

Commentary

Moral Progress and Methodism, Taylor and Schmitt

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Abstract

My study, intended as a comparative conceptual commentary, contrasts the visions of Charles Taylor and Carl Schmitt regarding the 18th-century, especially moral, revolution. I thus situate John Wesley's preaching and the beginning of the Methodist movement within that very social and cultural climate, albeit interpreted and experienced differently: thanks to the comparison between the two authors, I show how the Methodist movement of the eighteenth century does not represent only a sort of counterpoint to the Enlightenment, but rather is complementary to it. In short, Methodism contributes to defining the idea of progress as conceived in that century, while in the following ones the notion of technological-scientific and economic progress will tend to prevail. Furthermore, I focus on what Taylor, in his jargon, calls "common life" (commitment to work and family), initially valued, in particular, by the Protestant Reformation. I then observe, thanks also to two classic works on Methodism, that the very events arising from the Reformation, along with others, ultimately conferred renewed value on citizens' active political engagement, understood as constitutive of existence, not as something extraordinary or exceptional. The Methodist movement, in fact, already in the 18th and 19th centuries, was very attentive to issues of social justice and the living conditions of the last and the penultimate.

Keywords

Enlightenment, Methodism, Moral Revolution, Philosophy of History, Common Life, Public Theology

1. Introduction

My intention is to show how Methodism, in the 18th century, was situated within the social and cultural climate of the Enlightenment, albeit interpreted very differently. To this end, through a comparative conceptual commentary, I find considerable support in the work of Charles Taylor, which aligns with Carl Schmitt's "philosophy of history". It is precisely from Taylor that I draw inspiration to dwell on the idea of "common life", a characteristic expression of his jargon. At the same time, however, I come to observe how the culture and experiences arising from the Reformation extend far beyond the concept and practices of "common life".

2. Taylor, the Enlightenment, Methodism

Charles Taylor is a prolific and original philosopher also because he embodies a plurality of cultural sensibilities: the Anglo-Saxon world, French-speaking Québec, continental Europe. And in his masterpiece – *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* – he repeatedly refers to John Wesley (1703–1791) and Methodism, especially to place them in tension with deism and, more generally, with the Enlightenment. Let us listen: «The idea that God thinks things with a view to human good took the form of a belief in the goodness of the *natural order*. Providence was understood in general terms: it is reflected in the regular arrangement of things. The deists made no room for 'particular providences',

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that is, for those divine interventions in the histories of individuals and nations that were at the heart of popular piety and played such an important role in orthodoxy – no less than in widespread contemporary movements such as, for example, Methodism» [1]. And later: «Although Count Zinzendorf and the German Pietists had irrationalistic tendencies that Wesley did not embrace, all these movements had in common the idea that conviction and devotion are more important than culture and theology. This thesis represents their way of understanding the need, affirmed by the Reformation, for total personal dedication, even if in the climate of the eighteenth century this fervor took the form of a display of strong emotions. Something similar also occurred in what was called the American 'Great Awakening', although here the theological background is represented by a more orthodox Calvinism» [1]. Again: «The 'decline of hell' and the constant affirmation of faith in universal salvation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only within deism but also in certain movements of return to religion (think, for example, of Wesley's rejection of the Calvinistic theory of predestination), reflect at the same time, in even more complex and elusive forms, an orthodox religious sensibility no less than the secular and rationalistic critique» [1].

Beyond the fact that the author's discourse here is historical-philosophical and, understandably, may lack theological subtlety, the last quote captures a common trait between deism and phenomena such as Methodism.

Personally, I would go further: perhaps they are different responses to similar sociocultural demands. In other words: John Wesley situates himself precisely in the cultural climate that characterizes the Age of Enlightenment.

2.1. Schmitt's Philosophy of History

This would be confirmed by the historical-philosophical framework adopted by Carl Schmitt in his work *The Categories of the 'Political'*. He discerns in the eighteenth century an idea of progress understood primarily as *moral progress*, compared to the idea prevalent in the nineteenth century and beyond of progress as technical and economic progress. Let's listen for a moment: «The idea of *progress*, for example, of improvement and perfection, in modern terms of rationalization, became dominant in the eighteenth century, in an era of moral-humanitarian faith. Consequently, progress meant, first and foremost, progress in enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), progress in education (*Bildung*), self-control and formation, *moral perfection*» [2].

Well, in dialogue with Taylor, I would say that here, in radically different forms, both the Enlightenment, in its various forms, and Methodism.

But let us dwell further on what we might call Schmitt's "philosophy of history", relating to the last few centuries, while being aware of the tendency of every philosophy of history to reduce the complexity of facts and ideas into schemes that are sometimes too linear: «Clear and particularly significant as a unique historical conversion is the transition

from sixteenth-century theology to seventeenth-century metaphysics, in that supreme age of Europe, not only from a metaphysical but also a scientific point of view: the true heroic age of Western rationalism. This age of systematic scientific thought simultaneously includes Suarez and Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Grotius, Hobbes, Spinoza, Pascal, Leibniz, and Newton. [...] The subsequent eighteenth century, with the help of the constructions of a deistic philosophy, set aside metaphysics and became a grand vulgarization, enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), the appropriation by ordinary writers of the great achievements of the seventeenth century, humanization, and rationalization. [...] Then follows, in the nineteenth century, a century of apparently hybrid and impossible fusion of Romantic-aesthetic and technical-economic tendencies. In reality, the Romanticism of the nineteenth century – if we do not want to make, in a Romantic way, a vehicle for confusion of the term Romanticism, already a bit Dadaistic in itself – signifies only the intermediate phase of aesthetics between the moralism of the eighteenth century and the economism of the nineteenth century [...] In fact, the path from the metaphysical to the moral and the economic passes through the aesthetic, and the road that passes through consumption and the still so sublime aesthetic enjoyment is the surest and most tranquil for reaching the general economization of spiritual life and a structure of the spirit that finds the central categories of human existence in production and consumption» [2]. Thus, beyond the inevitable approximations and generalizations inherent in any metahistorical perspective, Wesley's preaching is situated within the "morality" of the 18th century, with its concepts of "sanctification" and "perfection" and its constant attention to the "social".

2.2. "Common Life" According to Taylor

Taylor, for his part, emphasizes how, based on the teachings of the New Testament, the Reformation succeeded in affirming the centrality of what in its jargon it called *common life*: faith can and must be lived within the context of daily work and family commitments. The monastery is not the place for exercising one's vocation. And Francis Bacon's vision contributes significantly to this vision.

This, Taylor notes, breaks not only with a millennia-old religious tradition, but also with the idea, typical of classical Greece and philosophers like Aristotle, that there are higher forms of life, such as contemplation and active political engagement. Let us listen: «Aristotle's notion of the 'good life' includes two of the activities that later ethical traditions would most commonly place above the common life: theoretical contemplation and participation in political life as citizens. This position was not unanimously shared. Plato regarded the second of those activities (at least in its most common expression of competing for office) with great suspicion. The Stoics, moreover, attached no importance to either. But in both cases, these are authors who, in the hierarchy of ends, assigned the common life an even more modest status» [1].

And again: «Well, the transition I am speaking of is a turning point that overturns these hierarchies and demotes the good life from its special rank as a superior activity to relocate it within 'life' *tout court*. Human life in its entirety is now defined in terms of work and production, on the one hand, and marriage and family life, on the other. At the same time, activities previously considered 'superior' were subjected to vigorous criticism. Under the impact of the scientific revolution, the ideal of *theor á*, of reconstructing the order of the cosmos through contemplation, came to appear vain and misleading, a sort of presumptuous attempt to evade the hard and concrete work of research. Francis Bacon constantly insisted on the critical observation that until now the traditional sciences had sought to discover a satisfactory overall order in things, rather than concern themselves, as they should, with establishing how things function» [1]. Only this second path, for him, would bring real benefit to humanity, through technological advancement.

3. Conclusions

Here, I would observe that the events following the Reformation – the interminable religious civil wars, the Huguenot affair, the English Revolution, Methodism itself at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and so on – contributed to redefining the meaning and value of active political participation beyond what our author calls "common life". Let us listen to Sergio Carile, speaking about the dawn of Methodism: «By the end of 1740, there were already other Methodist societies in existence besides those of London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Bath. Newcastle was therefore the first northern city visited by Wesley; and the Bristol, London, and Newcastle triangle remained the main area of his missionary strategy. Until he was seventy, he traveled on horseback for some four or five thousand kilometers a year, often covering seventy to eighty kilometers a day and preaching an average of fourteen sermons a week [...] In this work, certainly exhausting even for a man more robust than himself, he was often aided by those pastors who esteemed his work, even though they did not have the courage to break away from the official church. The others forgave him neither for his successes nor his open-air preaching. But above all, he was aided by those lay people whom he so diligently prepared. John Nelson, for example, was entrusted with the beginning of the work in Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, and York. John Haime was tasked with *preaching to the soldiers*, naturally hindered by the military chaplain. Howell Harris was an indispensable aid in the evangelization of Wales, where, in Trevecca, he founded a college for future preachers. Wesley also received notable support from *several women* who participated in all Methodist activities from the beginning, even though they were often criticized by public opinion. One example is Mary Bosanquet, who devoted herself to the poor, ran an orphanage in her home for several years, and later became an itinerant preacher. Thus the movement grew; and if the clergy were alarmed by the surprising development that the work of

evangelization was taking, *the ruling classes were equally alarmed by the intensification of the democratic idea among the people* [...] The fear was generated above all by the belief, not entirely erroneous, that Wesley inculcated in the lower classes aspirations and opinions superior to the conditions in which they were kept [...]», combined with the erroneous idea «that the revival movement incited rebellion against the constituted authorities, ecclesiastical and civil» [3]. A passage from another classic on Methodism, by the same author, seems to complete the discussion: «But Wesley did not limit himself to arguing, he took a direct personal position in the face of the problem of the economic imbalance that was ever increasing between the classes» [4]. And, in the same work, a writing from 1822 by the Methodist theologian Adam Clarke is cited. One passage, in particular, is illuminating: «Of all the forms of government, the one that most pleases God is that which offers *the greatest extent of civil liberty to the citizens*, since it is the one that is most similar to Him. Wherever the mind or body is reduced to slavery, and the caprice of the ruler takes the place of law and justice, there the government is not of God; *for He will not, and cannot, approve of that kind of government, in which the life, liberty, and property of the subjects are subjected to the will and capricious despotism of him who holds the power in his hand*» [4]. Small but eloquent examples, taken from the Methodist movement, of how Protestantism contributed to conceiving engagement in public life as a constitutive dimension of modern women and men, not as something extraordinary and exceptional.

Author Contributions

Danilo Di Matteo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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- [3] Sergio Carile, *Il metodismo. Sommario storico*, Claudiana, Torino 1984, my italics.
- [4] Sergio Carile, *I metodisti nell'Inghilterra della Rivoluzione industriale*, Claudiana, Torino 1989, my italics.