

Methodism and American Empire Project

David Scott and Filipe Maia, editors

From the start of North American colonies of European powers, empire has characterized the American experience. The role of empire in shaping the United States extends far beyond its origins as an imperial hinterland itself or its turn-of-the-20th-century heyday of possessing its own colonies. Empire as concentrated, top-down power that seeks to control others for the sake of its own agendas is a constant within US history. Empire goes beyond particular political parties, presidential administrations, or theological groupings. The impulses and perspectives of Empire have characterized and continue to characterize American politics, economics, culture, and religion in a thorough-going way. US imperialism has functioned and continues to function both within and beyond the territorial boundaries of the United States as a nation-state. Empire is a basic strategy by which those with power in the United States have sought to unite larger groups for the sake of asserting power over others, even as those within these in-groups often act against their own interests by participating in such imperial projects. Thus, empire is a technique of exploitation of those within and beyond the empire, especially those on the margins.

Scholars in postcolonial and decolonial theologies as well as recent developments in political theology have insisted that Empire shapes religious traditions and imaginaries. In the case of the United States, the entanglement between imperialism and US Christianity runs deep in the powers and principalities of this world. The impact of empire on US Christianity has been most evident among those closest to its levers of power—historically speaking, straight, white, male citizens of the dominant class. Though the impact of imperialism is not limited to this group, the work of resisting imperial Christianity requires attention to communities that stand on the underside of US imperialism.

As significant expressions of US Christianity, Methodist and Wesleyan traditions in the United States have been and are shaped by the imperial practices and mindsets of their US members, even when they aspire to be “global” denominations. US empire has shaped other expressions of Methodism as well, even those that are not historically connected to the United States. Methodism’s relationship with empire is at times ambiguous, and there are ambiguities and ambivalences in how Empire has played out historically. Those on the margins of Empire have appropriated the openings created by empire for their own purposes. Nevertheless, the exploitation and injustice that are inherent to empire go against basic tenets of Christianity, especially in its Wesleyan expressions.

Writing from within Methodist traditions, the authors in this volume provide testimonies of a “theological surplus,” as Joerg Rieger has termed it, in the tradition: while imperial forces seek to control everything, God’s work exceeds the grasp of empire. This volume will include historical and theological reflections that elevate these experiences and that showcase Methodism as a denominational tradition that has historically resisted US imperialism even as it often times succumbs to it.

This volume therefore suggests that resistance to empire is a biblical imperative. The Bible makes it clear that God’s power does not stem from domination over but from identification with God’s interactions with God’s creation. These interactions are marked by love, justice, service, and freedom. This biblical depiction of God inspires us to our own work of resisting empire and crafting alternatives to it, especially within the church. These alternatives to empire are indeed the first fruits of God’s new creation. By so doing, we join in partnership with God and others in the work of doing God’s will on earth as in heaven,

and we open ourselves to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, who helps us grow in our love for others.

Given the impact of Empire on the American church and on Methodism as a historically and predominantly American denominational tradition, and given the Christian imperative to resist any system that identifies a Lord other than Christ, we intend to develop a book project that will serve as a resource for the work of resisting Empire. We intend that this resource will be primarily geared toward a popular audience, rather than a scholarly one. The goal is to bring along people for whom a critique of Empire does not come naturally but who recognize on some level the problems of imperial Christianity and who are open to trying as Christians to live in a new way.

We envision a collection of writings that draw upon a variety of disciplines: biblical studies, theology, history, missiology, etc., that will help readers better understand how the forces of Empire have impacted Methodism (in its various expressions) and its practices and how the church can move towards a non-imperial manner of being and acting. To do so, we anticipate that authors will explore different forms of Empire—not just political and military might, but also economics, culture, media, and other forms of “soft” Empire. Moreover, we recognize that imperial power is not static but grows, fluctuates, and declines over time. We also anticipate that authors will explore the ways in which Empire interacts with other categories of analysis such as race, class, nation and nationalism, geography (rural/urban, for instance), sexuality, the environment, and the body. Again, the goal of this analysis is not primarily to advance conversations in the academy but to use the resources of the academy to help educate and equip the church broadly. Finally, recognizing that the ills of Empire cannot be fully cured solely by those at the centers of the imperial system, we hope for contributions from Methodists around the world.

Themes

We invite contributions for essays or resources that relate to the following themes:

1. Historical essays tying Methodist missionary activity and the expansion of United States foreign interests. Case studies could include US missionaries in Puerto Rico, Western Africa, the Philippines, the impact of US expansions on the church in the United States, and international structures of Methodism, etc.
2. Theological and ethical reflections on Wesleyan theology, Empire studies, and political theology.
3. Liturgical, worship, and ministry resources (sermons, liturgies, litanies, biblical studies, Sunday school lessons, etc.) for church communities to engage in anti-imperial reflections.
4. Practical resources on activism, advocacy, and mission focused on Methodist communities and contexts.

Timeline

Essay proposals are due August 31, 2021. Proposals should include 300–400-word description of the project and ought to be submitted as an email attachment to the editors, David Scott (dscott@umcmmission.org) and Filipe Maia (fmaia@bu.edu). Accepted proposals will be communicated to authors by September 30, 2021.