

PROPOSAL

John Rylands Research Institute/Manchester Wesley Research Centre Joint Visiting Fellowship

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Project Title

“Institutionalizing Social Holiness: Methodism and the Rise of Transatlantic Social Christianity, 1870-1910”

Objectives

This project focuses upon the question: how does the transatlantic character of Methodism shed light upon the development of Protestant social Christianity in Great Britain and North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century? Studies of late nineteenth century Methodism often stress the decline of a vibrant evangelicalism, in the face of a growing desire to preserve institutional status (see, for example, David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*). However, the period from approximately 1870 to 1910 was an era of unprecedented institutional expansion of global Protestantism, epitomized by the emergence of a web of interconnected organizations, including church boards and agencies, women’s missionary societies, and denominational and interdenominational youth organizations.

These institutional developments contributed greatly to the rise of what has been called social Christianity, or the social gospel. Religious leaders, churches, and organizations identified with social Christianity attempted to reformulate their theologies in order to address systemic social-economic inequalities caused by industrial capitalism. Although scholars of social Christianity often focus upon individuals and movements within the Church of England (and the Episcopal Church in the U.S.), Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic played a vital role in the rise of social Christianity. By exploring Methodism’s institutional and theological development from approximately 1870 to 1910 in Great Britain and the United States, this project will offer a fresh historiographical reinterpretation of the social gospel movement, by examining it within the larger context of transatlantic Protestantism.

Methodology

In terms of my work in Manchester, I am primarily interested in exploring two historical questions. First, how did British Methodism contribute to the development of social Christianity in the late nineteenth century? In addition to examining various Methodist conference minutes and periodicals, I am particularly interested in uncovering the history of the Wesley Guild—an important youth organization that emerged in the

Wesleyan Methodist Church during the 1890s. Also, I want to explore the relationship between British Methodism to the development of important interdenominational organizations such as the World Student Christian Federation, the Student Volunteer Movement, and the YMCA/YWCA—organizations that were critical in the broader dissemination of social Christian ideals in the early twentieth century.

My second research question is how does the rise of Methodist social Christianity shed light upon larger theological developments within transatlantic Methodism? Frequently, Methodist historians identify the late nineteenth century as a time of institutional and theological schism. However, many of the most important representatives of the social gospel tradition often integrated dimensions of evangelical and liberal theologies in terms of how they engaged issues of social reform. My research would present a more nuanced interpretation of Methodist theological identity during a time of important institutional transitions within transatlantic Protestantism.