



Editorial

Andrew Stobart

I

The title of this issue, 'Holiness & Contemporary Culture', would not have been immediately recognisable to Wesley and his contemporaries. Understanding the term 'holiness', of course, would pose little trouble for the successors of Oxford's Holy Club, but 'contemporary culture' would be as unfamiliar a description of the world to them as it is a familiar one to us. The idea of cultural studies is a relatively recent one in the history of intellectual endeavour, and its crossover into the theological arena has an even shorter lifespan, taking root and flourishing only really within the present generation of theological reflectors. One can imagine having to take Wesley to one side to explain that by 'contemporary culture' we are simply referring – albeit with greater sophistication than we normally muster – to 'the world in which we live', the world within which we attempt to speak to and of and for God.

At once, Wesley is no longer standing on the sidelines of our topic, but fully immersed in it, offering us an example of how 'holiness' and 'contemporary culture' are to be related in thought and practice. Wesley's oft-quoted (and oft-misquoted) remark in his Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* of 1739 reveals his hand: 'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.'¹ His use of 'social' here is in contrast to the 'holy solitaires' of the mystics, who retire from the world to cultivate Christianity in seclusion. Wesley is, of course, misconstruing the thrust of the mystic movement, but his positive affirmation is pertinent: any holiness that is not thoroughly conversant with its 'social' context is not worthy of the name. Holiness is always a lived entity, generated within the community of Christ, but also informed by and worked

out within the cultural structures that provide definition to our daily lives. The gospel of Christ knows of no holiness but holiness within contemporary culture.

II

I have always thought that the term 'contemporary culture' has more than a hint of tautology about it. To say that we live in contemporary culture is another way of saying that we live *now*, rather than at another time, which would of course be impossible. However, on reflection, the modifier 'contemporary' is necessary because too often we seek to work out what holiness looks like within *church* culture, which may well have lost contact with what contemporary means, at times being practically oblivious to the preoccupations and priorities of the lives of others, and indeed even of our own lives beyond the sanctities of Sunday. Relating holiness to contemporary culture invites us to consider the resonances and dissonances between a culture which understands all things as proceeding from and for and back to God through Christ (the proper culture of the Church according to Colossians 1:15–20), and a culture that understands itself apart from Christ (within which we all live). The Wesleyan theological tradition, rooted in a missionary movement to those whose daily lives were being overlooked by the religious establishment, is a constantly renewed call to holiness within *contemporary* culture.

The articles offered in this issue are intended to prompt renewed attention to this task. While 'contemporary culture' is indeed the context within which we all live, it is by no means therefore straightforward to define or understand. In part, this is because we might more properly speak of contemporary cultures, highlighting the plurality of contexts that co-exist, overlap, and at times clash within our lived experience. But, as Rebekah Callow's article reminds us, our difficulty is also with finding the critical distance to observe our own culture: 'It can be hard to spot our own cultural idiosyncrasies until we step outside them, hard to recognise that what is normal for one seems strange to another' (p. 331). Callow's article, dealing with the effect of 'culture stress' or 'culture shock' on international students, emphasises the care that we must exercise if we are to journey successfully alongside others at the edge of their or our culture. This resonates far beyond the student context.

The language of journeying is one which reappears, unbidden and therefore remarkable, in a number of the contributions. It is, perhaps, a fitting trope for

the status of holiness within contemporary culture, not as a citizen but as a sojourner, not as a permanent resident but as a migrant, just like holiness' incarnation in Jesus. The journey metaphor highlights the often precarious nature of holiness in our midst. Gordon Leah's reflections on the experiences of Carlo Levi in southern Italy pose the uncomfortable but necessary question: will our engagement in contemporary culture 'introduce Christ's presence into where it was thought he was not' (p. 377)? Richard Clutterbuck brings the work of pioneering Methodist missionary John Hunt to our attention, exploring how his understanding of holiness was shaped by his journey to the island of Fiji. Rosemary Power offers some further reflections on her experience of pioneer ministry in rural Ireland, a ministry which was itself a temporary sojourner within a migrating culture. Given all this, it seems appropriate that this issue includes the third podcast in our series on the hymns of Charles Wesley, focusing on 'Come, O Thou traveller unknown' and featuring a new recording of the hymn by Nicola Morrison and Ruth Jeffries.

Any journey of significance brings with it a requirement to learn a new language, or at the very least a new dialect or vocabulary, and the remainder of this issue's articles explore the languages we might need to learn if we are to take holiness within contemporary culture seriously. So, for instance, Hilary Brand asks us, intentionally provocatively, 'Whatever happened to sin?' (p. 283). How do we speak intelligibly of what ails us? If 'sin' is no longer in our vocabulary, then what, if anything, is our dynamic equivalent? Pete Phillips draws our attention to the importance of being digitally conversant, encouraging us in his stimulating lecture 'to embrace digital technology and digital culture as the lingua franca, the common ground of contemporary culture, and thus the most appropriate place for us to engage with the world in which we live' (p. 355). Tom Osborne's article, 'Pretty amazing grace', explores the use of so-called secular music in worship. Using secular lyrics as liturgy exposes our underlying confidence – or otherwise – in God's Spirit to redeem and work through all things. Mindful of the adage that 'money talks', Tim Macquiban's contribution to our regular series on John Wesley's sermons asks some searching questions about what our approach to money says about the vitality of our Christian faith. Finally, Anna Robbins' article offers a useful guide to the vocabulary of meaning in contemporary culture. While Ecclesiastes sums up the feelings of many in Qoheleth's declaration that 'all is *hebel*, meaningless' (Ecclesiastes 1:2), Robbins asserts that meaning is possible: 'That which some philosophers would deem impossible, Christ makes possible' (p. 366).

If you were hoping to find a definitive description of holiness within contemporary culture in this issue, then you may well be disappointed. These articles, in all their variety, are merely starting points for further reflection, discussion and – most challenging of all – practical application in our lives and ministries. The Reviews section introduces yet more arenas of contemporary life in which we must engage in the struggle for holiness: sexuality and desire, violence against women, music, the practice of spiritual autobiography, and, highlighting the most recent fruits of the Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue, ecumenical understanding. The purpose of this issue is not to define holiness in contemporary culture but to promote the pursuit of it. By the end of this issue, I hope you will be stimulated to engage thoughtfully with the preoccupations and priorities of the culture that is contemporary to you, developing the vocabulary and dialect necessary to talk meaningfully to and of and for God within that context. If you feel more equipped to do this than before you read ‘Holiness & Contemporary Culture’, this issue will have been a success.

III

A final word is required to pay tribute to the dedication and expertise of Janet Morley, whose work as Commissioning Editor comes to an end with the publication of this issue. Her creativity continues to be evident here, not least in her podcast commentary on ‘Come, O Thou traveller unknown’, but also in a number of the articles which were ‘commissioned’ by her before my appointment. Our debt of gratitude to Janet for shaping this journal over its founding years is immense. The present success of *Holiness*, with its growing readership and developing reputation, is due in no small part to her experienced mind, hard work and fastidious attention to detail. Above all that, Janet’s intuitive sense of the connection between faith and life, holiness and contemporary culture, have set the tone for the journal, which I hope to continue and develop. I know you will join with me in wishing her well.

On the holy journey to which we have been called, we are grateful for all who share their intellectual and spiritual company along the way. This journal is evidence that Wesleyan theology still knows nothing of ‘holy solitaires’, but rather invites us all to ‘social holiness’.

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