



# Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley's insights in contemporary context

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*John Wesley summarised Methodism's mission as spreading 'scriptural holiness'. This article argues that the praxis of social justice as an expression of holiness is integral to the mission of the Church. The following themes from Wesley's theology are examined: holiness as love; 'justice, mercy, and truth'; social holiness; works of mercy as a means of grace; stewardship, and 'the outcasts of men'. It argues that the praxis of justice, mercy and truth is integral to holiness and hence to mission of the Church. A contextualisation of this theme in the context of secularisation and migration is then developed.*

HOLINESS • SOCIAL JUSTICE • SOCIAL HOLINESS • MIGRATION • MISSION • JUSTICE, MERCY AND TRUTH

## Introduction

John Wesley described the mission of Methodism as: 'To reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.'<sup>1</sup> In Wesley's understanding, Methodism's mission was the formation of holy people whose presence and praxis would reform the Church and society.<sup>2</sup> The gospel that Wesley proclaimed was that God, in love, not only desired to forgive people but also to deliver them from the power of sin and transform them by the Spirit. His goal was that people who responded would become holy people. Hence his emphasis on their integration into classes and societies through which they could grow in holiness. In contemporary Europe the understanding of the mission of the Church as 'spreading scriptural holiness' or as the formation of holy people does not resonate with the majority of Methodists. For Christians and churches grappling with how to interpret, proclaim and live the gospel in an increasingly secularised culture the concept of 'holiness' appears to be esoteric, archaic, irrelevant, and even alienating. This is intensified where 'holiness' has been associated with other-worldliness and legalistic piety.

Another aspect of historic Methodist praxis that has greater resonance with some Methodists is the commitment to addressing the needs of the poor and suffering through social and sometimes political engagement. While this was and in some cases continues to be an important aspect of the mission of some Methodist churches, its significance was reduced during the twentieth century in Western Europe by the development of state-sponsored welfare systems and in Eastern Europe by the restrictions enforced by communist regimes.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary economic and social dynamics are creating new spaces in which this aspect of the Church's mission is becoming relevant again. One particular space is that created by the migration into Europe of significant numbers of people from outside Europe and the migration of people from Eastern Europe into Western Europe.

This new space challenges Methodists to critically rethink the relationship between holiness and social justice, and hence to reconceptualise their understanding of the mission of the Church. I argue below that an analysis of the relationship between holiness and justice in Wesley's theology provides resources for reconceptualising the mission of the Church in secularised contexts which can be concretely embodied in the presence of migrants.

## Holiness and justice in Wesley's theology

It has been popular within the Methodist tradition to relate holiness to social justice by referring to Wesley's phrase 'social holiness' as a designation for social engagement which must be added to the pursuit of personal holiness.<sup>4</sup> This, however, is problematic from two perspectives. First, it fosters a bifurcated understanding of mission which divides the personal and the social into two spheres whose interrelationship is unclear. One is left with the suspicion that it is possible to be personally holy without being socially holy or vice versa. Second, given that this phrase only occurs in one passage of Wesley's writings where it does not relate directly to social justice, it cannot bear the theological weight it has been made to carry.

In this article I will examine themes from Wesley's theology and their relationship with each other. This forms the basis for the development of a contemporary interpretation of holiness in which the pursuit of social justice is an integral component.

### *Holiness as love*

Wesley's interpretation of holiness, particularly as it is consummated in Christian perfection, has raised considerable controversy. The controversy is intensified due to the developments and ambiguities in Wesley's writings on the subject. A key issue is whether entire sanctification is to be understood substantially, that is, as the removal of sinful 'substance' from the human person, or relationally as the transformation in a person's relationship with God and neighbour. Both aspects can be found in Wesley's writings; for the purposes of this article I will emphasise the relational aspect.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of which aspect is emphasised there is a common core to Wesley's understanding of the goal of sanctification. The goal is that the person would live a life that fulfils the commands to love God and one's neighbour. He proposed: 'What is holiness? Is it not, essentially love? The love of God and of all mankind? Love producing "bowels of mercies, humbleness of mind, meekness, gentleness, long suffering"? ... Love is holiness wherever it exists.'<sup>6</sup> In another context he stated, 'Love is the sum of Christian sanctification.'<sup>7</sup> Hence Christian perfection is

nothing higher and nothing lower than this the pure love of God and man – the loving God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and the life, running through all our tempers, words and actions.<sup>8</sup>

Holiness as love for God and our fellow human beings is rooted in and arises out of God's free love for us as individuals. In love the Spirit of God draws people to God, enables them to believe, transforms them in response to their faith, giving them new birth and making them children of God. The Spirit bears witness within believers to God's love for and acceptance of them as children of God. Believers' love for God and their fellow humans arises out of their experience and assurance of God's love for them. This love for God and human beings encompasses both inner attitudes and dispositions and outward actions – an inner transformation manifest in a transformed way of life in the world. As Wesley explains it:

[W]e are saved from our sins only by a confidence in the love of God. As soon as we 'behold what manner of love it is which the Father hath bestowed on us,' we love him ... because he first loved us'. And then is that command written on our heart, 'that he who loveth God loves his brother also', from which the love of God and man, meekness, humbleness of mind, and all holy tempers spring. Now these are the very essence of ... salvation from sin. And from these outward salvation flows, that is holiness of life and conversation.<sup>9</sup>

### *'Justice, mercy, and truth'*

Wesley goes beyond the assertion that holiness is love to explicate the content of love. Thus in his sermon 'Of Former Things,' Wesley wrote:

By religion I mean the love of God and man, filling the heart and governing the life. The sure effect of this is the uniform practice of justice, mercy, and truth. This is the very essence of it, the height and depth of religion, detached from this or that opinion, and from all particular modes of worship.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar way, in 'On Living without God,' he stated, 'Indeed nothing can be more sure than that true Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth.'<sup>11</sup> This triad of 'justice, mercy, and truth,' which reoccurs frequently in Wesley's writings, has been neglected in interpretations of Wesley's understanding of holiness.

The vital importance of the triad arises out of Wesley's rooting it in the character of God. 'Justice, mercy, and truth' are a summary of the moral attributes of

God.<sup>12</sup> They are the concrete expression of the love of God which is God's 'reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable light on all his other perfections.'<sup>13</sup> As the summary of God's moral character they are also the summary of the moral image of God in which humanity was created.<sup>14</sup> Holiness is the restoration of the moral image by the Spirit of God so that a person's life becomes characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth'. Wesley commented, 'While thou seekest God in all things thou shalt find him in all, the fountain of all holiness, continually filling thee with his own likeness, with justice, mercy, and truth.'<sup>15</sup> And in another sermon: 'we are moving straight toward God, and that continually; walking steadily on in the highway of holiness, in the paths of justice, mercy, and truth.'<sup>16</sup>

While 'justice, mercy, and truth' are the essential outward manifestations of holiness, holiness is not to be reduced to them. Holiness has both an inner and an outer dimension. The inner dimension is the transformation of people's motivations, desires and attitudes by the love of God so that they love God and their neighbours. Genuine holiness comprises an integration of both dimensions. It is possible for people to practise a measure of 'justice, mercy, and truth' without the inner transformation by the love of God as a consequence of prevenient grace. However, there is no inner transformation that is not expressed in outward action.<sup>17</sup>

Because 'justice, mercy, and truth' are the outward form of holiness, Wesley could argue, in a letter affirming the loyalty of Methodists to King George II, that the Methodists 'unite together for this and no other end – to promote, as far as we are capable, justice, mercy, and truth, the glory of God, and peace and goodwill among men'.<sup>18</sup> Hence these are not merely personal virtues but also characteristics of a Christian engagement with society. In this letter Wesley assumes that the pursuit of 'justice, mercy, and truth' would not result in conflict with the state and would be welcomed by the king. However, in other contexts he uses these virtues as a standard to evaluate the moral character of a nation or society, regardless of whether they are Christians or not. He thus uses it to compare so-called Christian Europe with non-Christian nations in relation to the slave trade and colonial conquests. Here 'Christian' Britain is found wanting while non-Christian nations display far more of 'justice, mercy, and truth'.<sup>19</sup> In his Journal he provided a detailed evaluation of the trial of a smuggler on the basis of its conformity to 'justice, mercy and truth'. The smuggler was clearly guilty, yet Wesley is extremely critical of the trial and sentence. The poor must not be exploited even if they are criminals. He lamented: 'O England, England! Will this reproach never be rolled away from thee? Is there anything like this to

be found either among Papists, Turks, or heathens? In the name of truth, justice, mercy, and common sense.<sup>20</sup> Hence, contrary to the letter to George II, the pursuit of 'justice, mercy, and truth' could be subversive of the socio-political status quo.

Drawing on examples in Wesley's writings we can say that justice refers to treating someone in accordance with who they are as a human being and in accordance with what they have done. Depriving someone of life and liberty for no reason is unjust, punishments must fit the crimes, and a person should be rewarded for their action. A society must be structured in such a way that all humans are given their full dignity and freedom as human beings. Wesley thus argued in *Thoughts upon Slavery* that the Angolans have the same right to liberty as the English.<sup>21</sup> The prime example of Wesley's personal involvement in the struggle for justice was his commitment towards the end of his life to the struggle against slavery.<sup>22</sup> This involvement was not without precedent in other periods of his life. While at Oxford he was prepared to take the unpopular and despised step of defending a person accused of sodomy, and while he was in Georgia he engaged in supporting those he held to have been treated unjustly by the authorities.<sup>23</sup>

Mercy refers to active compassion for the suffering and the needy. This refers not merely to individual actions but to laws and institutions of society – they must be instruments of mercy. The pursuit of mercy both personally and through the Methodist societies for the poor, the suffering, the sick and the imprisoned is well known as a constant feature of Wesley's life.<sup>24</sup>

Truth refers to integrity, veracity and honesty. Wesley's understanding of truth is influenced by a realistic and empirical epistemology whereby he expected to reach and ascertain knowledge of the truth through empirical means and the testimony of those who had empirical knowledge. An example of this is to be found in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, where he set out to describe the socio-cultural conditions of Africa prior to the slave trade, and the cruelties involved in slavery and the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

### *Social holiness*

The only place where Wesley uses the phrase 'social holiness' is in his Preface to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.<sup>26</sup> In a critique of the 'mystic divines' he refers to three fundamental issues. The first is the 'foundation' of the Christian religion; for Wesley this foundation is justification by faith on the basis of Christ's death. The second is the manner of building on the foundation;

Wesley argues that holiness is to be achieved through active participation with other Christians in the life of the Christian community.

The third problem that Wesley identifies is the 'superstructure' which is being built: that is, religion itself. The religion of the 'mystic divines' is 'solitary religion', which is focused on contemplation and does not include outward works.<sup>27</sup> It is in contrast to this understanding of holiness that Wesley states: 'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness.'<sup>28</sup>

Wesley goes on to describe what he means by social religion or holiness as follows:

'Faith working by love' is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. 'This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;' and that we manifest our love 'by doing good unto all men, especially to them that are of the household of faith'. And, in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be zealous of good works. He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. My Father, will he say, worketh hitherto, and I work and, at all possible opportunities, he is, like his Master, going about doing good.<sup>29</sup>

Hence 'social holiness' describes Wesley's understanding that holiness is love; this love is manifested in the pursuit of the good of others. It thus only exists in the contexts of relationships with other people. Love, and hence holiness, cannot be manifested in solitude. To withdraw from people is to refuse to act in love and is thus a denial of holiness. It is important to note that by 'social' Wesley is not referring to the relationship between people and social structures; he is referring to interpersonal relationships between people. Hence 'social holiness' is the concrete manifestation of 'holiness of heart' in our relationships with other people through concrete acts which promote their good.

### *Works of mercy as a means of grace*<sup>30</sup>

In Wesley's terminology 'works of mercy' refers to practical action to meet the physical and spiritual needs of others. Scattered in his writings we find overlapping lists of these works. For our purposes two will suffice. In his sermon 'The Scripture Way of Salvation' he lists them as

feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as the endeavouring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to succour the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death.<sup>31</sup>

In 'The Important Question' he includes, 'to be as eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame; an husband to the widow, a father to the fatherless.'<sup>32</sup> 'Works of mercy' is an integrative concept that treats human well-being in a holistic way; Wesley does not prioritise the 'spiritual' over the 'physical' nor is the 'physical', merely a means to the 'spiritual'. Evangelism, pastoral care, spiritual guidance, social welfare, charity, psychological support and encouragement, and practical bodily help are all included.

By integrating the spiritual and the physical, 'works of mercy' address both the perpetrators and victims of human sin. In *Thoughts upon Slavery* Wesley argues that he is motivated both by love for the suffering slaves and for those involved in the slave trade.<sup>33</sup> Wesley's critique of those involved in the slave trade is a work of mercy instructing and reproofing them and thus promoting their spiritual well-being.<sup>34</sup>

An important characteristic of works of mercy is that performing them requires effort and self-denial. Providing for the needs of others comes not out of our excess but through giving up that which we enjoy and believe we have a right to. Visiting the sick and prisoners in the eighteenth century, for example, required going into uncomfortable, dangerous and disagreeable places.<sup>35</sup> In his sermon 'The Danger of Riches', Wesley describes the zeal for works of mercy:

You once pushed on through cold or rain, or whatever cross lay in your way, to see the poor, the sick, the distressed. You went about doing good, and found out those who were not able to find you. You cheerfully crept down into their cellars, and climbed up into their garrets ... You found out every scene of human misery, and assisted according to your power.<sup>36</sup>

Works of mercy are the expression of love for one's neighbour; however in some of his later writings Wesley adds a further dimension, works of mercy are also a means of grace. He explains this in his sermon 'On Zeal':



In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers; – longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus.’ In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers – by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace.<sup>37</sup>

Works of mercy are a means through which God encounters and transforms people’s characters; they manifest a transformed character and through this manifestation they lead to further transformation. They are an expression of holiness and a means to become more holy.

### *Stewardship*

Wesley proposed that the image of a ‘steward’ is an appropriate way of representing human beings in their relationship with God.<sup>38</sup> Stewardship emphasises that all we have comes from God and we are responsible before God to use God’s gifts according to God’s purpose, and we will have to give account to God for how we have used these gifts. Wesley’s understanding of God’s gifts was holistic and comprehensive; they included our mental abilities, affections, bodies, bodily faculties, possessions, education and influence. God’s gifts are given as resources to be used in works of mercy for the good of others. In his eighth sermon on ‘Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount’, he uses this motif to particularly address the rich, urging them to use their resources and influence, among other things, to ‘Defend the oppressed, plead the cause of the fatherless, and make the widows heart sing for joy.’<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that in addressing those who by virtue of their social status had greater social and political influence and rights Wesley includes what could be termed social engagement in his list of responsibilities.

Wesley’s concluding sections of *Thoughts upon Slavery* can be understood as an application of this theology of stewardship to the particular case of the slave trade. Here he applies his message to various categories of people involved in the slave trade, emphasising that they are responsible for the use of their resources in the enslavement of people and will be held accountable by God for this.<sup>40</sup>

### *A Focus on the 'Outcasts of Men'*

Wesley wrote to the 'men of reason and religion'; 'The rich, the honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing ... to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of men.'<sup>41</sup> Wesley used the phrase 'outcasts of men' in a number of places in his writings to refer to those who are excluded from the benefits of human society and culture,<sup>42</sup> and it provides a useful way of describing the socially marginalised. These people were the focus of his ministry since his time in Oxford.<sup>43</sup> He ministered to those who were excluded from society on economic grounds – the poor; on social grounds – the under classes;<sup>44</sup> on legal grounds – convicted prisoners; on nationalist grounds – prisoners of war;<sup>45</sup> on health grounds – the sick.<sup>46</sup>

This focus was, for Wesley, a concrete expression of what it meant to imitate Jesus in the world – that is, to walk as he walked. This is a phrase that Wesley regularly uses to describe outward holiness. As he stated in his sermon 'On the Wedding Garment', 'In a word, holiness is having "the mind that was in Christ", and the "walking as Christ walked".'<sup>47</sup> In the letters quoted below he describes this concern for the poor and sick in terms of walking as Jesus walked: that is, it is a facet of outward holiness expressing God's love to the deprived.<sup>48</sup> He wrote to 'A member of the society':

The lengthening of your life and the restoring your health are invaluable blessings. But do you ask how you shall improve them to the glory of the Giver? And are you willing to know? Then I will tell you how. Go and see the poor and sick in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman; you bear an higher character.<sup>49</sup>

In a further letter he stated:

I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who, if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward on their way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith, and the love of God in a larger measure than any persons I know. Creep in among these, in spite of dirt, and a hundred disgusting circumstances; and thus put off the gentlewoman. Do not confine your conversation to gentle and elegant people. I should like this as well as you do. But I cannot discover a precedent for it in the life of our Lord, or any of his Apostles. My dear friend, let you and I walk as he walked.<sup>50</sup>

Theologically rooted in the conviction that God cares for and in a particular way has chosen the outcasts to be the objects of grace,<sup>51</sup> and power of God's grace is demonstrated in that God works from the least to the greatest,<sup>52</sup> this solidarity with and focus on the 'outcasts of men' had important consequences for the way in which Wesley perceived social issues. A striking characteristic in *Thoughts upon Slavery*<sup>53</sup> is that Wesley interpreted and addressed the issues from the perspective of the enslaved people whom he described as 'outcasts of men'.<sup>54</sup> The crucial triad of 'justice, mercy, and truth' was understood from the perspective of the 'outcasts'. This is clearly seen when Wesley's perspective is contrasted with the pro-slavery pamphlets of his time. The supporters of slavery argued that justice required the protection of the 'property rights' of the slave owners (their right to own slaves) and the right of merchants to buy and sell Africans.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, for Wesley justice required the affirmation of the rights of slaves to their liberty.<sup>56</sup> Mercy required that the cruelties of slavery be unconditionally condemned and rejected. This contrasted with the argument by the supporters of slavery that cruelty was necessary to ensure that the slaves worked. This is more striking when seen in conjunction with Wesley's warning to slave owners, in a context where violent slave revolts were frequent, that it would be their own fault if their slaves cut their throats, for the masters had 'first acted the villain in making them slaves'.<sup>57</sup> Telling the truth entailed not only describing the sufferings of slaves but also interpreting the behaviour of slaves. What the masters experienced as the slaves' stupidity, laziness, stubbornness and wickedness, Wesley described as their legitimate resistance to slavery.

### *Weaving the threads together*

Holiness and social engagement in the service of and in solidarity with the poor, oppressed and excluded are not equivalent. However, the Wesleyan threads described above suggest that such social engagement is an integral aspect of holiness. A contemporary interpretation of holiness needs to make this more explicit by reweaving these threads so that the pattern of relationships is clearer. As such this entails going beyond Wesley to creatively reimage what it means to embody holiness in our contexts.

Such a contemporary account should begin where Wesley begins, with a transforming encounter with the love of God in Jesus Christ. This is the taproot of holiness, and hence the proclamation of the gospel of God's love in Christ through word, example and action is central to mission. The transforming encounter is not a one-off event but a continuing praxis of living with and

before God in the fellowship of others on the same journey. Hence there is a need to emphasise the importance of small groups as the locus of the continuing encounter with God through mutually accountable fellowship. The goal of such groups is to nurture people in holiness that is outwardly expressed in a life characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth'.

Wesley's triad of virtues continues to be a valuable summation of outward holiness. They provide a way to affirm the importance and comprehensive character of holiness which moves beyond individualistic piety and moralistic legalism. 'Justice, mercy, and truth' are not a set of principles or rules but rather orientating directions that provide a creative stimulus to discover in new contexts how holiness should be embodied. Hence for Wesley they stimulated a creative response to slavery that went beyond and contrary to individual biblical texts. Wesley's use of them to critique social, political and economic life provokes us to embody them in new ways in our engagements with society. Wesley's active engagement against slavery is an example of how works of mercy also go beyond personal charity and diaconal service to include action for social, political and economic transformation.

Historically, Methodists have engaged in diverse contexts, supporting a variety of social and political policies and projects often representing contradictory ideological perspectives and political goals. In the light of the argument above, social and political engagement is creatively faithful to but moving beyond the heritage of Wesley when it is committed to the transformation of the lives of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed, when it stands in solidarity with them and addresses social, political and economic dynamics from the perspective of their impact on these people.

Works of mercy that include social engagement in solidarity with the excluded are both an expression of holiness and a means of growing in holiness. Action in solidarity with and for the other is a dynamic interaction in which the Spirit of God is present, stimulating, enabling and calling forth the transformation of all people involved. They are a means of grace through which God encounters and transforms people. This understanding of works of mercy as a means of grace enables us to reconceptualise social holiness to include an engagement not only on the personal but also on the structural level of society. We express holiness and become holy not only in our personal interaction with others but also as we respond to structural injustice, cruelty and untruth. This reconceptualisation of holiness affirms that such engagement is integral to what it means to be holy. It reaffirms the prophetic tradition of Isaiah that 'holiness'

that is merely personal piety and morality, and that does not in some way engage structural injustice, cruelty and untruth in solidarity with the excluded, is not scriptural holiness.<sup>58</sup> The motif of stewardship provides an important nuance to this integration of social engagement. The possibilities of social engagement are constrained by resources and context. We are responsible for using the resources and influence we have for the good of others, recognising that other people in other contexts and with different resources will have other responsibilities. While there will be a diversity of concrete expressions of 'justice, mercy, and truth', such expressions are integral to the identity and mission of churches who claim to embody the Wesleyan heritage.

## **Holiness and mission in the context of migration**

The social and political context of Europe is vastly different from that of eighteenth-century England and we cannot simply apply Wesley's insight to contemporary issues. Rather we are required to reimagine critically and constructively what 'justice, mercy, and truth' require in our context. A key feature of contemporary European context is migration. To rephrase Wesley's famous dictum, 'the world has come to our parish'.

Migration has been a feature of human history since early humans left the African savannah to spread throughout the globe. European history has been shaped by the complex interaction of diverse national, ethnic and political groupings which have migrated from one area to another. Despite this, the dynamics of contemporary migration have become an increasingly contentious political and social issue across Europe.<sup>59</sup>

The rise of migrant communities within Europe is happening at the same time as rampant secularism is eroding the traditional role played by Christianity in many European societies. Formerly dominant Churches are losing or have lost their position of socio-cultural authority and influence, and are increasingly being reduced to interesting relics or tourist attractions from a past age. However, the intersection of rising secularism and the increasing presence of migrant populations creates a new opportunity for Churches to rediscover and reconceptualise their identity and mission. It is a *kairos* for Christianity, a time of unique opportunity but also radical challenge that has the potential to reshape the future of Christianity in Europe.

The challenge posed by the presence of migrant populations is multifaceted. I will focus on the space created by the intersection of secularism and migration

for European Churches within the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition to reconceptualise one aspect of their identity and mission. That is, what it means to be a community committed to the formation of a holy people – a people whose life is characterised by ‘justice, mercy, and truth’. The focus here is not on migrant Churches or congregations but on Churches whose membership is predominantly constituted by people who are rooted in the socio-cultural identity of the particular country.

### *(Re)discovering the identity of the Church*

Over the centuries the identity of European Christianity in its diverse expressions has been deeply entwined with the dominant socio-cultural matrix. On the one hand, Churches have legitimated and nurtured the ideological and cultural identity of European societies; on the other, influential forces within the socio-cultural matrix have supported dominant Churches. This symbiotic relationship between Christianity and the socio-cultural matrix is unravelling, resulting in a sense of loss of identity and purpose for many Churches. At the same time the presence of migrant populations poses a challenge to the dominant secular socio-cultural matrix as a consequence of their alternative cultural values and practices – values and practices that are often complexly related to deep-seated religious convictions.

In this context the Churches of all confessions must resist the temptation to seek to recover the role of being the guardians of the European cultural heritage. Methodist Churches need to (re)discover their identity as communities of ‘justice, mercy, and truth’. In contrast to Wesley’s letter to King George III such a (re)discovery will not lead to a position of passive submission to the state nor to an alignment with conservative political forces. Rather it will lead to Churches becoming critical and troublesome communities within society whose identity is shaped by its creative embodiment of ‘justice, mercy, and truth’. Their proclamation, but above all their praxis, ought to become a constant challenge to society, representing an alternative to the dominant culture, an alternative whose primary characteristic is not legalistic moralism nor increasingly exotic piety, but rather concrete engagement on behalf of and in solidarity with the excluded and suffering other.

The increasing presence of migrants of other faiths, particularly but not exclusively Muslims, has provoked a vigorous reaction from many conservative Europeans that argues for discriminatory action and legislation against Islam in the name of defending Europe’s Christian identity. The consequence is that,

despite increasing secularisation, the traditional identification of European culture and Christianity has been reasserted to reject the presence of migrants from other cultural and religious traditions. Hence Churches are challenged to articulate clearly in word and action what constitutes Christian identity. Wesley's critique of European society as a consequence of its failure to be characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth'<sup>60</sup> points in an alternative direction. Authentic Christian identity is not verified by claims to a historic tradition, nor by religious practices, but by the praxis of 'justice, mercy, and truth'. Hence, with Wesley, contemporary Methodist Churches need to critique and reject the simplistic identification of Christianity and European culture. In contrast they ought to assert in word and praxis that 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with those excluded by the dominant society is central to the identity of Christianity. Hence the identity of the Churches in the Methodist tradition is manifested as they embody 'justice, mercy, and truth' towards those of other religious and cultural traditions and not in the xenophobic rejection of the other.

### *Migrating to the margins*

Secularisation is increasingly removing Christianity from the centre of European cultures and societies. Decreasing church attendance is accompanied by loss of status and the traditional social and cultural influence of the Churches. This change needs to be grasped as a challenge to renewal by relocation. Churches are called to follow Jesus outside the city gates, rediscovering the Wesleyan wisdom of locating themselves among those who exist on the margins of society. It is here that the presence of migrant communities provides a new opportunity for Churches to discover a new centre among the excluded.

Migrants are not a uniform group. There are highly qualified migrants who have been headhunted by major companies for lucrative positions. There are foreign executives employed by multinational companies at the expense of local people. There are people who have left their home country temporarily or permanently in order to escape desperate economic conditions to find the resources to provide for their own needs and those of their families who remain behind. Some are undocumented workers who perform menial tasks for starvation wages, many in appalling conditions and under constant threat of discovery and deportation. Others are documented but their educational qualifications are not recognised and they are forced to work in basic jobs. There are temporary workers, particularly from Eastern Europe, who are paid low wages, with little legal protection and who suffer a variety of forms of

discrimination. There are asylum seekers and refugees who have fled violence and war and who face a mountain of bureaucratic obstacles to obtain the right to live and work in the country of refuge. Then there are the victims of human trafficking who work in the sex industry. Churches that relocate themselves on the margins are Churches that stand in solidarity with the victimised and excluded migrants and embody 'justice, mercy, and truth' in relation to them.

*'Justice, mercy, and truth' in the context of migration*

What concretely do 'justice, mercy, and truth' require of Methodist (and other) Churches in Europe today?

The commitment to truth requires that all our responses to the issue of migration be based on a careful, critical and nuanced analysis of the causes and consequences of migration. Such an analysis must recognise the contested character of knowledge and the diverse political and economic interests that influence and in some cases distort information provided to the public. In keeping with Wesley's focus on the 'outcasts of men', such an analysis needs to assume the perspective of the impact on the marginalised, the poor, the exploited, the powerless and the victims, rather than on the wealthy and the powerful. The analysis must be nuanced, recognising the complexity and diversity of contexts, motivations and consequences of migration. The commitment to truth challenges Churches not only to analyse but also to propagate the truth and hence to provide the broader public with the information that they have discovered.

The commitment to justice challenges Churches and Christians to become involved in the political processes to promote legislative approaches that are rooted in a critical analysis of migration, that affirm the dignity and value of all human beings, the right of all to due legal process, and an orientation towards the powerless and the victims. Concretely this includes educating congregation members, particularly those who have voting rights, and a direct engagement with broader society in the form of public theology. Many migrants, particularly asylum seekers, victims of various forms of trafficking and exploited labourers, have no access to legal support or even information as to legal processes. A practical embodiment of the commitment to justice could include a variety of projects to provide legal information and support to such people.

The commitment to mercy challenges Churches to be the voice of the voiceless, the silenced and the victims – these include not only those who are present in European countries but also those who never arrive. Mercy requires deeds as



well as words. Many Churches and Christian organisations are engaged in a variety of projects aimed at addressing the basic needs of migrants, ranging from providing food and household necessities, helping people find accommodation and work, to language course and skills training. Further, mercy as Wesley viewed it included a concern for the spiritual well-being of all, hence it requires Churches to challenge their members to engage in the pursuit of 'justice, mercy, and truth' in relation to migrants for this is integral to the spiritual well-being of those who are not migrants, who have the resources to empower the marginalised or who benefit from policies and practices that discriminate against and exploit migrants.

### *(Re)affirming the centrality of worship and spiritual formation*

This (re)discovery of the identity of Churches of all traditions as communities characterised by the practice of 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with outcasts does not undermine or reduce the significance of the communal worship and sacramental life of the Church, nor the importance of spiritual formation. On the contrary, they obtain a new and intensified significance.

The communal worship of the Church, particularly as it is consummated in the Eucharist, is of fundamental importance. In the Eucharist the congregation gathers in the presence of God manifested in the Crucified One; it comes to a renewed awareness of the love of God in Christ; it discovers again God's 'justice, mercy, and truth'; it brings to God society in all its complexity and pain, and is renewed and strengthened for its mission in the world. In the context of a secularised society Wesley's affirmation of the importance of regular communion regains a new and heightened importance as the place where God's personal accepting, liberating, healing and transforming presence is encountered. It is this that distinguishes Churches from a host of non-governmental organisations. The regular retelling and exposition of the narratives of God's presence and action in the life of Israel and Jesus gives a particular shape to the Christian praxis and proclamation of 'justice, mercy, and truth'.

Churches will only become communities of people characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with the excluded through a process of deliberate spiritual formation. Central to the early Methodist praxis of holiness was the system of classes and related small groups. These groups provided the context for mutual accountability, encouragement and support for the difficult task of living a holy life in a hostile society. In the context of secularised societies shaped by diverse political, social and economic forces such small groups can

become places for mutual strengthening, reflection, encouragement and accountability as Churches become counter-cultural communities.

The proclamation of the gospel regains a new significance as the call to experience the transforming love of God within the community of the Church and so to participate in its embodiment of 'justice, mercy, and truth'. In contrast to Wesley's emphasis on 'fleeing the wrath to come', a concept that has lost any meaning and significance in contemporary Europe, evangelism becomes the announcement of what God has done in the crucified and resurrected Christ, what God is doing through the Spirit, and an invitation to turn around and participate in God's action in the world. Such an invitation includes the critique of lifestyles, behaviour patterns and institutional forms that embody injustice, cruelty and falsehood as detrimental to the spiritual well-being of perpetrators and bystanders. In this way evangelism becomes the recovery in new words of Jesus' call: 'Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust the good news!' (Mk 1:14, Common English Bible).

## Conclusion

Despite the lack of resonance between the language of holiness and contemporary European cultures the understanding of mission as spreading scriptural holiness can contribute to a relevant conceptualisation of the ministry of the Church in a pluralistic and secular context when holiness is understood as the practice of 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with the excluded. To affirm this is, however, to begin a journey to a new way of being the Church. The goal of this journey will be discovered on the way as we grapple with the complex issues of what the praxis of justice and mercy require in the concrete context of migration in Europe.

## Notes

1. 'Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley and Others' in Wesley 2011, p. 845.
2. This basic understanding is described in 'The General Spread of the Gospel', Sermon 63, in Wesley 1985, pp. 485–499.
3. Details of these developments can be found in Streiff 2003.
4. See Thompson 2011.
5. See Runyon 1998, pp. 82–101 and 222–233, and Klaiber 2014, pp. 184–223. For a relational interpretation of Wesley, see McEwan 2015.

6. *The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason and Experience*, in Wesley 2012, p. 277.
7. 'On Patience', Sermon 83 in Wesley 1986, p. 175.
8. *Thoughts on Christian Perfection* in Wesley 2013, p. 63.
9. *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* in Wesley 1989, pp. 67 and 68.
10. 'Of Former Things', Sermon 102 in Wesley 1986, p. 448.
11. 'On Living without God', Sermon 130 in Wesley 1987, p. 174.
12. See for example 'The Lord our Righteousness', Sermon 20 in Wesley 1984, p. 452, and 'Original Sin', Sermon 44 in Wesley 1985, p. 175.
13. Comment on 1 John 4:11, Wesley 1976, p. 914.
14. See Sermon 44, 'Original Sin' in Wesley 1985, p. 175, and 'New Birth' in Wesley 1985, p. 188.
15. 'Sermon the Mount VII', Sermon 28 in Wesley 1984, p. 614.
16. See 'The Witness of our Own Spirit', Sermon 12, §12, in Wesley 1984, p. 307.
17. See 'The Almost Christian', Sermon 2 in Wesley 1984, p. 140.
18. 'To His Majesty King George II' in Wesley 1987b, p. 105.
19. 'The Mystery of Iniquity', Sermon 61, §33, in Wesley 1985, pp. 467 and 468, and *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 70–75.
20. Journal entry for 3 July 1761 in Wesley 1992, p. 333.
21. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 70.
22. See Brendlinger 2006.
23. See Green 1961, p. 178, and Hammond 2014, pp. 178–189.
24. See the many examples in Marquardt 1992.
25. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 59–79.
26. Wesley 2013, pp. 36–40.
27. Wesley 2013, pp. 37 and 38.
28. Wesley 2013, p. 39.
29. Wesley 2013, p. 39.
30. For a detailed discussion of works of mercy, see Cummings 2014.
31. 'The Scripture Way of Salvation', Sermon 43 in Wesley 1985, p. 166.
32. 'The Important Question', Sermon 84 in Wesley 1985, p. 191.
33. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 76 and 77.
34. See Cummings 2014, pp. 41 and 42.
35. See 'Self Denial', Sermon 48 in Wesley 1985, p. 248.
36. 'The Danger of Riches', Sermon 87 in Wesley 1985, p. 244.
37. 'On Zeal', Sermon 92 in Wesley 1985, p. 313.
38. 'The Good Steward', Sermon 51 in Wesley 1985, pp. 282–298.
39. 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Eighth', Sermon 28 in Wesley 1984, p. 630.
40. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 75–79.
41. *A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part III*, §3.35, in Wesley 1989a, p. 316.
42. See for example Hymn 29, verse 5, in *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodist* (Wesley 1989b, p. 117): 'Outcasts men, to you I call,/ Harlots, and

- publicans, and thieves'. He also uses the phrase to describe the poor who were the audience of his open-air preaching: see *A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* Part III (Wesley 1989a, p. 305), to slaves in *Thoughts upon Slavery* (Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 79), to people in countries whom he considered to lack the benefits of civilisation (see Sermon 69, 'The Imperfection of Human Knowledge' in Wesley 1985, p. 579).
43. Wesley describes aspects of this in sections 10–15 of his 'A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist' in Wesley 1989c, pp. 272–280. For a discussion of his ministry in Oxford, see Heitzenrater 2013, pp. 44–54.
  44. For detailed discussions of Wesley's focus on the poor and underclasses, see Marquardt 1992, pp. 27–34, Heitzenrater 2002, and Lloyd 2002.
  45. See Marquardt 1992, pp. 77–86.
  46. See Madden 2010.
  47. 'On the Wedding Garment', Sermon 127 in Wesley 1987, p. 147; similar examples can be found in 'On the Death of George Whitefield', Sermon 53 in Wesley 1985, p. 243, 'The General Spread of the Gospel', Sermon 63 in Wesley 1985, p. 488, Hymn 515 in *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodist* in Wesley 1989b, p. 707, and *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in Wesley 2013, p. 190.
  48. See Heitzenrater 1995.
  49. Wesley 1979, vol. 12, p. 300.
  50. Wesley 1979, vol. 12, p. 301.
  51. See Hymn 204 in Wesley 1989b, pp. 335 and 336.
  52. See Sermon 63, 'The General Spread of the Gospel' in Wesley 1985, pp. 494 and 495.
  53. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 59–79.
  54. *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4:9 in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 79.
  55. See Pettigrew 2013.
  56. *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4:9 in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 70 and 71.
  57. *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4:9 in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 75.
  58. See Leclerc 2001, and Gammie 1989, pp. 71–96.
  59. For a helpful summary of contemporary migration and the issues it raises, see Snyder 2012, pp. 51–126.
  60. See for example 'The Mystery of Iniquity', Sermon 61, §28–36, in Wesley 1985, pp. 464–470.

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