



# Social Holiness and Social Justice

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*This article explores the connection between social holiness and social justice. It accepts the view of Andrew C Thompson that 'social holiness' in Methodist history has a distinctive meaning which was not linked to, and quite different from, the notion of social justice. However, it argues that encountering grace was not restricted to the gathering of Christians in Wesley's theology or practice and that missional engagement opens another channel or means of grace. Acts of mercy are themselves expressions of and encounters with holiness, so that holiness will lead us to justice and justice to holiness. Social holiness and social justice are, thus, part of a divine ecology where one follows the other in the rhythm of discipleship.*

SOCIAL HOLINESS • SOCIAL JUSTICE • DISCIPLESHIP • WESLEYAN THEOLOGY  
• PRAXIS

There is a beautiful image in Psalm 85:10:

Steadfast love and truth will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.<sup>1</sup>

The verse speaks of the coming together of the great attributes of God. Steadfast love (*chesed*) and truth (*emet*) will meet or encounter or, perhaps even, embrace each other; righteousness or justice (*tzedeq*) and peace (*shalom*) will kiss. In this extraordinarily intimate picture, these giant concepts don't clash and crash into each other like tectonic plates but rather they touch, they embrace, they kiss. They meet in tenderness and mutual delight.

This evocative imagery is suggestive of a God in whom essential character traits are not only held together in perfect harmony and balance, but also act together in a bonded unity to achieve God's purposes.

In 2016, Rachel Lampard and I were elected to the Presidency of the British Methodist Conference. We chose as our theme for the year of office 'Holiness and Justice'. These two mighty theological pillars are deeply embedded in Scripture and have been very dear to our denomination, particularly as exemplified in our founders, John and Charles Wesley. We were convinced that these were not separate themes conjoined by an 'and' but that they were deeply interwoven concepts. Like the Psalmist, we believed that they must be intimately connected. If we were going to speak about Holiness and Justice to our church (and beyond, where we could) we needed some sense of how these great planks of our faith relate to each other. So we spent much of the preparation year exploring their relationship.

Because Methodists are mindful of John Wesley's dictum that the gospel knows 'no holiness but social holiness' we knew that we would need to attend to the meaning of social holiness. At the same time, we noted the popularity of the term 'social justice' among Methodists, recognising that major thinkers in contemporary discourse on justice equate it with social and political fairness.<sup>2</sup> As Keith Hebden has put it, '[t]o work for justice is to work for right relationships'.<sup>3</sup>

How does social holiness relate to social justice? This article represents some of our thinking on the subject.

## Social Holiness is not Social Justice

The tendency to equate social holiness with social justice is widespread. Some people use the terms interchangeably, others as closely related concepts central to a Methodist understanding of church and mission. Andrew C Thompson has, however, challenged this sloppy and inaccurate Methodist vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> According to Thompson the original context of John Wesley's only use of the term 'social holiness' is not in any way connected with social justice. Rather, appearing in the preface to one of the Wesleys' early hymn books, it refers to the environmental contexts 'in which holiness of heart and life is manifest in the Christian life'.

Thompson is undoubtable right that the key to understanding John Wesley's notion of social holiness is to be found in his preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* published in 1739. The intention of this preface is to orient the reader for the content and use of the hymn book. Given that congregational singing is the purpose of the hymn book, social holiness in this context relates to people coming together to praise God and to build one another up through fellowship. Wesley uses the preface to recant his earlier mystical interests. Once he pursued mystical spirituality, he confesses, but now he has renounced this way, as being built on the wrong foundation and contrary to the New Testament. He is dismissing a notion of holiness which was achieved by solitary activity such as retreating to the desert. Instead,

Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. '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 loveth 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.<sup>5</sup>

As Thompson argues, 'social holiness' here is not connected with social justice. Rather, it refers to the environments or activities that are conducive to growth in holiness because they bring together those seeking holiness into a place of grace. This is what Andrew Roberts calls 'holy habitats'.<sup>6</sup> For the Wesleys, these were locations where Christians gathered to engage in practices – the

instituted and prudential means of grace – through which they would meet with God and would build up one another.

The phrase ‘social justice’, on the other hand, has a very different origin and history. According to Thompson, it is a notion developed by the nineteenth-century Jesuit philosopher, Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio.

When the idea of ‘social justice’ first appeared in the 1840s, it was a formal concept rather than a material one. That is, the term was taken to signify a branch of the ordinary concept of justice, analogous to ‘commutative justice’ or ‘criminal justice’, and did not imply any particular content, philosophy, or view of the world.<sup>7</sup> Taparelli’s writing gave it the distinctive form that we associate with the term today, though this was not entirely what he intended.

Taparelli was particularly concerned with the problems arising from the industrial revolution and sought to apply the methods of Thomism to these social problems. His view of social justice was primarily about the ordering of society. In effect, he accepted the status quo as divinely decreed and defended the hierarchical order of the aristocracy and the papacy. He used the concept of social justice in a very conservative way to underpin the social order as it had emerged through history, developing a theory of social equality and social inequality. Politically, social justice is, for Taparelli, the way things are in society, a balance that should be maintained.

However, he also wrote on economics and in particular opposed the emerging free market economics developing from the ideas of Adam Smith and John Locke. He understood the underlying notion of this approach to (what he deemed to be Protestant) economics to be competition. Instead, he advocated a system built on co-operation rather than competition and saw the role of government as protecting the weak against market forces. Justice is called on to protect the order of society both against the cruelty of the powerful who crush the poor and also against the communism of the poor who rise up against the powerful.

Taparelli’s idea of social justice was, thus, primarily about retaining the present structure of the social order but allied with this was a need to intervene when the poorest were threatened by external economic forces. It is his view of interventionist economics that has become more strongly attached to the meaning of social justice. This aspect of his writings was taken up and advocated by various popes, resulting in Taparelli being reckoned among the fathers of Catholic Social Teaching.

Thus the two concepts – social holiness and social justice – are neither identical nor are they easily associated from their origins. One term referred to corporate contexts in which Christians find the means of grace, the other to a social and economic philosophy for a more just society. Thompson suggests that later Wesleyan emphasis on social justice as expressing the ethical orientation of Methodism is derived, in fact, not from Wesley, but (imperfectly) from Taparelli.

Thompson does not rule out a theologically informed understanding of the relationship between social holiness and social justice in contemporary Methodism. Indeed he suggests, in his conclusion, that ‘a fuller evaluation of social holiness could inform present discourse about engaged Christian activity “in the world”’,<sup>8</sup> but he is concerned that a sloppy approach wherein social holiness is equated with social justice risks losing significant Wesleyan insights into the nature of sanctification.

Thompson helps us to see that a simple connection between social holiness and social justice cannot be made from history. He sets out clearly the origins and development of these phrases but does not resolve the issue. A conceptual connection may be present, even if the words were not used in the way some have supposed Wesley to have employed them. In any case, etymological origins do not necessarily have the final word on meaning and use. Language is a fluid, evolving and dynamic process, as is theology, and new connections are often as important as ancestry.

In order to find a meaningful theology of the relationship between these two notions, we must look elsewhere.

## **Wesley’s Praxis**

One reason why Methodists find the concept of social justice so attractive is John Wesley’s practice of engagement with social justice issues in his own context. Wesley went to preach in the open air to reach those outside the congregational gatherings of the church. He visited prisoners condemned to death; he went out among, and listened to, the poor; he got involved in campaigns against the distillers (not primarily because they fermented alcohol but because they exploited the poor); he opposed slavery and enabled work opportunities by means of loans for those who would otherwise be destitute or in prostitution. These actions still inspire Methodists and many other Christians and remind us that the Evangelical Awakening often uniquely

combined a passionate evangelism with practical action against poverty and injustice. If the preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* does not make a connection between holiness and justice, Wesley's own life and ministry does. Engagement with the social evils of the day and the people affected by them was not an additional activity to be undertaken as a result of the gospel, it was the gospel. Being saved from sin through grace, repentance and new birth and acting in care, mercy and for justice is part of the holy life to which all are called.

One of the insights regained through the discipline of practical theology has been to notice and examine theology embedded in practices. Swinton and Mowatt make it central to their definition of the discipline.

Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.<sup>9</sup>

This is not the place to undertake a thorough examination of all Wesley's practices (and those of the communities that he founded) but even a surface reading of the above allows us to note that an engagement with social justice issuing from his faith was central to Wesley's way of being Christian.

Such engagement often involved his objection to societal practices or political policy and led to open discourse on creating a better world. R George Eli argues that the tracts Wesley produced in the latter part of his life, such as *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions*, carry within them what has since become an acceptable method in political theory and analysis.<sup>10</sup> It is a powerful precedent for the work of the British Churches' Joint Public Issues Team on, for instance, benefit sanctions, based on real engagement and careful analysis.<sup>11</sup>

In Wesley's practice, holiness and justice were interlocked. However, this does not, of itself, tell us how they are integrated nor whether the connections are theologically strong, for as Swinton and Mowatt remind us:

the efficacy of the practice (the good to which it is aimed), is not defined pragmatically by its ability to fulfil particular human needs (although it will include that) but by whether or not it participates faithfully in the divine redemptive mission.<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately, there is also a wealth of Wesley's theological writing within which deeper connections are made between the concepts of social holiness and social justice.

## **Wesley's Theology: Justice as an expression and a means of holiness**

David N Field has already made a strong case for a dynamic linking of holiness and justice in Wesley's writing. Beginning with the notion of holiness as love, Field sees in Wesley's theology a unity of inward and outward holiness. Inward holiness is the experience of God's Spirit enabling faith and new birth and witnessing that we are loved by God as God's children. Outward holiness is the expression of love through a life characterised by 'justice, mercy and truth'.

Indeed nothing can be more sure than that Christianity cannot exist without both inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy and truth.<sup>13</sup>

Acts of piety and acts of mercy are twin practices, which point to inward and outward holiness. Both are expressions of love but while acts of piety are strongly associated with the means of grace and thus point to social holiness as the places where grace may be found, acts of mercy have been less so linked. However, Wesley makes the point very clearly that acts of mercy may also be means of grace in his sermon *On Visiting the Sick*. Having spoken about acts of piety as ordinary channels of grace he goes on.

Are there no other means than these whereby God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him? Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace... And those that neglect them do not receive the grace which otherwise they might. Yea, and they lose, by a continuing neglect, the grace which they have received.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Wesley sees the face-to-face encounter with those in need as a location of grace for the believer, the neglect of which may mean the loss of grace, which ultimately would leave those who were once strong in faith 'weak and feeble-minded'. Conversely, to engage in acts of mercy is to open up another channel of grace that issues in holiness. For Wesley the inward experience of God's love is the starting point of the journey but once the Christian has begun on the road, acts of mercy as well as acts of piety both become part of the transforming process.

Field writes

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.<sup>15</sup>

'Justice, mercy and truth', mentioned above, is, according to Field, Wesley's broader way of speaking of outward holiness. What is more, this triad does not simply mean personal virtues exercised by individual disciples but it is 'characteristic of a Christian engagement with society'.<sup>16</sup>

What Field means is spelt out by reference to Wesley's critique of the slave trade and in relation to his exhortation to visit the poor. The former involves a radical empathy with victims of slavery, seeing justice from the side of the marginalised rather than from the perspective of property rights and slave ownership. Visiting the poor requires going to 'uncomfortable, dangerous and disagreeable places'.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, costly positioning is necessary in order to treat all people as made in the image of God, a fundamental truth made known in Christ – for Christ died for all – and experienced in the Christian community. This means that costly discipleship and becoming 'troublesome' communities, which speak truth to power and live out the alternative way of the kingdom, are all part of the same whole.

We express holiness and become holy not only in our personal interactions with others but also as we respond to structural injustice, cruelty and untruth.<sup>18</sup>

## Social Justice as Encounter with the 'Other'

Field's argument can be strengthened by examining Wesley's treatment of the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46). This text appears in many of his sermons.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he read it literally, seeing these works precisely as works that express holiness of life flowing from a grace-enabled faith. For Wesley, this meant Christians would visit the prisoners, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger and give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, and in these endeavours they would be met by grace.



The parable lends itself to a further extension of this thought. When both groups ask the king when it was that they saw him without recognizing him, he tells them that it was in their action or lack of action to the least which was when they had in fact met him:

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (*emoi*).” (Mt 25:40)

“Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me (*emoi*).” (Mt 25:45)

The Greek *emoi* is a simple dative. It could equally be translated ‘for me’ rather than ‘to me’ but the narrative of the parable favours the second because it flows from the statement ‘when I was hungry’. The king locates himself in the place of the one in need, with whom all those gathered in front of him had met. Some had acted to meet the need, others had not, but none recognized that it had been the king in disguise. One interpretation of this is that doers of these good works meet Christ in the needy. They encounter him in ‘the other’ where they least expect him and grace comes to them in this encounter of exchange. The faithful bring food, drink, clothes and friendship but they receive Christ himself.

Wesley does not make this point. Indeed, in one place he points out the absurdity of giving bread, drink and clothes to the maker of all things. He suggests that the encounter with Christ is figurative.<sup>20</sup> However, there are other ways in which Wesley was very close to much recent theological understanding of encountering ‘the other’.<sup>21</sup> He clearly believed that we are recipients of grace and blessing when we engage in works of mercy. To say that the reception of grace is always in some way an encounter with God’s holiness is only to affirm that our salvation is contained within God’s self-revelation and on each occasion of encountered grace, Christ is being formed within us.

All dimensions of mission – service, caring, being good neighbours, challenging injustice and evangelism – take us to places of encounter, some of which are demanding and difficult but turn out to be holy habitats, where grace flows with the power to transform us.

There is a theology of missional grace here, not so much the grace to empower Christians to do the works required but a grace that is encountered in the very act of performing the works, a grace that comes through and from encounter – encounter with ‘the other’ which is simultaneously an encounter with God.

## Conclusion

These reflections have not comprehensively defined the way in which social holiness and social justice relate, nor is this the last word on the subject. There is much more to be explored; however, the insights here may help us make sense of our calling to both social holiness and social justice.

Social holiness and social justice are not the same, but engagement in social justice, as a key component of mission, flows from social holiness; and growth in holiness depends upon a continuing openness to and experience of grace. Grace is to be found in acts of piety and also in acts of mercy and we have no option to neglect the latter. Rather we are compelled to participate in such merciful acts for the good of all and for our own growth. These are deep Wesleyan convictions.

One way of describing this is as a kind of holy dance in which our feet follow patterns to one place and then another and then repeat the same sequence all over again in another part of the dancefloor. We attend to our needs for prayer, communion and the scriptures and to the needs of individuals and wider society in a recurring rhythm of grace. Acts of mercy are themselves expressions of and encounters with holiness, so that holiness will lead us to justice and justice to holiness. Social holiness and social justice are, thus, part of a divine ecology where one follows the other in the rhythm of discipleship.

A further conclusion is that we ought to extend the range of contexts, or sites, that we include in the concept of social holiness. If social holiness is defined as 'environmental contexts in which holiness of heart and life is manifest in the Christian life' then what we have argued here is for the inclusion in this definition of sites of missional engagement – whether they be the food bank, or the street protest against injustice. These too can be means of grace. Participating in the *missio Dei*, including the struggle for a just society, takes us to many and varied sites of social holiness where grace is readily available. It is in our participation in all these sites – whether gathering for praise or campaigning against injustice – that we are formed by grace. As sites of grace and blessing, these are all sites of God's self-giving; and through God's self-giving presence, they are thus holy places. In all these places, holiness and justice meet, even as righteousness and peace kiss.

## Notes

1. The NRSV is used throughout, unless stated.
2. See, for instance, Rawls.
3. Hebden, p. 66.
4. Thompson, pp. 142–3.
5. Wesley 1739, Preface ¶15.
6. Chapter 6, Roberts.
7. For a fuller account of Taparelli's work see Burke, pp. 98–106 and Behr, p. 7.
8. Thompson, p. 171.
9. Swinton and Mowat, p. 6.
10. Eli, p. 94.
11. See, for example, 'The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty', a 2013 report from the Joint Public Issues Team 2013, available online from <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Truth-And-Lies-Report-smaller.pdf> [accessed March 2019].
12. Swinton and Mowat, p. 21.
13. Wesley 1987, p. 174.
14. Wesley 1986, p. 385.
15. Field, p. 185.
16. Field, p. 181.
17. Field, p. 184.
18. Field, p. 188.
19. For instance, Sermon on the Mount 2, 5 and 8; The Good Steward; The Great Assize; The Reward of Righteousness; On visiting the Sick; Scriptural Christianity; God's love to Fallen man; Public Diversions Denounced; and others.
20. Wesley 1986, p. 401.
21. For example, the writings of Martin Buber; Emmanuel Levinas; and Miroslav Volf.

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