Wesleyan Witness in the Midst of Secular Ways of Life

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At its root, secularism is the attempt to disconnect religion from power, politics, and economic systems. A secular society is one where "natural" and "material" human rights and considerations shape the social, political, and economic structures that govern human living and flourishing. In its most open form, a secular society is a pluralist one where people hold various religious and non-religious beliefs, and our shared public institutions—which we all contribute to—offer a neutral space where everyone can interact as equals**.** At its best, a secular society grants maximal freedom to all humans and creates a place where no individual and community has special privileges over others.[1]

What I have just described is often called "open secularism", as distinct from "closed secularism". "Closed secularism" seeks to disconnect religion from the public sphere altogether. Religion is confined to one's private life and should not influence their professional work or political involvement. In theory, few secular theorists argue for closed secularism, but in practice, secularism can foster antireligious attitudes. It's likely that many of us live in a context with forms of both open and closed secularism.

Now, I want to sideline nuanced conceptual debates about secularism in its distinct traditions, be it French, Indian, or Turkish. Instead, I want to speak about secularism as a religion or a way of life. In Charles Taylor's contemporary classic, *A Secular Age*, he suggests that secularism cultivates various forms of living that seek to inhabit particular visions of the good life. Similar to religion, these ways of life have specific practices, values, and worldviews, what Taylor calls "social imaginaries". The various "isms" of a secular age flesh out the "immanent frame" of modern living, where meaning and well-being can be found in the material and natural world without reference to God.[2]

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[1] Andrew Copson, *Secularism: Politics, Religion, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jeremy Rodell, "What Do Secularists Mean by 'Secularism'?" Religion and Global Society (blog), LSE Blogs, January 9, 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/what-do-secularists-mean-by-secularism/.

[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 159-211, 539-593.

A good example is materialism, arguably the contemporary world's most component evangelist. It listens to us through our phones and profiles us through cameras in digital billboards. It customises messages in various mediums to attract us to buy a material item that will lead us to greater forms of happiness. Materialism has its own holiday season: Black Friday, Boxing Day, and Prime Day. It even shuns those who do not fit in with the trends of the season and saints those who buy into its way of life. Likewise, sportism establishes a way of life in the secular age that offers fulfillment and communal identity. From its hymn-like chants to the pilgrimage to hallowed stadiums, sportism carries numerous religious practices. It disciples us throughout the week via podcasts and Youtube and demands our tithes through merchandise sales and yearly membership fees. Sportism even has its own holy days: the Olympic opening ceremony, Super Bowl Sunday, and derby matches.

By design, secularism sought to remove religion from interfering with political and social structures, seeking to reduce discrimination and increase freedom and diversity. In concrete terms, this has meant that grocery stores are no longer closed on Sunday, that sports can be played on Sunday mornings, and that Easter is no longer considered a public holiday. Secularism removed these kinds of practices so that individuals can pick and choose what they do with their time and resources. Furthermore, beyond simply removing religion from political and social life, I'm suggesting, with Charles Taylor, that secularism goes a step further by replacing it with secular "religions" – ways of life that provide identity, meaning, and value without reference to the transcendent.

So, how do we grapple with this shift in social, political, and interpersonal living? We observe one response in the Christian right's seeking a return to Christendom, envisioning a society where Christianity continues to influence and control public policy and social norms and values. Yet, we must ask: does this particular response address the core issue—for people to discover that genuine human fullness depends inextricably upon experiencing the glory of God in everyday life? For the rest of this essay, I'd like to explore how Christian disciples in the Wesleyan-holiness might address this challenge.

First and foremost, it has long been reflected that one of the distinctives of the early Wesleyan movement was its radical optimism that human growth is achievable because of the reality and power of divine grace. Wesley's fundamental posture of hope and trust in the loving power of God are the foundation of his focus on intentional discipleship. Wesley urges his followers to daily grow in grace, to strive for personal and social transformation, to live and die well. With this general posture in mind, I want to suggest that Wesleyan-holiness people should welcome secularism. Secularism presents an opportunity for disciples to witness to the reality of God with a message unburdened by political and social entanglements, like those in the compromising alliances found in Christendom or a theocratic society.

That said, the rest of this paper highlights how Wesleyan-holiness people bear witness to Christ in the midst of secular ways of life. One can bear witness in many means. Traditional evangelism models often focus on the importance of verbal persuasion. Without denying this form of witness, what made Wesley unique from the other evangelical revivalists of his time, like George Whitefield, was the attention he gave to discipleship structures. The more Wesley ministered, the more he was convinced that Methodist societies, classes, and bands would lead to the most lasting growth. Methodists "watched over one another in love" (Heb 13:17) and helped "each other work out their salvation" (Phil 2:12). Wesley was convinced that intentional discipleship and social holiness would make people more attentive to the presence of God in this world.

Scholars generally agree that George Whitefield was a better evangelist than Wesley, but Wesley was better at forming disciples, and this is what led to Methodism becoming a movement. Kevin Watson notes, "When Wesley surveyed the fruits of the ministry of traveling evangelists such as George Whitefield in Pembrokeshire, he lamented the lack of spiritual vitality that resulted in this ministry."[3] Thus, William Abraham argues that Wesley had a distinct "missiological agenda" with "practices that were constitutive of it", and contemporary Wesleyans

[3] Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42.

and Methodists should revive his agenda and practices, which are what actually set him apart.[4]

Therefore, let me suggest that Wesleyan-holiness people bear witness to Christ by inhabiting a particular set of practices, which I'm calling a "way of life". Over time, a "way of life" cultivates love and affection for a desired goal or end. Secular ways of life cultivate love for wealth, stability, and health through forms of living–secular practices–that bear resemblance to how religions have sought to shape love or yearning for the divine. That said, Wesleyan discipleship offers an alternative way of being in the world by seeking to establish habits that cultivate love for God, humanity, and creation. Let me be clear that this way of being does not fundamentally have an anti-world posture, nor does it foster an attitude that is unwilling to learn from natural ways of being in this world. Nonetheless, it is likely that it will be a costly alternative compared to other secular and religious ways of inhabitation.

Now, this is all quite vague so far because I'm attempting to offer a conceptual framing of the secular age and a Wesleyan-holiness response, which focuses on a distinct way of being that cultivates a particular kind of love. To say it succinctly, I am suggesting that what should be "front and center in evangelism" in a secular age is robust forms of discipleship and spiritual formation.[5] Given the short amount of space, I will not elaborate on what kind of discipleship structures and practices these may be, but I'd like to suggest one distinct practice that might set Wesleyan-holiness people apart in a secular age.

Wesley's ministry was *at the margins* of society and *to those on the margins*. His radical vision for the Christian life–parallel to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view of costly discipleship–meant that he grew less and less accepted in mainstream Anglican settings. His preaching moved to the margins, where he ministered to the poor and preached to the working class. He regarded regular visitation of the poor as an essential aspect of Methodist holiness and discipline. Methodist class meetings were not simply a place for prayer, but for the distribution of clothing and food. Wesley

[4] William J Abraham, "The End of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40:1 (Spring 2005), 17. See, also, William J. Abraham, "Saving Souls: A Missiological Midrash on John Wesley," Wesleyan Theological Journal 38:1 (Spring 2003), 7-20.
[5] Abraham, "Saving Souls," 19.

created a free medical clinic–"the first of kind in London"--and a loan fund for the poor to borrow from.[6]

In Wesley's sermon *On Zeal*, he distinguishes between works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety include inward spiritual practices like prayer and personal Bible study, whereas works of mercy focus on the outward, like providing for the poor, offering hospitality to the stranger, and visiting those in prison or the sick. Welsey instructs his followers that if they ever have to choose between works of mercy and works of piety, then "should be more zealous for 'works of mercy.'"[7] As his disciples put on the habit of serving the poor and offering hospitality to all, they would find that their love for God and the virtues of the Christian life increased. This was what it meant to be fully human, to be perfect. Wesley closes the sermon, stating, "Be most zealous of all for *love*, the queen of graces, the highest perfection in earth or heaven, the very image of the invisible God…"[8] To be a radical Christian in a Wesleyan-holiness way is to be zealous in the pursuit of the love of God through the means of grace, particularly through works of mercy.

Many Christian lament the fact that secularism's success has meant Christianity has moved to the margins, losing its place and influence in the mainstream. If we are following Wesley's example, then we should not lament this shift but embrace it. Rather than seeking a return to a bygone Christendom, our radical optimism in divine grace calls us to an alternative form of witness. A Wesleyan way of witness embodies a way of life that prioritises works of mercy at the margins of society. We cultivate a love for God, humanity, and creation that learns from the best of contemporary human practices while also calling Christ followers to more costly forms of discipleship. While verbal witness has its place, Wesleyans best witness through authentic and transformative community. It is there where we testify that human flourishing is most realised by the indwelling of divine love and glory in a community of compassion, belonging, and formation. In closing, Wesley said, "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid that they should only exist as a

[6] Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 267.
[7] John Wesley, "On Zeal," in *Sermons III, 71–114*, vol. 3 of *The Works of John Wesley: Bicentennial Edition*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 320-21.
[8] John Wesley, "On Zeal," 320-21.

dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out."

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