

Wesleyan Contributions to Life with Other Religions

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My intention in this paper is to offer some reflections on Wesleyan contributions to a common life among the Abrahamic religions. I will argue that a critical appropriation of Wesley's understanding of "Practical Divinity" and his view of sanctification as love of God and neighbor would be one of the most important Wesleyan contributions to a faithful life among the Abrahamic religions and the modern "secular" religions.

I begin with five observations.

First, I hold to the conviction that religion is among the most dangerous human phenomena. This is because religion expresses passion for the infinite, a passion that can be easily misshaped into the *libido dominandi* in the service of the destruction of human beings and nature. Religion always stands ready not only to celebrate the wonder of life beyond the ordinary but also to serve the subjugation of peoples and the earth. Why concentrate on the Abrahamic religions? For the simple fact that the conflicts among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (and the conflicts within those religions) are the most deadly religious threats to the future of the world. To fail to work for their peaceful life together is to take a nihilistic stance toward the future.¹

Second, the negative tendency toward domination and destruction in a religion can be effectively criticized only from within the religion. Failing the religions' internal *Religionskritik*, violence ensues. Such criticism of religion is what Christianity calls the criticism of idolatry. Every religion tends toward the service of domination; it is also true

¹ This is not to eliminate from consideration Hinduism and Buddhism and other world religions. They all share the characteristics I just mentioned. It is simply to take seriously the particularly urgent Christian responsibility for peace among the religions stemming from Abraham.

that every religion tends to be the bearer of ideology, that is, the concealment of power and the obfuscation of truth. Unconcealment happens in the constant interaction of worship, beliefs, and actions, and critical reflection on worship, beliefs, and actions. Christian intention to live with those who profess other religions begins with our self-criticism of our beliefs and practices.

But, third, this self-criticism is often best ignited by life with the otherness of other religions through which, say Christianity, relearns what it has forgotten about its deepest beliefs and practices and about the truth by which these beliefs and practices are judged. Therefore, for Christians, life with Jews and Muslims is not only urgent to prevent catastrophic conflict but also for the faithfulness of Christians. And vice versa. All of the Abrahamic religions bring worship, beliefs, and practices to focus on the “table.” The way to think about relations among these religions is to think and practice life at table among them. The daily reports of the lethal violence and threats of violence prompted by these religions make it almost impossible to envision them at the same table. I am arguing that the truth of all three religions requires this.

Fourth, the burning, but often effaced, question regarding “other religions” is not pluralism or relativism as such but rather poverty. All three religions, insofar as they are religions of the “book,” understand who God is in relation to the poor, and yet all three religions are regularly forgetful of the poor. Their relation to each other, indeed the possibility of their relation to each other depends on their reminding each other of God’s relation to the poor as this is uncovered in their respective traditions. The radical differences among the religions in terms of their views of God, soteriology, and eschatology can be held in creative tension if the common focus is on the suffering of the

poor. But this will require a much more complex and differentiated (scriptural) understanding of the poor and poverty than is generally held in any of the three religions.

My fifth observation is that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are deeply confused and troubled by the *other religion*, what Wesley roughly called Deism. Broadly speaking, what I mean by Deism is not secularization per se. Deism, though it can appear in mild mannered forms, is a virulent religion to end all religion and therefore practices a human virtuosity to criticize everything – except itself. An “Enlightenment man” though he was, Wesley was certainly right in seeing Deism as the chief religious threat to Christian faith.² The more basic Deistic religious expressions, such as the “market system” making the rules by which we live, lessen the opportunity the Abrahamic religions have for a genuinely common life.³ Thus all three religions have to deliberate on what to do about the human pretension to control history and nature that belongs to the milieu of all modern religions but is especially lodged in the Deistic religions.

The Ecumenical Movement and Relations with Other Religions

At this moment in time we live with low expectations about both the ecumenical movement and relations with other religions. The two questions are much more closely connected than we normally suppose. The movements share some of the same weaknesses. Methodism made enormous contributions to the ecumenical movement in the 20th century, but beginning in the 1960s it, like other denominations, failed to respond to the historical changes that undermined the gains. Many successful dialogues among

² See Randy Maddox, “Wesley as Theological Mentor: The Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 7–29. I presuppose here both Maddox’s argument and the bibliographical references to Wesley’s works.

³ The drive of economic ideologies. (such as neoclassical libertarianism and statist Marxism) to universal and all-absorbing claims calls the truth claims of all world religions into question and represents a much greater “religious” challenge to Wesleyan modes of existence than the other religions.

denominations have been carried on right up to the present time. In general the dialogues have shown that differences in doctrine do not need to divide the churches. This is a signal achievement in the history of Christianity, but it has not brought about what was hoped for, that is, common life at table among the world churches. Many people in the developing world simply dropped out of the dialogue because the “table” under discussion remained abstract. The dialogue and the table were not realistically placed in the economic, political, and social contexts in which people lived. It is not all that helpful to get doctrine straight if the questions of human livelihood, indeed thriving, are not simultaneously and interdependently pursued.

First world efforts to deal with inter-religious life have suffered much the same fate. They tend to concentrate on the thought of religions but not the realities of the political economies in which they live. Ecumenical and interreligious efforts fall short when they do not account for differences that are embedded in the “deep economy” of religious communities.

By “deep economy” I mean, first, the ways a religion assumes human gratitude for *bread* (the producing and consumption of food as a fruit of the land), *water* (as the well spring of life), *table* (and its manners by which it is decided who is included in the nurturing of life and how), *oil* (as the sign of light, celebration, and energy), and *towel* (as the expression of self-giving serving of the other). Bread, water, table, oil, and towel are, of course, the signs of Christian sacraments, but they are centrally present also in the other Abrahamic religions as the focus of their liturgical/cultic (in the broadest sense of “liturgy”) life. Liturgy is the exuberant enactment of gratitude and the basic sharing of

what makes human life human.⁴ This is of course what is sociologically observable in tribal religion, but we go badly wrong if we do not understand it to be the basis of every true religion today even in our most sophisticated locales. We dare not consider the *ratio* of other religions without intimate awareness of their liturgies. And lest we proceed in abstraction we cannot consider their liturgies without taking into account the ways the Deistic religion of the global market has deformed these liturgies by the uses of bread, water, table, oil, and towel in the “liturgies” of the global market society. All religions are embedded in or in the vicinity of political economy and must struggle against a political economy that prevents or distorts the practices of its own “economy.” The received Scriptures and tradition of each Abrahamic religion point to an “economy” (scripturally and liturgically given) without which it cannot be true to itself. The economies are different, and the ways in which the economies have been distorted historically are different. We cannot take steps toward common life at the table without realizing these differences but also some commonalities in the ways ordinary people transcend their ordinary struggles for survival in the “relaxed” (non-agonistic) sphere of religious practices.⁵

Practical Divinity as Model of Life at Table with Other Religions.

Applying Wesley’s understanding of Practical Divinity as an approach to life with other religions may offer some fresh starts in dealing with the beliefs and practices of other religions – not to speak of our own. I would like to consider this from several perspectives: 1) theory and practice of theology (or whatever is similar to Christian

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 117-174.

⁵ Bellah, *Ibid.*, 567-606.

theology in Judaism and Islam), 2) the differences among the religions, and 3) ways of beginning and sustaining life at table among the religions.

Theory and Practice.

John Wesley's conception of Practical Divinity is a creative alternative to modern notions of theory and practice which leave us with academic attempts to discover similarities and identities among the religions, on the one hand, and feeble practices to live together in face of the poor, on the other hand. For Wesley, theory and practice, theology and ethics, beliefs and practices have to be held together. Edward Farley offers a basic definition of theology that is close to Wesley's view: theology is *critically reflecting on situations under the gospel*. Farley claims that what the academic theologian should do is not qualitatively different from what the layperson in the congregation should do.⁶ It was not just because he was an inordinately busy person carrying on by the seat of his pants that Wesley developed his theology by reflecting on situation of human suffering and the problems of evangelization and mission in the revival. He did this as the method of his theology and thereby practiced precisely what Wesleyan theology needs today.

Practical Divinity would eschew the formal attempt to find what is universally true in each religion, an activity that takes place mostly in academic settings at some distance from the violence prone distortions of religion or from the marvelous expressions of peace in localities. This is not the way to bring the religions to the table. No believing Jew or Muslim will come to the table if Christians already know what is

⁶ Edward Farley, "Four Pedagogical Mistakes: A Mea Culpa," *Teaching Theology and Religion* (Vol. 8, no. 4), 200-203. We may, with Karl Barth, understand second order theology as the church's self-examination according to the truth it confesses.

universal and true in all religions. This is another form of Western domination that usually proposes the Western *philosophia perennis* as the truth behind all religions. It is a subtle or not-so-subtle triumphalism that cuts short every attempt at common life in ordinary life. This approach pretends to mediate and adjudicate all religious claims by reference to universal truths, thus reducing the friction among the religions. But it makes no sense to water down the beliefs of one religion in order to find a greater proximity to the others, for then no religion has anything distinctive to offer the others. Any realistic approach to other religions must respect the differences, the dissimilarities among them.

Each of the Abrahamic religions is formally “monotheistic,” and thus they seem to agree that there is one God. But do they actually worship the same God?⁷ On this question I side with Mark Heim that we are dealing with different conceptions of God and salvation. He argues that the various pluralist positions fail their own test of plurality.⁸

So Practical Divinity suggests beginning life at the table with other religions by focusing on situations that threaten human beings and the earth and asking what the peculiar narrations of God of each religion contribute to the common work to alleviate suffering. Instead of agreeing on universal conceptions of God, start with concrete questions: What difference does the character of God as narrated in your tradition make for the situations of human suffering?⁹ What does your confidence in God have to say

⁷ Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, Bruce Chilton, and Vincent Cornell, *Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims Worship the Same God?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012).

⁸ S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). I find Heim’s criticism of the pluralist views of John Hick, Wilfried Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter mostly convincing. See also Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious End* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁹ With Amos we might ask the question, Why do the children not have shoes? And with Amos we could answer that, for starters, our “solemn feasts” are concealing the fact of no shoes

about this problem or situation? This requires patience for hearing the story of the other and respect for the different conceptions of God and redemption that emerge from the other's story. If my listening to the story of the other is intent and serious, I may be converted, or, more likely, I may remember how radical is God's giving Godself to the world in the cross of Christ so that I may come to love and respect the other's peculiar way of being in a given place of that world that God loves with God's whole being. In any case, since "God" is a power term, conversation at the table requires perseverance in the criticism of God concepts that project the power to destroy. We may discover that concealed God concepts in the "other religion," various forms of Deism, are the most distorting of all.¹⁰ Only through life at table will we gain the mutual trust for such a difficult but necessary conversation.

The Canon within the Canon: The Scripture and the Poor.

The adherents of the Abrahamic religions are scriptural people. This is the reason that approaching the other religions with "natural theology" or with universal definitions of religion, however helpful in some respects, fails to bring about life at table. There is no space here to deal with the different conceptions of scripture in the Abrahamic religions. I do want, however, to point to the Christian notion of the canon within the canon, since, I would argue, it leads to a possible common reading of the scriptures in situations of threatened human livelihood/thriving.¹¹ From a Christian perspective, canonical Holy

and blocking the distribution of shoes to the children. To ask the questions of God in any of the three religions quickly raise the question of equity.

¹⁰ See M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

¹¹ I deeply respect the project of "scriptural reasoning." See David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, eds. *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). Peter Ochs, *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (New

Scripture¹² contains the narratives of the ways God relates to all that is not God, the ways God draws creation to eschatological fulfillment, and the ways God reconciles alienated creatures to Godself and to each other. The Gospels imagine a new world under the kingdom of God, that is, the reign of God's righteousness, which has the shape of the grace we see in Jesus Christ, as God's righteousness and grace make possible God's love which is the power of life against death.

The proclamation of the narrated gospel is a poetic event through which we are set in the kingdom of God at hand. But the narratives by themselves do not provide what unites Canonical Holy Scripture. Every effort to interpret the scriptures includes interests expressed in particular contexts. It is in the discourse between the large narratives and the interests that a community brings to the scriptures out of a particular time and place that the canon within the canon, crucial to the interpretation of scripture, emerges.

What are the contextual interests brought to scripture under guidance of the canon within the canon? The primary interest in Wesley's reading of the canon within scripture that led to his understanding of the narratives of Christological and eschatological redemption was the life of the poor in the Triune God. Just as in Wesley's time, present-day liberal and conservative readings of scripture, abstracted from the sufferings of these times, keep us from encountering God in the poor as witnessed in the scripture and deter us from the intimacy with the poor that I believe is the key to life with the other religions in our time.

Sanctification: Love of God and Neighbor.

York: Paulist Press, 1993). The project needs to be expanded in order to include the reasoning about the religions' contemporary contexts of suffering.

¹² For the following see David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009)

The way in which Wesley expresses God's relation to the poor and our relation to the poor is, simply put, sanctification. The distinctively Wesleyan sense of the canon within the canon is sanctification. Sanctification is the means through which we know and live in the Triune God's redemption of the world by our own resipse. It is, sadly, what is most missing in the current life of many Wesleyan churches. When Wesley was pushed into a corner to say after all what sanctification was, he said with Jesus: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-39).¹³ So I come to my main claim: the possibility of life with other religions from the Christian perspective comes from the Great Command, love God and neighbor, and from God's grace that makes this love justly possible.

I am speaking from the Christian scriptures, but how else would we know how to live with Jews and Muslims? Several theological realizations about the Great Command are crucial. First, we cannot love God without loving our neighbor (1 John 4) and vice versa. Second, it is impossible to keep the Great Command without God's grace. Third, neighbor love is qualitatively different from friendship and erotic love. In friendship I see myself reflected in the friend. In erotic love I see myself completed in the beauty and desirability of the other. In the neighbor Christ gives me I see the radically different one whom I can love only by being transformed, born anew.¹⁴ Fourth, God in Christ gives us

¹³ Charles Wesley distilled the meaning of sanctification: “The two commands are one:/Ah, give me Lord, to prove/Who loves his God alone/He must his neighbour love,/And what thine oracles enjoin,/Is all summ'd up in love divine.” Hymn on Matt. 22:40, Scripture Hymns (1762), 2:181.

¹⁴ This is classically stated by Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* Ed, and Trans. By Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

our neighbors to love, we do not choose our neighbors. And, fifth, all neighbors are poor. Here is our way to the table with those who believe differently: the understanding of God in the poor and of the poor in God and the grace-filled love of the poor neighbor that God makes possible for us.

I will flesh this out in four notes: 1) Jesus is poor and his poverty is the way into our life with God, 2) all neighbors are poor, 3) God's grace gives us eyes to see the unrecognizable poor in multiple dimensions of poverty, and 4) our salvation is experienced in God's salvation of the neighbors God gives us.¹⁵

Jesus is Poor.

That Jesus is poor is not immediately an ethical consideration but rather belongs to the reality of the great “exchange” at the heart of our redemption. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Or “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:19, 21). Or “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13, cf. Phil 2:1-11). And the book of Hebrews offers this insight: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death” (Heb 2:14). Jesus, the poor One, knows the plight of every poor person.

Thus, that God in Christ is poor belongs precisely to the power the world calls weakness and foolishness (1 Cor 1) and yet the only power that can redeem the cosmos (John 3:16). The paradigm for God's work of reconciliation through Christ (2 Cor 5:16-

¹⁵ Some of the following comes from a lecture I gave recently to the Charles Wesley Society.

21) is the power of God in the cross of Christ (1 Cor 1). If Canonical Holy Scripture sees God in Christ as poor, it is understandable that the traditions of its interpretation see all neighbors as poor.

All Neighbors are Poor.

In light of the neighbors God gives us to love (as opposed to neighbors simply defined by their nigh-ness) we would have to say that all neighbors in their givenness are poor. Gregory Nazianzus begins his oration “On the Love of the Poor” with the claim that “all of us are beggars.”¹⁶ Before God, all of us are poor. The Wesleys continue this theological insight by claiming that it is the recognition of the poor that is the beginning of our life in God and that the recognition of the poor, who are hidden by the fear and hatred of society, is made possible in us solely by the grace of God.

And here we find an enormous block to our life with people of other religions, namely, our inability to see the poor who are near but whom we refuse to see as neighbors. I teach a course called “God, Economy, and Poverty” that is composed of divinity, law, business, and international relations graduate students. I always begin the course with a question to which I encourage a response from all participants, in full knowledge that all of us find it a disorienting question: “Do you give to beggars?” It evokes, without fail, many of the responses that most persons in our society would give, that is, the perfectly good reasons not to give to beggars according to the values of the market society.

The reasons for not giving to beggars are considered ethical¹⁷: I am not sure

¹⁶ Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 74ff.

¹⁷ And they can be easily extended to national welfare policies or international relations through the means of “foreign aid.”

whether the poor person will spend the money wisely. Would my money simply dissolve in a bottle of vodka? Will I be an enabler, reinforcing the habits that have led to the poverty of this person? I might be hurting the poor person by postponing his or her serious pursuit of a job. Wouldn't it be better to take the person for a meal, but then I would have to talk to him or her and might get more permanently involved. Besides shouldn't the family be taking care of this person? Has he left his family? Has her family abandoned her? My giving to the poor person is not likely to prevent the poor person from falling further into poverty. After all, who is responsible here? Don't we have a welfare state?

In response I want to raise what I think is a profound Wesleyan question: Have we become constitutionally incapable of intimacy with the poor? And I want to claim, though I know it is not immediately apparent, that our answer to this question has everything to do with whether we can live with people of other faiths. The way I will define poverty illustrates the many ways we distance ourselves from the radically other or neighbor. All neighbors are poor. Even if we express concern for the poor, we deal with poverty from a distance. We look immediately for structural and institutional ways to "handle" poverty at a safe remove. The market society hides the poor and those who identify with the poor because the market on its own cannot provide for the poor. They are "surplus" people, beyond the ability of the present systems of production and consumption (according to the present assumptions and rules) to provide for. Our social arrangement of life relations assumes that each individual is on his or her own. My freedom has something to do with not being responsible for the poor.

Put off by the perceived indigence, incapability, and smell of the poor, we invent

finely tuned ethical and esthetic oversensitivity that leaves the poor far removed from our personal sphere. Adam Smith, the Wesley's contemporary, expresses our unsanctified sentiments well:

We despise a beggar; and though his importunities may extort an alms from us, he is scarce ever the object of any serious commiseration..... The fortunate and proud wonder at the insolence of human wretchedness, that it should dare to present itself before them, and with the loathsome aspect of its misery presume to disturb the serenity of their happiness.... [Those who teach us to] feel for others as we naturally feel for ourselves....are those whining and melancholy moralists, who are perpetually reproaching us with our happiness, while so many of our brethren are in misery.... Persons of delicate fibres and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the corresponding parts of their own bodies.¹⁸

This is the frame of mind, of course, in which we are in constant temptation of considering Jesus an “offense” and the gospel a “scandal” because we so easily trust the securities offered by the prevailing economic, political, cultural, bodily control, and psychological cures.

We are All Poor in Various Dimensions of Poverty.

Who are the Poor? This question can be answered in many different ways.¹⁹ But

¹⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Pres, 1976), III.i.3.18; I.iii.2.1; III.i.3.9; I.i.1.3. Malthus expresses the case even more severely: ‘Even in the relief of common beggars we shall find that we are more frequently influenced by the desire of getting rid of the importunities of a disgusting object than the pleasure of relieving it. We wish that it had not fallen in our way, rather than rejoice in the opportunity given us assisting a fellow creature. We feel a painful emotion at the sight of so much misery; but the pittance we give does not relieve it. We know that it is totally inadequate to produce any essential effect. We know, besides, that we shall be addressed in the same manner at the corner of the next street; and we know that we are liable to the grossest impositions. We hurry, therefore, by them, and shut our ears to their importunate demands.’ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 283.

¹⁹ We can answer this question by rehearsing the constantly changing definitions of the poor by statistics. Forty-six million living with less than \$11,000 income per year. (United Nations, *Human Development Report*, 1990.) But this comes nowhere near the biblical perspectives on the poor.

from the scriptural perspective of God's working in our midst the poor are those who are excluded from the conditions of life. Poverty is multidimensional. There are many ways to become poor and to be poor. The objective of economy (in the ancient sense) is providing and distributing what it takes to survive the day, but the poor are constantly threatened with not having what it takes to survive.

There are apparent in the ministry of Jesus (and the Jewish traditions in which he lives) five dimensions of poverty: economic, political, cultural, natural/bodily, and spiritual. As we find our orientation in Christ with the poor, it is crucial for us to have a much greater awareness of the multi dimensions of poverty as well as of the complexity of redemption from poverty as seen through scripture.²⁰ This is a map to common life at table with the people of other religions.

The first dimension may be called *economic* and the painful cry for salvation is "I am hungry."²¹ The scriptural answer of redemption is, as is eminently clear at every Eucharistic meal, "God is bread." To know who God is we tell the story of bread. So true is this that bread is at the center of church's life and is an essential way we identify God. "This is my body, broken for you." It the life and work of every baptized person who prays "Give us this day our daily bread" to work while there is light for an economy that serves God's serving of all those who are hungry.

²⁰ One reason I regard the hymns of Charles Wesley so highly is that they so vividly show the multi dimensionality of poverty in the loves of the poor. What they lack in sociological objectivity they gain in a poetic imagination that allows us to see the poor and to see ourselves as among the poor.

²¹ The clearest index of poverty is hunger. The poor lack daily bread. For lack of bread we become debtors; the biblical hatred of debt is that it often leads to slavery. Because it leads to slavery, the Torah places severe restrictions on interest and debt. Interest may not be charged to the poor and nothing may be taken as collateral that a person needs for life (Exod. 22:25-27; Deut. 23:19-20, 24:6. 10-13). The Christian tradition before modernity made usury, the increase of wealth through sterile money, a sin.

The second dimension of poverty is *political* and the cry for salvation here is “I have no power” to shape the life of my family, my neighborhood, my country, and the world community. The redemptive reply is “God is power,” not the dominative power (the *libido dominandi*) of the world but the nurturing, creative power that gives all creatures access to life and that can indeed transform death-serving power. The poor lack political power. The poor have no power to make a difference in their lives through their own decisions and actions. The poor do not have the capabilities by which they could change their life condition. They have little control over the means of work. The poor are recognized by their failure to appear in public and their inability to protect themselves from those in control. The power of others always runs ahead of them. They lack an understanding of the laws of their society and the forces that maintain the laws. All persons baptized into the Spirit of life are sent to work for a politics friendly to the power we know in the cross of Christ in whom the poor find their future.

The third dimension of poverty is *cultural* in which is heard the cry for redemption “I have no name.” Here we find those whose names and histories have been robbed by racism, sexism, classism, meritocracy, and ageism. And the redemptive answer is “God gives you name.” Without a cultural place to stand and be recognized, the poor are despised and feel humiliated. The poor remind those around them about how insecure life is and therefore the cultural means of making them invisible are prized. The poor live in a culture that defines them as failures and less than fully human. The inward acceptance by the poor of the values of the rich makes poverty self-destructive and produces self-hate in the poor themselves.²² You who were once no people now have a

²² Leif E. Vaage, “The Sermon on the Mount: An Economic Proposal,” in *God’s Economy*, ed. Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 127-168.

name given by the One who invites, accepts, forgives, and sends those who have been made homeless. Jesus' word to the poor is "stand up." No longer the slaves, they are their own conscious subjects, with the dignity of God's children. They no longer adopt the system of values of their oppressors according to which the rich are the real persons, whereas all who are not rich are failures.

The fourth dimension of poverty is *bodily or natural health*, and the cry for redemption is "I am sick, I am diseased, I am not whole." This is a cry of all human beings at one time or another and of the whole of creation that is groaning under its domination by human beings and its own cracks and flaws. And the redemptive answer is "God is healing (*salus*)."¹⁰ The poor suffer bodily. Whether one is healthy or ill affects all other dimensions of poverty. Because of their sickness, they are separated from the community. For Gregory Nazianzus lepers are the most extreme case of the poor. They are a metaphor for all who are poor in any dimension of poverty. Jesus' embrace of lepers brings all poor neighbors into proximity to us. All those who are healed by the embrace of Jesus and commanded to stand are immediately sent to minister to the sick neighbors.

Finally, the fifth dimension of poverty is *spiritual* and the cry for salvation here is "I have no hope."¹¹ The answer of redemption is that God gives hope to the hopeless. The poor suffer from the sense that they have no future, that the future is closed to them. The poor are in despair. There are no alternatives to the way things are. They see no horizons in which to breathe. They bring dread into the present, crushing their ability to see objective possibilities for the new. This is the spiritual degradation of life without faith, hope, and love. It is a living death or death before death. The lack of hope colors economic, political, cultural, and bodily lacks. All those who in God's grace are gifted

with faith, hope, and love are sent to bind up the hopeless.

We are not really confronting poverty until we see the interdependence of these dimensions of poverty. We all could say that we have at one time or another been poor in one or more of these dimensions of poverty, but few of us are poor in all of these dimensions. The global human reality is that if you or your family is poor in one of these dimensions for a generation or two, you are likely to become poor in all dimensions. People that are poor in all dimensions at once are what Luke calls *ptochoi* (the poor) and Matthew *ochlos* (the crowd). The scandal of the gospel is that God in Jesus Christ comes to these in order to manifest God's grace, God's power that is different from all other kinds of power, and God's glory. God comes to these in order to show forth God's power of redemption for all. It is in their presence that we come to know the communion of the Triune God.

We Experience our Salvation in God's Redemption of the Poor.

Could it be that we fail to read Canonical Holy Scriptures because we fail to see the poor and we fail to see ourselves as poor? The conflict over the poor is so intense as to make us want to avoid speaking of the poor altogether. But this is impossible if one is to speak of Jesus scripturally, for we do not get Jesus without the friends of Jesus whom we are to love as the neighbors God gives us. We certainly do not earn our salvation by loving the poor, but we do not experience the joy and peace of our salvation without loving the poor. This is the heart of sanctification. Sanctification is "our way" to common life at table with believers of other religions.

Wesleyan Agenda

I have argued that conversation at table with people of other religions should take

place around situations in which human and natural thriving or suffering are at stake.

Wesleyan acts of mercy, which are constitutive of sanctification and have been a part of the Wesleyan movement since its inception, are proposals for common life and work in these situations. I can only suggest an outline that includes Wesleyan life with the poor, visitation of prisoners, care for the sick and frail, education of those excluded from the culture, and good news for those without hope.

The Systems of Poverty. The conversation with other religions begins with the question how to recognize and live with those who are poor in any or all of the dimensions of poverty I mentioned earlier. But this means also remembering the scriptures of the religions in which the reasons for poverty have to do quite concretely with lending, interest, rents, debt, taxes, and tyranny. Nothing could be more current than these topics in relation to the global economy and human survival. For example, a major concern for all the Abrahamic religions is usury, which is at the heart of the world-wide manipulation of money and fiscal systems and the source of untold misery for millions around the world.²³

The Prison Systems of the World. It is unimaginable to think of Wesleyanism without the visitation of prisoners. Just so, it is unimaginable to conceive life with the other religions without focusing on the prisons, torture, surveillance, and rendition prevalent in many parts of the world. But prisons eventually raise all the questions of governance. Prisons are the face of the citadel. I use “citadel” as the sign of complex political, police, and military-industrial power.²⁴ The conversation at table must be about

²³ M. Douglas Meeks, “The Peril of Usury in the Christian Tradition,” *Interpretation* 65/2 (April 2011), 128-140.

²⁴ See Lewis Mumford’s use of “citadel” in *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

what each religious tradition brings to a redefinition of security in opposition to the reigning doctrine of international life: mutual assured destruction. The Abrahamic religions know that ultimately there is no security except through confidence in God's providence and judgment. In the end only the religions can offer something different from the coercion of the state and commodity security of the market society. The religions will not replace the state and the market, but they can substantially contribute to the redefinition of their ends and rules.

Education and Humanization. For Wesley education had to accompany the revival lest there be no generation of the generations. All religions have to be troubled by the loss of their schools and the general decay of educational systems. But even more frightening is the way our great universities and colleges are becoming instruments of inequality and disparity. The religions have no rightful place in public unless they are working for equality. Markets alone cannot produce equality.²⁵ The common life of the religions takes shape around the common search for forms of education that create capabilities among all people.²⁶

Health Care Delivery and the Integrity of the Earth. Wesley's concern for the health of our embodied existence presents yet another aspect of the sanctifying love of God and neighbor that belongs in and can actually occasion life at table with those who profess a different faith. The nature of global diseases and the pitiful failure of health care systems throughout the world as well as the question of the "health" of the earth require the religions to regain their memory and to share their resources for healing.

²⁵ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

²⁶ See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999) for a conception of economic relations based on providing capabilities as the means to freedom and equality.

Practical Divinity and sanctification as the love of God and neighbor are our reliable contributions to a common table with the other religions at which the peace we share with them is a religious experience. To be sustained in this hard work Wesleyans, like all Christians, have to find their hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but precisely this hope will engender hope for the other religions.