

**A Legacy of Holiness:
Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Interreligious Engagement in Higher Education**
Tiffany L. Steinwert, Syracuse University

“Superior to any sectarian bias and apart from any denominational appeal the Chapel will seek unalloyedly to serve for moral undergirding and for spiritual development all the students of all religious associations equally, in recognition that whatever enriches the spiritual level of one group will lift the level of all.”

– Rev. Dr. Charles Wesley Flint, Methodist Bishop and Chancellor of Syracuse University

In 1930, Hendricks Chapel opened its doors at Syracuse University as one of the nation's first interfaith Chapels. Bringing together Jewish, Protestant and Roman Catholic students, the Chapel created a religiously plural community dedicated to the moral, ethical and spiritual development of all students. That a Methodist college campus birthed such an innovative, interreligious Chapel is no surprise. The Wesleyan emphasis on personal and social holiness coupled with a spirit of unity in diversity has fostered and fueled interfaith engagement on Methodist related college campuses for many years.

Using Hendricks Chapel as a case study, this paper places Wesleyan commitments to holiness and unity in dialogue with contemporary interfaith movements, identifying core practices that might further interreligious engagement on contemporary college campuses. A Wesleyan interreligious praxis offers a distinct resource for higher education that cultivates a holistic education of heart and head while simultaneously bringing people together across difference to work toward the transformation of the world.

Hendricks Chapel: The Soul-life of Syracuse University

Inspired by the quiet, contemplative spirit of the Williams College chapel in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Senator Francis Hendricks donated funds to Syracuse University in 1920 for a chapel of its own. Chancellor Charles Wesley Flint, a Methodist Elder (and later Bishop of the Church) recognized the opportunity in such a gift. Rather than hastily build a structure in the midst of rapid campus expansion, Chancellor Flint chose to carefully plan the campus around the Chapel itself making it both the literal and metaphorical heart of Syracuse University. From 1930 to the present day Hendricks Chapel has, in the words of its first Dean, William H. Powers, served as the “soul-life” of the University caring for the moral and spiritual welfare of generations upon generations through a holistic education of the heart.

The founders of the Chapel understood that religion and spirituality are integral parts of higher education. More than simply educating the head, institutions of higher education are called to educate the whole person, heart, mind and soul. At the dedication of the Chapel, Methodist Episcopal Bishop Ada Wright Leonard framed the role of religion in higher education: “The purpose of planting a place for religious worship like this in this university is evidence of the fact that without religion, knowledge may be a detriment, morality may become a dissipation, and the highest aims of life utterly frustrated.”¹ Echoing the centrality of religion in education, the Reverend Cleveland B. McAfee asserted that, “Religion can't properly be conceived in a place like this as an interest to be taken or left, because religion, properly conceived is a way of taking life, a way of being and doing everything...a way of living a whole life.”²

Indeed, Hendricks Chapel was created to witness to the essential place of religion in higher education by nurturing a climate favorable to moral and religious growth.³ Religion, while rooted and grounded in the Christian, specifically dominant Protestant tradition, was broadly interpreted to include the pursuit of life's most pressing questions through moral, ethical, and spiritual reflection. This understanding of the wide horizon of religious concerns is reflected in programming beginning in 1930 that included not only worship services and religious study groups, but also a high profile lecture series, contemporary issues discussion groups, community service opportunities, a medical mission in China, fellowship events, international student services, first year orientation programs, courses in human sexuality, pastoral counseling and an emergency fund for students.⁴ Over the years programming expanded, always maintaining a focus on joint socially just pursuits that promoted peace, human relations, social service, overseas relief, and the education and enrichment of human beings.

Given the expansive definition of religion and the founding spirit of the University, the Chapel was intentionally founded as an interfaith institution. The 1894 inaugural address by Chancellor James R. Day foreshadows the inclusive, interreligious vision of Hendricks Chapel:

Syracuse University is to be a Christian university with a mission emphasized by the fact, something superior to the state or secular schools in its moral atmosphere and equal to it in its curriculum and work. But it is to be a Christian university upon the broad foundations of Christ's Christianity which welcomes men and does not exclude them...It is to be far more Christian than denominational...It will be a University Christian enough to make a Hebrew as much at home as a Christian; to afford equal facility to Catholic and Protestant. It will be Christian not by exclusion, not by magnifying a sect, but by magnifying human learning and contributing to the same.⁵

This commitment to fostering an inclusive, interfaith community was imbedded in the Chapel from the outset. The very architecture and design of the building reflects its interreligious aim. Built in the Georgian colonial style, the main sanctuary boasts expansive Greco-Roman niches. Designed to hold icons, the niches remain empty, allowing the viewer to project their own imagine of the Divine or Ultimate into the niche. Circling the Dome are three verses selected by Dean Powers to reflect the interreligious impulse and educational aim of the Chapel.

Not that we have lordship over your faith but are helpers of your joy. – *II Corinthians 1:24*

Ye shall know truth, and the truth shall set you free. – *John 8:32*

God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. – *John 4:24*

These three verses represent the Chapel's primary aims of mutual relationships, intellectual discovery, and shared purpose. Although today, these verses from the Greek Testament may not be considered inclusive of all faith and non-faith traditions, in 1930 they reflected an aspiration to a universal religion shared by all.⁶

Although the impulse toward a universal religion runs the risk of reducing religious difference to a set of vague propositional faith statements or secular moral imperatives, Hendricks Chapel was careful to create a religiously plural community that continued to emphasize the value of religious particularity. For Dean Powers interreligious engagement was rooted in the religious commitments of each faith tradition. In 1930, he wrote, "From the point of view of organized religion it is better to call the work at

Syracuse interdenominational than nonsectarian, for there is no apparent or veiled attempt to desecularize students.”⁷

Hendricks Chapel has maintained this unique balance of maintaining the integrity and distinctiveness of individual faith traditions while uniting in joint endeavors for the common good. The aim and form of interfaith work at Hendricks Chapel is best summarized by Dean Powers, “This is a place where all unite regardless of our religious creeds. This is the place where we try to find something in common – one for all and all for each.”⁸

Wesleyan Influences on Interreligious Engagement: Holiness, Unity and Mission

As an heir of American Methodism, Hendricks Chapel and its approach to interreligious engagement in higher education bear distinct marks of Wesleyan theology. The Chapel’s commitment to the pursuit of a religiously grounded life, its appreciation for and preservation of the distinctive character of individual faith traditions and its unity in shared values for a common purpose all arise out of key Wesleyan theological commitments to holiness, unity, and mission. While it would be anachronistic to ask, “What would Wesley do?” it is helpful to explore the ways in which Wesley’s theological commitments and interreligious praxis foreshadow and frame contemporary Wesleyan interreligious engagement.⁹

At the core of Wesley’s theology and praxis was a commitment to holiness of heart and life. Developed throughout his career in his understanding of Christian perfection, holiness is both an inward act of grace and the outward embodiment of that spiritual state through concrete actions and spiritual disciplines. Holiness encompasses the whole of one’s life, “not a part, but all of our soul, body, and substance.”¹⁰ More than an assent to a particular belief, holiness is a commitment to a holistic way of living one’s life manifest in a vigorous calling and cultivation to the love of God and neighbor. Wesley was adamant that Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and outward practice of holiness.

Wesley’s pursuit of holiness framed his own interreligious engagement. Nehemiah Thompson illustrates the ways in which Wesley’s encounter with religious diversity focused on the presence or absence of holy living. Thompson asserts that since holiness, not sanctification alone, framed Wesley’s soteriological principle, he remained open and attentive to the marks of holy living in Christians and non-Christians alike. Often comparing and contrasting the practice of some Christians with that of non-Christians, Wesley was willing to learn from and appreciate the religious practices of non-Christians, affirming the pursuit of holiness in them.¹¹ In fact, at times Western Christians came up short in comparison to moral lives of non-Christians. Wesley lamented, “I am afraid truly, that many called Christian are far worse than the heathens that surround the, - more profligate, more abandoned to all manner of wickedness, neither fearing God, nor regarding man.”¹²

Rebekah L. Miles raises a similar point in her article, “John Wesley as Interreligious Resource: Would You Bring John Wesley to An Interfaith Dialogue.” Expanding the work of David Pailin and Randy Maddox, Miles argues that Wesley’s comments about other religious traditions were rhetorical devices employed to exhort Christians to be better Christians. This is illustrated in Wesley’s sermon *On Faith* in which he compares the faith of non-Christians and Christians in order to urge Methodists to strive ever more diligently toward holiness of heart and life.¹³ Again, in his sermon, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, Wesley employs comparisons of different faith traditions to convince listeners of the religious malaise infecting the world and to urge them through holy living and the power of God’s grace to transform the world. Miles contends that Wesley’s treatment of diverse faith traditions is not necessarily to be read as his assessment of the tradition itself, but rather an assessment of the state of Christian living. Central for

Wesley was the extent to which Christians were pursuing holiness of heart and life. Interreligious engagement for Wesley, in this way, was a means to encourage holiness among Methodists.

Wesley was not indifferent to the distinct doctrinal claims of Christianity and other world traditions. He remained firm in his conviction that the Christian faith claim was unique and soteriologically necessary.¹⁴ However, Wesley's openness to the possibility that non-Christians can practice holy living and have access to the "inward voice of God,"¹⁵ provides a window of opportunity for shared concerns between Christians and non-Christians. By momentarily suspending doctrinal truth claims, it provides space for people of diverse faith traditions to come together around a shared value of holy living for personal and social transformation.

The pursuit of holiness within a religiously plural community necessitates an understanding of unity within diversity. Wesley's appreciation for a unity that maintains diversity is formally articulated in his sermon *Catholic Spirit* in which he argues for a "catholic spirit" that unites Christians in love despite differences.¹⁶ He writes, "Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?"¹⁷ Although Wesley is clear to distinguish his "catholic spirit" from a latitudinarianism that maintains indifference, he does not prescribe an orthodox set of beliefs. Rather, he affirms the fallibility of theological opinions of all people, including his own. It is important to note that Wesley is talking to a Christian community regarding Christian differences. However, the impulse creates space and openness within Wesleyan communities for interreligious engagement.

John Cobb argues that Wesley's theology acknowledged and valued an openness to difference, even in matters of doctrine and creed. For Wesley to believe one thing was not to deny the other. He understood that he, like everyone else, was mistaken in some opinion. Orthodoxy was secondary to Wesley's concern for the transformation of life. As long as a particular belief did not hinder holy living Wesley allowed it. In fact, holy living could bridge religious difference for Wesley. In his sermon *A Caution Against Bigotry*, Wesley urges Christians to support all work that advances God's love in the world, whether in opposing Christian camps or diverse religious traditions. If the work advances holiness of heart and life in the world, it does not matter whether the actor is a Christian. Wesley writes, "Yea, if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew, a deist, or a Turk doing the same thing, were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly I should be no better than a bigot still."¹⁸

In Methodism and at Hendricks Chapel this shared pursuit of a life well lived provides a framework for people to work together for the common good despite and in celebration of difference. This coming together in shared purpose is often invoked in Methodism by summarizing Wesley's sermon *A Catholic Spirit* in the maxim, "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand."¹⁹ Indeed, throughout the history of a people called Methodist it has been the commitment to shared mission that has held together a diverse, global community. Mission, whether spreading scriptural holiness through the land or ending malaria, has served to bind an ecclesial body marked by striking theological and socio-historical diversity.

Toward an Interreligious Praxis:

The Wesleyan core commitments to the pursuit of holiness of heart and life and to unity in diversity evident in the life of Hendricks Chapel provide us with an emerging framework for interreligious praxis in higher education. This final section will sketch such a praxis that 1) integrates religion into the central purpose of higher education, 2) employs religious pluralism as an asset, and 3) uses collaborative action to build common goals.

The Centrality of Religion in Higher Education

A Wesleyan praxis of interreligious engagement affirms the centrality of religion in higher education as an integral part of a holistic pedagogy aimed at the formation of global citizens. Like Wesley's pursuit of holiness, a religiously grounded education seeks to shape and form all parts of one's life by providing a broad existential framework for meaning-making, cultivating a *habitus*²⁰ of critical reflection and thoughtful action, and nurturing concrete practices that embody one's most deeply rooted convictions.

A 2011 study at the University of California at Los Angeles demonstrated the positive impact of religion and spirituality on undergraduate education.²¹ Analyzing data collected over seven years from 14, 527 students in the United States, the study discovered that spirituality²² concretely enhanced students' educational experience leading to improvements in grade point average, leadership skills, psychological well-being, ability to relate to diverse people, and overall satisfaction with college. Urging colleges and universities to craft educational practices that promote spiritual development, the study sketched a pedagogical model that would return religion to higher education in meaningful, concrete ways.²³

Indeed, religion has the power and potential to reinvigorate and renew higher education. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen argue, in *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*, that religion enhances student learning and improves higher education as a whole.²⁴ Describing the current reemergence of religion in institutions of higher learning in the United States, the Jacobsens illustrate the ways in which religion, like Wesley's own rigorous pursuit of holiness, aid in the formation of whole persons. By reframing religion beyond traditional conceptions of personal belief, they demonstrate how a focus on the inherently religious or spiritual dimensions of higher education can maximize the cognitive, social, and personal dimensions of student learning.

By returning religious pursuits to higher education colleges and universities can help students of all faith and non-faith traditions pursue a holistic moral, ethical and spiritual life. This comprehensive pursuit of a whole life is rooted and grounded in a Wesleyan commitment to holy living and evidenced in the life and work of Hendricks Chapel. Beyond simply understanding the belief claims of various world traditions, interreligious engagement highlights religion as a viable, appropriate and essential part of higher education and frames it, as was envisioned by the founders of Hendricks Chapel and Wesley himself, as a way of life. The pursuit of holiness of heart and life can be a valid and instrumental practice in higher education shaping and forming global citizens by attending to the body, mind and soul.

Religious Pluralism

Arising from a commitment to unity in diversity and a distinct openness to difference, a Wesleyan praxis of interreligious engagement prioritizes religious pluralism over religious diversity. Diana Eck distinguishes pluralism from diversity noting that while diversity indicates the presence of various traditions, pluralism is the energetic engagement with that diversity.²⁵ As such, religious pluralism requires a mutual seeking of understanding across difference that aims toward the transformation of self and world. To achieve this aim, pluralism requires concrete commitments that can be placed in relationship to one another through mutual dialogue, revealing common understandings and deep differences.

In recent years in the United States, colleges and universities have turned toward understanding religious difference as one of many identity groups. Religious centers on campus have gradually been transformed into cultural or multi-faith centers. While this is critical in dismantling Christian privilege in the United States and reframing religion as something beyond concrete religious institutions, it runs the

risk of confusing diversity for pluralism. A Wesleyan interreligious praxis necessitates an engagement with religion that arises out of and responds to concrete commitments from multiple faith and non-faith traditions.

It is important to note that the praxis of both Hendricks Chapel and Wesley arise out of the commitment to a particular faith tradition. In no way, does the pursuit of a moral and spiritual education or holiness of heart and life demand theological non-partisanship. In fact, neither could function if not grounded in particular faith commitments, for it is those very commitments that define and guide its engagement with people of other traditions.

John Cobb argues for a contemporary Wesleyan theology of religious pluralism that “emphasizes deep differences instead of essential identities.”²⁶ Differences highlight the authenticity of spiritual witnesses found in distinct traditions, fuel spiritual reflection and growth, and facilitate both teaching and learning across religious traditions. Focusing on difference maintains the integrity of distinct traditions while enabling the full participation of all without risk of having to edit oneself for public presentation. If religious life in higher education stopped at affirming common commitments, interreligious engagement would be bland, one dimensional and not particularly exciting. Rather, higher education is called to invite students to think more deeply and critically about themselves and the world around them.

Collaborative Action

Arising out of a commitment to personal and social transformation through shared mission, a Wesleyan interreligious praxis brings people of all faith and non-faith traditions together around shared values for a common purpose. This commitment to collaborative action is embodied in both Hendricks Chapel and the Methodist movement over time. For Wesley, shared mission bridged theological and praxeological differences and furthered holiness of heart and life in individuals and the wider community.

Interfaith activist and educator, Eboo Patel, has developed a framework for interreligious engagement in higher education that focuses on this specific task. Drawing on the work of Marshall Ganz and the growth of social movements,²⁷ Patel proposes three concrete practices to further the interfaith movement on college campuses: the cultivation of appreciative knowledge about diverse faith and non-faith traditions, the building of real relationships across difference, and the bringing together of diverse peoples around shared values for a common purpose.²⁸ These three concrete practices are inextricable interwoven, each building upon the other.

Concrete, appreciative knowledge is central to interreligious praxis for it provides a foundation for the deeper work of interfaith communities. Through study, one begins the process of building real relationships across difference, putting a face to religious pluralism. No longer is interreligious engagement an abstract concept, rather it becomes embodied in a friend, colleague and peer with whom one works on pressing issues of mutual concern. It is this coming together around shared values for a common purpose that ultimately cements the relationships made and enriches the knowledge gleaned.

Much the same way that Wesleyan small groups encourage others to press on in their spiritual journeys, interfaith relationships facilitate spiritual growth, self-reflection and mutual action. As individuals learn more about one another they begin to discern the places where their most deeply held convictions and beliefs overlap with those of another. Rather than seeking agreement or similarity in theological claims, this type of collaborative action focuses on shared values. It is a place where Buddhists and Christians and Pagans and Muslims can come together to take action on shared values of compassion, justice,

service and action. Theologically diverse people from many faith and non-faith traditions can come together to combat world hunger, improve urban education, advocate for environmental justice, plant community gardens or any number of other social justice projects. Like Wesleyan communities throughout time, the focus on a shared mission can be a unifying force that uses difference as a resource rather than a roadblock and aims toward the transformation of individuals and communities.

Conclusion

Through this brief study the strands of a Wesleyan interreligious praxis can be discerned at work in the life and legacy of Hendricks Chapel and in Wesley's own interreligious engagement. The shared commitments to a pursuit of holiness of heart and life as a way of living in the world and to forging a unity in diversity sketch for us the beginnings of a Wesleyan interreligious praxis marked by the centrality of religion in higher education, a rigorous engagement with religious pluralism, and a focus on common action rooted in shared values. As we move forward into an age marked by growing religious diversity, Wesleyan (and non-Wesleyan) institutions for higher education can benefit from an exploration of the way in which core Wesleyan commitments can enrich and enhance student experience.

¹ Richard L. Phillips & Donald G. Wright, *Hendricks Chapel: Seventy-five Years of Service to Syracuse University* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 21.

² Ibid., 22.

³ William H. Powers, *Religion at Syracuse* (Syracuse: Hendricks Chapel, 1930).

⁴ Phillips & Wright, 26-47.

⁵ Powers, 1930.

⁶ In fact, the verses encircling the dome framed the charge from the University to each of the deans from 1930 through 1981: "You are inducted into this office not that you might have lordship over the faith of any, but that you may assist all toward the truth that sets us free, toward the peace that passes understanding and toward the joy that fades not away." Phillips and Wright, 2005.

⁷ Powers, 1930.

⁸ Phillips & Wright, 54.

⁹ Below is an abbreviated list of those who have explored Wesley as a resource for interfaith engagement: John B. Cobb, Jr. *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995), 135-154; Randy L. Maddox, "Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions", *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 27, 1992, 7-29; Rebekah L. Miles, "John Wesley as an Interreligious Resource: Would You Take This Man to an Interfaith Dialogue", *A Great Commission: Christian Hope and Religious Diversity: Papers in Honor of Kenneth Cracknell on his 65th Birthday* (Oxford, NY, Peter Lang, 2000), 61-72; David A. Pailin, ed., *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Britain* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984); Nehemiah Thompson, "The Search for a Methodist Theology of Religious Pluralism," in Mark Heim, ed., *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 93-106.

¹⁰ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesley Conference Office, 1872; reprinted Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 3:341-342.

¹¹ Nehemiah Thompson, "The Search for a Methodist Theology of Religious Pluralism," in Mark Heim, ed., *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 93-106.

¹² John Wesley, "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," Sermon 69, *The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed., (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1985) 2:581.

¹³ "On Faith," Sermon 106, Outler, 3:491-501.

¹⁴ For a fuller treatment of Wesley's understanding of the uniqueness of Christian revelation in relation to interreligious engagement, see Randy L. Maddox's article, "Wesley as Theological Mentor: The Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 27 (1992): 7-29.

¹⁵ "On Faith," Sermon 106, Outler, 3:491-501.

¹⁶ John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 301.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ John Wesley, "A Caution Against Bigotry," Outler, 2:63-78.

¹⁹ This is a common paraphrase of the core text of Wesley's sermon "A Caution Against Bigotry."

²⁰ I use *habitus* following the work of Edward Farley to indicate a practice that has been ingrained until it becomes an internalized, character trait and a way of being in the world. I would like to develop this idea of interreligious engagement as *habitus* that leads to deeper self and social reflection, however, it is not in the scope of this paper to do so.

²¹ Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 131-58.

²² This study broadly defined spirituality in the same way I employ religion to include active reflection on life's "big questions," a global worldview transcending ethnocentrism and egocentrism, a sense of caring and compassion coupled with service to others and a capacity to maintain calm and centeredness.

²³ The study recommended several concrete practices to cultivate spirituality including service learning, interdisciplinary courses, study abroad, self-reflection, and meditation .

²⁴ Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *No Longer Visible: Religion in University Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Diana Eck, "What is Pluralism," The Pluralism Project, June 27, 2013, accessed June 27, 2013, http://pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/what_is_pluralism.

²⁶ John Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 151.

²⁷ It is interesting to note that in the formation of his own theory of social movements, Marshall Ganz extensively researched the Methodist movement in America as an example of successful movement building. Many of the core concepts of his theory can be seen at work in the Methodist movement.

²⁸ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 65-128.