



Wholeness and Holiness: Reading Wesley through Oduyoye

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Abstract: This article seeks to read Wesley through the lens of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, reimagining the Wesleyan understanding of holiness in terms of Oduyoye's understanding of wholeness. It concludes with a constructive proposal for rethinking what holiness could or should look like given the rise of cultural context as a theological authority.

Keywords: Bolton • Wesley • Oduyoye • wholeness • holiness • Jane Cooper

It has become a truism that all theology is contextual. But what does this mean for our reading of someone like John Wesley and for the task of historical theology? In some sense, historical theology, in its attempt to read past authors within their own intellectual and social cultures, has always recognised this fact. But what does it mean to read someone like Wesley profitably in a new context, in a context of global pluralism, in the context of calls for liberation, of calls to condemn and repair the damage done by the very contexts that produced and nurtured someone like Wesley? This paper is an attempt to begin to answer this question by listening to and allying ourselves with the liberative project of Ghanaian Methodist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. In particular, I want to ask how attentiveness to Oduyoye's theological project can help white Westerners like myself re-conceive the meaning of Wesleyan holiness by re-reading Wesley, to the extent possible, through the lens of Oduyoye.¹

This article begins with a disposition of humble listening that requires more than passive hearing; rather it demands an embrace of Oduyoye's condemnation of the historical failures of the Western missionary project in Africa as well as a receptivity to her critique of oppressive elements within her own culture. As Oduyoye dismantles these two sources of oppression, she also reconstructs a vision of flourishing, of wholeness, of a holistic and liberative way of life that rejects the dichotomies between individual and community, spiritual and material, indigenous tradition and Christianity. In particular, Oduyoye attends to the experience of African women in their three-fold condition of oppression—race, gender, class—as her key for understanding both the nature of oppression and, perhaps more importantly, the true nature of holistic liberation.

The second half of this article turns to Wesley and his 18th-century British context, seeking to bring what we have learned from Oduyoye to bear upon our reading of him. For those Wesleyan sources, I follow Oduyoye's lead as far as John Wesley will allow us and look at the personal experience of an early Methodist woman, Jane Cooper. Through Wesley's introduction to her letters and the letters themselves, which he deemed evidentiary of

¹ This article is highly indebted to the tireless labours of Zhongya Shao who worked as a research assistant, shaping much of my understanding of Oduyoye and pressing me continuously for clarification and accountability to Oduyoye's own theological agenda.

her holiness and progress in sanctification, I aim to move beyond elucidating Wesley on his own terms and instead begin suggesting how we, and by 'we' I primarily mean white Westerners like myself, might read him in light of 20th and 21st-century global liberationist voices, here represented by Oduyoye. In particular, I ask how we might read Cooper's holiness in light of Oduyoye's holism.

I. Oduyoye – Context, Critique, and Liberation

In her 1998 essay 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion,' Mercy Amba Oduyoye provides the following self-description:

I am first and foremost an Akan, a member of a matrilineal society speaking the language of *Akan* found in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, brought up to believe in the centrality of woman to the human community. Brought up in the church and working with churches or teaching theology, my world-view has been shaped by a utopia that is Christo-centric. But this does not mean that I am blind to all else. In fact it is as an African that I am Christian and I have no conflicts with that, only periodic depression with regard to how little the church in Africa concerns itself with social issues. I have had problems with how the church, academia, and the patriarchal society into which I married assign roles to women.²

We catch just a glimpse of the complexity of Oduyoye's identity and context. For her, the most authentic source of identity is social, as a member of the matrilineal Akan. Close to this is her identity as a Christian, but even this identity is itself defined by her primary identity as Akan and as African. Yet both her African context and her Christianity have been sources of oppression. In this passage she is most concerned about patriarchy and misogyny, and about a Christianity disengaged from such social concerns. 'I have arrived at a point where I no longer wish to be patient with sexism, racism, and injustices against the dignity that rightly belongs to beings made in the image of God.'³

If patriarchy and misogyny are part of Oduyoye's own cultural context of oppression that must be condemned, we must also embrace her condemnation of historical missionary Christianity—and we in the West must doubly condemn it. To that end, I want to focus on a brief section from her work *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*. The section is entitled 'Salvation: Communal and Individual' and Oduyoye begins by describing the effect of missionary efforts to separate would-be Christian Africans from their traditional contexts:

The 'come apart and be saved' policy of the missionaries resulted in enclaves called 'Christian villages'. Because conversion meant not only a fitness of the individual for a future celestial life but also some attempt to make the world a more suitable place to which Christ should return, evangelical charity spilled into the world to touch the underprivileged. The emphasis however was on the individual—the context from which people came did not matter and was not seriously studied. The story of the missions is built on personalities, not on the transformation of communities.⁴

We see here the first element of Oduyoye's understanding of wholeness: it is about the community not just the individual. The missionaries in her community's experience were so concerned with the saving of individual souls that they did not consider the place of those souls within a larger communal and cultural framework. The image of 'come apart and be saved' underscores the sense that missional Christianity, in Oduyoye's view, saw the object of salvation to be some sort of self-encompassed, solitary being whose spiritual well-being not only did not depend on the larger community but was in fact threatened by it.

² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion,' in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, eds. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Orbis, 1998), 251-64, 251. For more on wholeness in Oduyoye beyond the texts I quote in this article, see Oduyoye, 'Wholeness of Life in Africa', in *An African Call for Life: Contribution to the World Council of Churches Sixth Assembly Theme ('Jesus Christ—Life of the World')*, edited by M. Masamba, R. Stober, and E.V. Appiah (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 113-22; Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 51-65; Oduyoye, 'Jesus Christ' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, edited by S.F. Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151-70.

³ Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', 252.

⁴ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 40.

Oduyoye continues,

To effect a transformation of a whole community demanded more knowledge of the community than the missionaries could muster or their collaborators were willing to supply. So eventually the ten commandments became the yardstick for measuring sin so as to preach salvation. This legalistic approach to Christianity eventually crystallized into a religion of “thou shalt nots”. Today among some Christian communities a “good” Christian is a person who is involved in a monogamous marriage and who does not smoke or drink or dance. The person may cheat a little and lie a little in public life, but certainly does not commit adultery.⁵

In this missional context, holiness has become an individual matter. To be Christian is to perform one’s holiness through specific types of acts: not smoking, drinking or dancing, and not participating in polygamy. These are practices that, for better or worse, can delineate the Christian individual from the non-Christian. And yet practices that are essential to the well-being of the community—trust and honesty—are not seen as essential to the holiness of the individual. Holiness has become a marker of personal piety rather than a way of being in relationship with others.

Moreover, Oduyoye explains, such separation-based holiness prevented the Christian’s full inclusion in the community:

Salvation for some individuals meant that they could not assume leadership roles in their traditional community. There was too much ‘heathenism’ involved in being an African ruler, a position in which politics and religion coalesced, the sacred and the secular met. To be a Christian, thou shalt not meddle with politics. The people of some African countries heard this kind of preaching during their struggles for independence. Involvement in the struggles was forbidden, especially if the activities were judged to be against colonial powers.⁶

Once again, we see the way in which historical missionary Christianity necessarily disrupted the African convert’s relationship to the larger community. The political dimensions of life were deemed inappropriate for a Christian for at least two reasons: first, African political life involved engagement with indigenous religious practices and beliefs; and second, such engagement was seen as a threat to the colonial hegemony of Western powers. Holiness, then, in this frame, was a complete separation of the individual African Christian not only from African religion but from the political and social community associated with it.

Finally, missionary Christianity required the separation from the spiritual aspects of life that were so dear to those they evangelized:

The missionary told the Africans what they needed to be saved from, but when Africans needed power to deal with the spiritual realms that were real to them, the missionary was baffled. The ancestors were to be ignored; infant mortality and premature deaths were purely medical matters. Failure of rains and harvests were acts of God. Childlessness had nothing to do with witchcraft, nor was there any spiritual aspect to any other physical disorder or infirmity. The individual African in the process of being saved was told that witches do not exist, though the community continued to believe in the reality of evil that witchcraft represents. The missionaries’ superficial assessment of the indigenous culture and its hold on the people who belong to it led to the Africans’ superficial acceptance of Christianity.⁷

Not only were African Christians expected to separate from the social and political communities; they were also expected to sever their ties to the spiritual world as well, including communion with their ancestors. Moreover, Oduyoye laments that key aspects of African life were not addressed adequately by missionary Christianity: bodily and spiritual wellbeing, the fertility of the earth and of the womb, all of these dimensions of African life were not accounted for in the Christianity of the missionaries; and because of this, Oduyoye claims, African acceptance of

⁵ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 40–41.

⁶ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 41.

⁷ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 41.

Christianity was, at least in her assessment, merely superficial, never fully accountable to the indigenous cultural context within which African Christians still lived, and moved, and had their being.

In short, what was lacking was a theology of wholeness. An appreciation of the way in which all dimensions of life, physical and spiritual, individual and communal, religious and political, are necessarily knit together. Moreover, we can see in Oduyoye's lament a positive vision of human flourishing that embraces wholeness, a way of being Christian, a way of being holy that attends to all dimensions of life for both the individual and the community. This vision of wholeness, I suggest, provides her with what we might call a hermeneutic of holiness.

But where are we to look for a vision of wholeness? For Oduyoye, the answer is clear: to the lives and spiritual experience of African women. In 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', she emphasizes the role of women's prayer for the material and spiritual well-being of the larger community: 'Women derive strength from the knowledge that God hears and answers the prayers of sincere believers who are dedicated to the welfare of the whole community . . . They develop a self-image of servants whose service is their source of honour and dignity. They are who they are because they make the community what it is. It is a spirituality of self-giving and a sense of justice and fair play. It is a spirituality founded on sharing all that is life-giving'.⁸ Lest we see this vision of community-centred wholeness and spirituality as unique to Christianity, Oduyoye hastens to add that Muslim women also represent this way of being because 'it is embodied in traditional African womanness'.

II. Wesley, Cooper and Holiness

While the 18th-century British context of the Wesleys is strikingly different from that of Oduyoye in modern Ghana, we can put the two into fruitful conversation, especially if we use Oduyoye as the theological lens for reading the Wesleys instead of the other way around. I propose that we should follow Oduyoye not only in seeing experience as the key interpretive lens but by focusing that lens on women's religious experience. In short, to answer the question, what would liberation look like in Wesleyan terms when read through an Oduyoyean lens, we must look at Wesley's accounts of the spirituality of women within the Wesleyan movement and note what themes arise as central in light of Oduyoye's emphasis on wholeness, both its brokenness in oppression and its celebration in liberation.

To do so, I turn to one particular woman, Jane Cooper. After her death in 1762, John Wesley compiled a series of her letters into a short volume, prefacing it with a brief account of her life and, especially, of her death⁹. It is the portrait of a holy women, a Methodist of ideal piety and holiness. In what follows, however, I do not focus on what Wesley would have us glean from his account and from her letters but upon what stands out for a reader in light of Oduyoye.

Holistic holiness in Cooper's letters can be construed in two interrelated ways: first, as an entire surrender of her entire person to the love and grace of Christ and, second, as grounded in the 'fullness' of God and Christ of which we are partakers through grace. The result is a personal—if possibly individualistic—construction of holiness that is concerned less with its social dimensions or even its moral aspects than it is with the spiritual condition of the believer. As I discuss later, this provides both resonance and dissonance with the holism of Oduyoye.

I begin with Cooper's repeated refrain: God's fulness. On one level, the fullness of God means God's total providential care of the world. Cooper often expresses her conviction that God cares for all of creation and especially for individual humans:

'Even the minutest circumstance is by his order and under his inspection'¹⁰.

Or again

⁸ Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', 258-59.

⁹ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper: To Which is Prefixt Some Account of her Life and Death* (London: n.p., 1764).

¹⁰ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 46.

'I see infinite wisdom and unfathomable love, in all his dispensations towards me: I can now believe that all things shall work together for Good'¹¹.

Or again

'But I trust, He in whom all fullness dwells, will supply my every want'¹².

This fullness of God even leads to a sort of mystical desire to be lost in union with God:

'At present I am guided by Jesus, and feel his grace sufficient for me: but there are depths of the deity I want to fathom. I long to be lost in the immensity of his love!'¹³.

But this understanding of God's fullness is not just about exalting the glory of the Lord abstractly. It is more importantly about affirming that through grace we are filled by God's own fullness:

'He will make us holy, filled with the fullness of his love'¹⁴.

Or again

'For I am persuaded out of his fulness I shall receive a supply'¹⁵.

Or again

'With joy may you draw from his fulness, grace for every moment's want'¹⁶.

God's fullness is that from which we receive grace, peace, and love.

And this leads us to the other key aspect of holistic holiness in Cooper: her desire to be fully devoted, in her entire being, to love of God. She primarily speaks of this in spiritual terms, at times lamenting her failure to be fully given over to such devotional holiness:

'I do not love him with all my heart and strength; so far from it, that I sometimes feel I never did one action with a single eye to his glory'¹⁷.

Or again

'I want to be all attention to God; to have every faculty of my mind fixedly waiting upon him. But I find myself beat off of this by weariness or listlessness'¹⁸.

We see here, I believe, Cooper's vision of sanctification and the journey to perfection: a desire for ever increasing commitment to love of God.

In her letters, Cooper often presents herself as having attained such a goal to a significant degree:

'My soul desires to know nothing but him crucified'¹⁹.

¹¹ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 49.

¹² *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 55.

¹³ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 47.

¹⁴ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 22.

¹⁵ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 32.

¹⁶ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 34.

¹⁷ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 27.

¹⁸ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 31.

¹⁹ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 45.

Or again

'And glory be to him, he now reigns in my heart without a rival. I find no will but his: I feel no pride nor any affection, but what is placed on him'²⁰.

Indeed, even her final words on her death bed as reported by John Wesley reflect such a fullness of divine love: 'My Jesus is all in all to me. Glory be to him through time and eternity'.²¹

III. Conclusion: Interpreting Holiness

For Cooper then, as Wesley presents her in a selection of her letters, holiness is primarily about one's spiritual disposition toward God, a fullness of love for God that is an extension of God's own fullness. In one sense, by identifying this as a type of 'holistic holiness' we are already reading it in light of Oduyoye. But there is surely more to be said in this light. Some of what is to be said must come in the form of critique. Certainly Cooper's holism, rooted so firmly as it is in personal spirituality, misses many of the dynamics of Oduyoye's vision. The personal here has the danger of becoming individualistic. Where is the community or the society in Cooper's holiness? She even says, 'I am learning to leave others to the care of our Shepherd and desire only to hear and follow him'.²² Where is the love of neighbour that must accompany the love of God Cooper so cherishes? Further, is there not an implied lack of concern for bodily, physical dimensions of existence. It should be granted that Cooper is, for much of this, in a long process of dying, but some of her statements are still striking when read in light of Oduyoye, including her declaration that, because she trusts in Christ, 'life or death is equal'.²³ An Oduyoyean lens might highlight the absence of concern for the lived experience of women or women's bodies in a patriarchal culture. Does Wesleyan spirituality of the 18th century not make room for such a holistic approach to holiness?

But, of course, we know that Wesley famously said that there is no holiness but social holiness. And while this might not mean what some of us would want it to mean, it does suggest a more outward facing kind of holiness than what we find in the limited evidence of Cooper's letters. And we do see a resonance with Oduyoye in Wesley's lifting up of women's religious experience—or the religious experience of certain women—as normative for interpreting the meaning of faith and holiness. But perhaps there is more to be gleaned from this using an Oduyoyean hermeneutic.

To conclude, then, I suggest that Cooper's understanding of the 'fullness' of God's own holiness that is shared with us through grace and manifest in our complete devotion to and love of God can be appropriated in a more Oduyoyean mode to speak to the need for a more holistic approach to the Christian life. If it is the fullness of God from which our own holiness is drawn, then no dimension of God's creation is exempt from such grace because the fullness of God is present in the ubiquitous grace of creation. Similarly, such divine fullness is found in the mysterious life of the Trinity, the 3-in-1 God who transcends individualism while remaining fully personal. Thus, to partake of God's fullness in a holistic manner requires transcending the limits of individualism through concern for the community and society via a holiness that takes into account all oppressive circumstances that threaten the dignity of the image of God. Finally, if our sharing in the fullness of God is expressed through a holiness completely devoted to love of God, then we must bring all of ourselves to that love, both as individuals and as a community, both as spiritual beings and as embodied persons, and as Christians embedded within complex cultural contexts that are also able to be bearers of God's grace and fullness in mysterious ways to which we must be open.

What I have attempted to offer in this article is a chronologically backward reading of historical theology that looks at an 18th-century Wesleyan approach to holiness through the 20th- and 21st-century lens of Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

²⁰ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 59.

²¹ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 18.

²² *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 34.

²³ *Letters Wrote by Jane Cooper*, 29.

Such an approach, rather than investigating Oduyoye's 'Wesleyan-ness' invites us to privilege contemporary global and marginalized contexts as hermeneutically fruitful sites for reimagining the inherited Western Christian tradition in ways that transcend the limitation of that original context, opening up new avenues for theological reflection. It is my hope that this article suggests ways in which we might value, even cherish, the theological tradition of the Wesleys while also recognizing the need to attend to newer voices that might both critique and enliven our reading of that tradition.

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