

# A WESLEYAN RESPONSE TO THE NEW PERFECTIONISM

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A vast undercurrent of transcendental moralizing came to the surface in the last decade. One finds it in the most unlikely places: in California's hippie colonies, in Timothy Leary's League of Spiritual Discovery, in Erich Fromm's projection of a *Revolution of Hope*, in John D. Rockefeller, III's essay praising young revolutionaries, in the apparently immoral and certainly vulgar plays presented at St. Mark's East Village Episcopal parish, or in Joan Baez's essays and sketches which appeared under the title *Daybreak*.

Fathers and teachers who have shared intimately the thoughts of a bright and sensitive youngster turned off by what he declares are the moral hypocrisies of our times have caught many glimpses of this undercurrent of ethical yearning. Its perfectionist drift both feeds upon and nurtures political radicalism. The apparent flaunting of traditional morality by such young people may constitute not simply a rejection but a prophetic judgment of those who have given chiefly lip service to the Sermon on the Mount.

Consider that now dated album of the Beatles *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Never before in human history have so many hundreds of thousands of ordinary youngsters listened to poetry, either good or bad, with such intense self-awareness, such groping after not only the literal but the existential meaning of words. The meanings seemed to them, as they seemed to those of us who were older and tried to listen, ironic, paradoxical, mysteriously contradictory. Such, our braver children declared, are the names of life's game. But the album also conveyed a

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cryptic message of hope. Though blurred in focus and, by comparison with past idealisms, distorted in form, the message signalled a desire both to escape from a self one had to reject and to set out in search of a new and truer one. This is apparently one of the ways to think about the song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," presumably a code-name for LSD.

What appears to have been the original and most persistent impulse of the members of the Beatles' singing group was a determination to break out of established patterns of life and to declare the meaning of that escape in radically new words and music. Their personal odyssey symbolized for a time the emergence of what I have called secular transcendentalism among young people.

What should Wesleyan Christians make of this frankly secular quest for transcendence? First we need to attempt to comprehend it. This requires some sympathetic analysis, which I propose to undertake, using Wesleyan theology as a frame of reference. I hope you may also try to understand rather than compulsively to condemn these new perfectionisms and that you may share my belief, grounded in some study of recent American religious history, that our own religious community has a valuable gift to offer to modern faith and to modern men.

The God of Holiness and of Love, who made us, knows the depth and intensity of fallen man's spiritual hunger; and the Gospel of his holiness and his love, that is the Gospel of Christ, corresponds precisely to both that hunger and the questions it generates. Amidst the despair of our times, the aspiration for purity, for peace, and for a self-transcending beloved community is exerting a surprising influence, even though some expressions of it seem hedonistic or neurotic or both.

The specifically perfectionist element in the radical movements of our time combines, as does traditional Wesleyanism, a negative and a positive impulse. A cult of self-denial is abroad in the land, so powerful that it seems in fact a cult of self-rejection. On the other hand, a quest for self-realization through purity, peace, and love flourishes in forms so uncompromising as to suggest that men can be angels now. These two facets of the new perfectionism self-denial and self-realization, bear consideration.

The harsh attacks upon others, particularly upon those mysterious others who exercise power in large and complex institutions of learning, religion, government, or industry may be projections of the troubles within. A friend with whom I taught during a recent year at the University of Michigan went to the "goldfish bowl," a crossroad for pedestrian traffic where students often conduct demonstrations, to try to talk with those who were leading a protest against the Vietnam war. Sensitive and intelligent, this fine young scholar came away after two or three days of marathon argument to report that when the barriers to communication at last came down, the protesters did not seem to him really interested in the problems of the Vietnamese at all, but in their own. By denouncing their

nation's essentially violent quest for power and wealth and their parent's similar pursuit of the same goals, the students were in fact castigating their own violence, materialism, and lust for power.

Making the perfectionist scene wilder still has been Timothy Leary, the best known of those who proclaim a gospel of personality reconstruction through repeated experiences with hallucinogenic drugs. Those who have listened carefully to what Leary is saying hear something more than merely science-fiction mysticism. He really does seem to want people to love one another, to find deliverance from the aggressive and exploitative rage which seethes beneath the surface of their lives. Leary, like many others, thinks modern man is in the grip of an original sin which he inherited not from Adam but from the social, the sexual, and the psychological hang-ups of the middle-class family. He proposes that people turn on with an intensive program of so-called "mind-expanding" trips which he hopes will make over their personalities. The experimenters will gradually become less dependent on drugs and by force of newly-formed habits live in a continuous state of loving ecstasy, sparing their children the complexes that they themselves grew up with.

In some like manner, we also may approach the Black militant's quest for identity through the acquisition of power by both words and deeds of violence. Is it not, above all, an heroic effort to transcend a self he scorns? If it is true that what one writer has called *Black Rage* towers within men who even in their infancy sensed themselves subtly rejected by mothers who unwittingly projected upon their Ishmaels the hatred of their black skins which white superiority fostered, if it is also true that Negro boys grow up in half-conscious awareness of a thousand intimations of white society's wish to castrate them, morally and psychologically as well as physically, then the Christian's first response must be to reach out in reconciliation.

The lives of those Black men who have fought their way up over such monstrous rejections to gain respectable jobs, to establish and maintain homes in which they share with tenderness an equal authority with their wives, and to rein in their rage by passive protest against injustice may represent the greatest moral triumph the human spirit has ever won. We should listen to them, even when their words lay a bitter condemnation upon us, for they have managed somehow to shed the old self-image which slavery, white racism and beleaguered Black mothers inflicted upon them without rejecting themselves as persons.

The student revolt on many college campuses also exemplifies the new self-denial. At the beginning, campus protests embraced a much wider range of concerns than those which, typically, small groups of revolutionaries have chanted about as they seized buildings or disrupted recruiters for war industries. The most important early demand was that faculties invest most of their energies in teaching and provide for a greater degree of personal encounter with students. When this request seemed to

be ignored, students began to demand the addition or the retention of teachers who did not publish much but who did attempt to talk about values to which they were more or less committed. These early demands challenged the basic presuppositions of the cult of objectivity in some of the same ways that Christian college educators seemed to do.

The inability of most university faculties to abandon the fruits of their century-long quest for objectivity prompted the students to organize what were called free universities, in which any person could teach or enroll in any course he pleased, without cost. This outburst of academic millennialism was aborted chiefly because it denied the necessity of orderly structures and because, like some of the religious sects which rely upon spirit-guidance, it had no way of dealing with the crackpots or the conspirators who wanted to use the free university for their own purposes. The experiment was, nevertheless, a testimony to the powerful urge for personal encounter, for a kind of spiritual communion in the academic community.

The tragedy of all this is the singular failure of the Christian community to take advantage of the growing commitment to the ideal of commitment. The response of American college students to the Peace Corps, to Vista, to the Teacher Corps, and to the underpaid professions of teaching, preaching, and social work has in recent years been testimony enough, to the hunger for higher goals in life than the pursuit of status or economic success. Both on the radical right and on the new left, young people who confess themselves alienated from one another and from the structures of authority which control the institutions of society are reaching out for an ideal and a fellowship to which they can feel themselves morally dedicated. The ideals they fix upon are usually secular and often political, but the commitment displays the fervor associated with religious faith. It testifies to the world-wide hunger of young people in the post-Christian era for some cause big enough to call them from their selfish preoccupations to a nobler task.

None should be surprised, then, at the outburst of what might be called mass penance which has stoked the furnace of secular perfectionism in the 1960's. The apocalyptic judgment upon the institutions of society, including the churches is but the most obvious aspect of this guilt-ridden renunciation of oneself. The language of our poets is one of despair; artists confine themselves to images of mystery, anguish, or ugliness; and playwrights, in the phrase of Eugene O'Neill, see life as a long day's journey into night.

Nevertheless, a transcendence rooted in self-rejection threatens to destroy itself. If the new perfectionists are unable to resolve the war that rages within the hearts of their followers, they are likely to degenerate into new rationales for tyranny, new modes of exploitation of man by man.

What, then, does Wesleyan Christianity have to say in response to this negative aspect of the aspiration for perfection which the new self-denial seems to display? Primarily there are three things, none of them new.

First, the Wesleyan position teaches that a discovery, not a rejection of the self, is the first work of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit convicts men of their sins by revealing to them God's holiness and love. Thus the penitence which Christianity brings is not destructive but saving. We discover our sin in the presence of a Lord who demonstrates his confidence in us by taking upon himself in life-giving death the burden of our guilt. He who knows all and not just a part of our evil enables us to face it and repent of it by revealing his willingness totally to forgive, fully to accept, and unconditionally to trust us. The result of a Christian conviction of guilt is not, then, self-rejection, but a discovery of our worth.

Secondly, we declare that the experience of the divine forgiveness and our choice to trust in God's love, enables us to recover possession of our true selves. The Christian, in the view of Wesleyan faith, is freed from slavery to evil and enters by faith into fellowship with the Eternal Father, who forgives, and with other forgiven men. The morbid need to escape from one's self is done away, along with all the false righteousness which that need introduced into his judgments of others. Instead, every other man, including the one who holds authority and abuses it, becomes a person of infinite worth whose redemption is possible.

Finally, we testify to an experience of consecration in the Truth, to use Jesus' words on the eve of his dying, or, as St. Paul represents it of wholeness through holiness which makes possible a life of self-fulfillment. John Wesley and those of his heirs who thought about the matter carefully rejected the mystic concept of a death of the self; but modern Wesleyans, beginning with Thomas C. Upham in the last century, have sometimes been confused about it. The New Testament promises a death not of the self but of self-will, and the restoration and fulfillment of selfhood through the gift of God's healing grace. Man, made in God's image, however much the evil begun in Eden may have taken away His likeness, is of infinite worth. Although sin has confounded his life, he may find fulfillment in the faith and love a Heavenly Father brings.

Wesleyan perfectionism makes the person supreme. It is the only viable humanism the eighteenth century produced. In it, self-denial and the salvation of the self go hand in hand. St. Paul testified, "I am crucified with Christ; *nevertheless I live*; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

The other side of the modern perfectionist coin is the quest of what some call the flower people for holiness, through peace and love. A few summers ago an unknown and unkempt young man stood on a street corner in San Francisco every morning with a loaf of bread he had begged from a nearby bakery. He gave a small piece to each passerby and said to each of them, "I love you." Was this the year's true Passover Feast or the Lord's Supper at last broken out of an upper room?

How should Wesleyan Christians respond to the challenge to exercise

perfect love on the issues of race, of poverty, and of war? What can Wesleyan Christians answer when the chaplain of Yale College, now convicted for conspiracy to frustrate the draft laws, declares to a world which never heard us say so that "the ethics of perfection have become the ethics of survival"?

Much romantic nonsense has been written by both those who support and those who denounce the "flower people." But before we dismiss them as insignificant or sick or subversive, perhaps we need to remember that some Christian saints seemed equally out of step in their times. John the Baptist, clothed in camel's hair wore no flannel suits and carried neither ordination certificate nor credit card. His manifesto was as radical as any I have read from today's bearded prophets. The axe was laid at the root of social establishment, he said, and leaders of both Church and state comprised a generation of vipers. Francis of Assisi, while still a sickly youth, forsook the comforts of a wealthy merchant's home to gather his friends around him in a fellowship of poverty and service which they hoped would assuage human suffering in the violently materialistic Renaissance towns. The fifteenth and sixteenth century founders of the modern Baptist movement rejected oaths and arms-bearing, and drew apart from the political state. They helped to father the pacifist tradition in evangelical Protestantism, which the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and the Society of Friends carry on today. George Fox, like several generations of his Quaker successors, defied at great cost the courts of law that forbade him to proclaim the Christian's obligation to follow both peace and holiness, without which no man could see the Lord.

My purpose in passing before you this brief Christian hip parade is not to justify by inference every unbaptized attack upon the institutions and traditions of social order. What I wish, rather, is to raise two questions: What are the teachings of today's flower children which seem to parallel most closely the Wesleyan gospel of what we dare to call, at least among ourselves, perfect love? What does the attractiveness of these teachings to large numbers of an allegedly disenchanted generation suggest about the witness we should now be bearing to our own faith before the world?

Consider, first, the Puritan if not the perfectionist elements in the renunciation of exploitative wealth. Without regard to the argument over which aspects of capitalism may be described properly as exploitative, and which not, an argument that revolves just now around the power of a military-industrial complex to coerce national decision-making, one must recognize that a large number of persons are deliberately turning their backs upon lucrative careers in favor of those which stress service. True this renunciation appears more often among youngsters from well-off families than among those reared in poverty. Black students rarely make it. Nevertheless, among those who do the indictment of materialism has a monastic ring.

Massachusetts Judge Charles E. Wyzanski declared in an article published three summers ago, "It is quite right that the young should talk about us as hypocrites; we are." And the hypocrisy, he said, is "embedded in our materialism." Of the defense grounded upon our churchgoing, he asked why we go and answered: "For social and commercial reasons and for consolation in time of trouble." But do we go with faith and conviction and discipline and self-denial? "Which of us," he continued, "displays a deep commitment to that denial and sacrifice and discipline which are the essence of religion?" Against precisely such a worldly and comfortable Christianity the leaders of the holiness movement, both those who stayed within and those who left the Methodist Church, rebelled long ago.

Beyond their renunciation of wealth lies a second major theme of those who are here called the flower people: peace, an entity which they define in terms of both freedom and justice. The rhetoric of the movement of resistance to the war in Vietnam, though often murky, makes this definition clear. The denial of freedom to any person as a means of subjecting him to the selfish uses of others, the argument runs, is an act of violence; it strips away rights which religious as well as political faith declares to be inalienable. Justice requires placing all such acts, and all the traditional social structures which encourage or allow them, under righteous condemnation. And what is, ultimately, righteous? Regard for the worth and sacredness of every man.

Christians both legitimize and reject this high calling to peace through freedom and justice by labeling it millennial. Such a peace can only find literal realization in the New Jerusalem, they say; it is not, therefore, immediately relevant. The peaceniks, however, do not see a New Jerusalem coming at all, but a holocaust. Man's accelerating dehumanization through his reliance upon the weapons of mass destruction will climax, they believe, in an apocalyptic rain of fire unless we here and now forswear all forms of violence and injustice.

The peace-advocate's renunciation of war has deep roots in radical and perfectionist Christianity. Bob Dylan cut to the heart of this matter in his early song entitled "With God on Your Side."

Oh the History books tell it  
They tell it so well  
The cavalries charged  
The Indians fell  
The cavalries charged  
The Indians died  
Oh the Country was young  
With God on its side.

But now we got weapons  
Of the chemical dust  
If fire them we're forced to  
Then fire them we must  
One push of the button  
And a shot the world wide  
And you never ask questions  
With God on your side.

Toward the end of this song, Dylan wrote,

In many a dark hour  
I been thinkin' 'bout this  
That Jesus Christ  
Was betrayed by a kiss.  
But I can't think for you  
You'll have to decide  
Whether Judas Iscariot  
Had God on his side.

The implication is plain. If God is on the side of order for order's sake, does he, then, always ride with the winners? Dylan is no perfectionist. Like Camus, he just barely manages to come down on the side of hope. Nevertheless the renunciation of moral compromise lies at the heart of the movement for peace.

A third major theme is the cult of love, and the pursuit of a holy community, however oddly defined, in which love prevails. This constitutes the most obviously perfectionist element in the revolutionary ferment of our times. Some expressions of it, perhaps most of them, are tawdry enough. A few, apparently, intend us to take quite literally the slogan "Make love, Not War." A world-wide orgy of drug-saturated copulation would certainly stop the killing, at least for a moment. It would also stop everything else, including preparations for next week's meals and next winter's heat supply. A few weeks and we would have the same peace on earth which the unleashing of the missiles would bring—the peace of a wasteland filled with corpses. Somewhat more substantial, and a good deal more typical, is the Jesuit Father Daniel Berrigan's little book, *Love, Love at the End*. A collection of parables, prayers and meditations, it not only proclaims the failure of the institutional church but signals Berrigan's commitment to the human spirit that can expand without drugs. "There is one gift, life itself," he writes, "morning and evening, foul weather and good, the cry of childbirth, the last breath of the dying. Love, love life. Die, loving life."

Some of the Black leaders who managed to maintain a commitment to non-violence while they saw many of their brethren turning away from it understand best the terrible contest between love and violence in the human soul. Dick Gregory's account of the rejection of passive resistance



by Rapp Brown and other members of what now seems ironically called the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee sounds like a saint's intercession for sinners. How would you feel, Gregory asked a couple of years ago, if you came down from the North, a Black man, to help the Mississippi Negroes take advantage of the school desegregation decision, only to find yourself rejected at last by both Blacks and whites?

Alongside Gregory's essentially compassionate record stands the gentleness of Joan Baez—Saint Joan, I call her, and only half in jest. For this strange girl with the funny voice may yet turn out to be the only prophet of holy love who can get through to this alienated generation. On the back of the album *Farewell Angelina*, which she issued three years ago, Miss Baez wrote the following prose poem:

Lord Buckley—the beautiful moon-man comedian—  
said to a cocktail audience, “M’Lords and  
M’Ladies . . . Beloveds . . . Would it embarrass you  
very much if I were to tell you . . . that I love  
you?” And they all laughed. How could anyone  
believe it?

A friend of mine told me it would be risky to  
write about Jesus. I’ll risk it. I wonder if Jesus  
knows what’s happening on earth these days.  
Don’t bother coming around, Jesus.

Jesus, gold and silver—standing naked in a  
roomful of modern men. What nerve. Jesus, gold  
and silver—you have no boots on, and you have  
no helmet or gun—or briefcase. Powerful Jesus  
gold and silver with young, thousand year old  
eyes. You look around and you know you must  
have failed somewhere.

Because here we are, waiting on the eve of  
destruction with all the odds against any of us  
living to see the sun rise one day soon.

You, Dear Reader—  
You are Amazing Grace  
You are a Precious Jewel.

Only you and I can help the sun rise each coming  
morning. If we don’t, it may drench itself out in  
sorrow.

You—special, miraculous, unrepeatable, fragile,  
fearful, tender, lost sparkling ruby emerald  
jewel, rainbow splendor person. It’s up to you.

Would it embarrass you very much if I were to  
tell you . . . that I love you?

To understand the significance and content of what such flower people are saying does not imply approval of all that they either say or do. But the questions arising out of their often distorted search for purity, for peace, and for love are welling up everywhere. To these questions the children of the Wesleyan movement, who ought to be God's flower people, have given scant response. What ought our response to be?

Again, I offer three simple statements not particularly new save in their form and in the setting in which they appear.

First, there can be no question that renouncing material goals for life fits the Wesleyan understanding of the Christian tradition. To be sure, we may use the examples of Jesus, the carpenter, or Paul, the tentmaker, to defend vocations which, though apparently secular, are hallowed by a man's commitment to use all of his talents and all of his gain to help make God's kingdom come and His will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Furthermore with Saint Paul we can declare a gospel sanction for the existence of an orderly economic system which makes possible the production and exchange of the necessities of life. The improvement of mankind's collective ability to furnish himself with an annually increasing portion of the material things which sustain energy and provide sufficient freedom from toil to enable him to enrich his spiritual life is indeed good. A high fidelity set, a car, a canoe, and warm boots for the children's feet are not deterrents to the spiritual growth of a family; they may serve to enlarge it.

If this Christian rationale for economic order is to stand the ethical test, however, it must extend to all families, not just a favored few. All must share in the fruits of man's common abundance at some minimal level. All families, everywhere. God has no favored people save in the opportunity he gives to some to sacrifice and serve. "Red and yellow, Black and white, they are precious in his sight." Otherwise, the pursuit of wealth becomes as objectionable as the lust for power.

Secondly, peaceableness is a fruit of holiness. Although we may differ on whether we should all be thoroughgoing pacifists we can scarcely support forms of coercive force designed to restrain evil which produce more evil than they restrain. The firing of atomic weapons, the unbridled use of so-called conventional armaments, and all attempts to deal by force with problems which might reasonably be expected to yield to social or economic reforms are acts of violence, whose outcome is not order but chaos. A dialogue on these points each year among all Wesleyans, including representatives from the Ohio and the Oregon Yearly Meeting of Friends, would have great value.

Finally, on the subject of perfect love, I wish to suggest a point about social ethics which I wish the flower people would consider. The concept of love standing alone, separated from its incarnation in the life and teachings of the Son of God, is subject to distortions so large as in

some cases to convert it into hate and in others to lust. In the New Testament, love always appears as the nucleus of a cluster of graces which flourish only in organic relation to one another.

The fruit of the Spirit, we are told, is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, temperance, goodness, and faith. Against a believing community held in the matrix of such a body of virtues there is, indeed, no law which can resist, no institution of evil which can survive. The gates of hell will not prevail against it.