

Reconciliation and Recovery:

The Moral Worlds of John Wesley and Oprah Winfrey

A Proposal for the Wesleyan Theological Society

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This essay proposes to engage Wesleyan theology with popular culture – in particular, the moral discourse surrounding issues of reconciliation in television talk shows. Television talk shows, with their endless parades of deviant behavior, are rarely considered important venues for serious moral discourse in our society. However, there is a clear moral code that is reinforced through these talk shows as they employ fairly regular conventions for exploring deviance, addiction, and estrangement, and then proceed to judge that behavior and offer a path to redemption, healing, and reconciliation. Oprah Winfrey is an especially interesting case in point since her talk show attempts to rise above the circus-like atmosphere of shows like Jerry Springer, employing instead more explicit “spiritual” language. In the end, however, Oprah works in the same moral world as these other shows and, like the other hosts, has become an important evangelist of the religion of recovery. Indeed, it is the recovery movement, epitomized in various twelve-step programs, that, at a popular level, has now come to provide much of the primary language in our culture for talking about morality and about how one moves toward redemption and reconciliation. TV talk shows reinforce the notion that the sinful forces from which we must find liberation are those processes of socialization that have left us emotionally scarred and codependent (especially those that occur early in life at the hands of our families). Salvation is proclaimed as a process of focusing more on our own inner healing and less on others, thereby creating a society where our moral worlds are confined to private self-fulfillment. This essay will employ resources from a Wesleyan theology to critique the moral discourse of popular television talk shows and, at the same time, attempt to provide a bridge between Wesley and popular culture.