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Methodism

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Abstract

One of the main events in religious history in Britain and colonial America in the eighteenth century was the development of Methodism. That evangelical revival brought about new conceptions of religious sociability and started controversies on the place of individual and collective discipline within the Established Churches in Britain. Methodist leaders insisted on the necessity of organising little societies for religious practices and defended field-preaching and emotional sermons whereas traditional orthodox Anglicans wished to reaffirm the centrality of the parish church and of rational and well-organised preaching.

The development of Methodism in Britain and in colonial America from the 1730s onward brought a redefinition of religious sociability along with theological and liturgical innovations. John Wesley and George Whitefield, who can be considered as the leading figures of the movement throughout the eighteenth century, constantly highlighted the

specificity of the Methodists in terms of religious sociability. John Wesley (1703-1791) created the Methodist movement with his brother Charles. He advocated itinerant preaching, hymn-singing, strict moral discipline and insisted on salvation by faith alone. He masterfully organized the Methodist societies. George Whitefield (1714-1770) was one of Wesley's early followers but then disagreed with him on several points of doctrine. He was renowned for his oratorical skills and often preached in front of huge crowds, both in Britain and in the American colonies.

Significantly enough, the origins of Methodism can be traced back to the meetings of a small group of students at Oxford in the early 1730s in a 'Holy Club' so as to better practice their religious duties.

'In November 1729, at which time I came to reside at Oxford, your son, my brother, myself, and one more, agreed to spend three or four evenings in a week together. Our design was to read over the classics, which we had before read in private, on common nights, and on Sunday some book in divinity.' John Wesley, *An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's Journal from his Embarking for Georgia to his Return to London*.¹

As George Whitefield expressed it a few years later in a sermon, 'Behold here, then, another excellent Benefit flowing from *Religious Society*; it will keep us *zealous* as well as *steady*, in the Ways of Godliness.'² Even if the term 'Methodist' was first used as a derogatory term in satires against this Holy Club, it was then re-used by Wesley to refer to those following his teachings and coming to listen to the preachers who agreed with him, as he phrased it in a pamphlet defining what a Methodist was: 'I say those who are called Methodists', for let it be well observed that this is not a name which they take to themselves, but one fixed upon them by a way of reproach, without their approbation or consent'.³

The creation of Methodist societies was fundamental to Wesley's projects and ideas, and he carefully elaborated rules and regulations so as to better organise the social and religious life of his followers.⁴ The regular meetings were meant to help enforce a strict religious discipline as those who did not abide by them could be expelled.

'If there be any among us who observe them not [the rules], who habitually break any one of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul, as they that must give account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But if then he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.' (Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, 73)

Moreover, the Methodist connection was quickly divided into 'the United Societies, the Bands, the Select Societies, and the Penitents'⁵, each obeying specific rules.

The development of Methodist societies throughout the kingdom and the new religious practices and manners of preaching introduced by Wesley and his followers were nonetheless

quite controverted. Even though they constantly affirmed that they were only reviving the practices of the early Christians and enabling people to be saved thanks to discipline and communication, they were considered by some ecclesiastical authorities as threats to the establishment and to religious sociability in itself. Methodism apparently clashed with the union of Crown and Church that was thought to guarantee peace and harmony. According to that orthodox model of religious sociability, abiding by parish duties by attending Sunday services in which moderation and morality were preached was synonymous with civil concord.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, many bishops considered that the established Churches in England, Wales and Ireland were an ideal *via media* between the horrors of Catholicism and of Puritanism that had plagued the country in the seventeenth century. The calls for a broad church after the Glorious Revolution (1688), which led to the Act of Toleration⁶, went together with the idea that Christians, whatever their denominations, could agree on the main tenets of their faith so as to amicably live together in society. Throughout the century, the Established Church was constantly compared to the Church in Berea presented in the Acts of the Apostles as an ideal community that welcomed St Paul.⁷ According to this conception of the established Church, the Bible was clear enough when generalities were concerned, and particular points of doctrine should only be left to specialists, or, as John Locke put it: 'Had God intended that none but the Learned Scribe, the disputer or wise of this World, should be Christians, or be Saved; thus Religion should have been prepared for them; filled with speculations and niceties, obscure terms, and abstract notions.'⁸

Wesley and his followers' practice of field-preaching, of hymn-singing, of *ex tempore* prayers and of emotional sermons therefore clashed with that conception of the Established Church as an institution guaranteeing moderation and social concord above all. During Sunday services, sermons were mostly read aloud in parish churches by the clergyman, and religious practice tended to be dull, as noted by [Richard Steele](#) in the first years of the century.⁹ In that perspective, Methodist preaching appeared as a scandalous threat to the very fabric of society and sociability.

The opposition to Methodism was expressed in several ways. Some preachers were mocked and attacked by crowds who threw them mud, for instance. But the rise of Methodism was also the cause of printed reactions, whether from prelates trying to oppose theological and political arguments, or from satirists ridiculing what they perceived as a new fashion and a new folly. Most criticisms of Methodists compared them to the traditional enemies of the Established Church, that is Dissenters and/or Catholics.

According to some bishops, the Methodists' insistence on salvation by faith and their field-preaching recalled the Protectorate and therefore tainted Wesley and his followers:

‘Whoever reads the large accounts of the Spiritual state of the Regicides while under condemnation (written and published, at that time, by their

friends, to make them pass, with the People, for Saints and Martyrs) and compares them with the circumstantial Journals of the Methodists, will find so exact a conformity in the frenzy of sentiment, and even in the cant of expression, upon the subject of Faith, Grace, Redemption, Regeneration, Justification, &c. as may fully satisfy him, that they are both of the same Stock; and ready, on a return of the like season, to produce the same fruits.’

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Methodism, in other words, led to antinomianism and should consequently be countered by all means as it put the very idea of society at risk. Wesley was well aware of those accusations as he tried to answer them throughout his career in polemical pamphlets, short dialogues, or even in dogmatic instructions to the Methodist societies.¹¹

The importance of the Eucharist in Methodist theology was also deemed suspicious as it could easily be mistaken for a belief in transubstantiation, that is, for Catholicism.¹² Moreover, the organisation of tightly-knit societies, as Methodists gathered weekly in private houses to discuss the Bible and to speak of their sins, was considered as a potential ferment of sedition by some bishops. That was all the more relevant in the 1740s, as the fear of a Jacobite invasion, supported by English Catholics, grew stronger:

‘Whether, I say, these Practices and Proceedings [of the Methodist societies], not warranted by any Law, can be otherwise treated, than as a presumptuous Attempt to erect a new Church-Constitution, upon a *foreign* Plan; in Contempt of those wise Rules of Government, Discipline and Worship, which were judged by our pious Ancestors to be the best and most effectual Means for preserving and maintaining Religion, together with public Peace and Order in Church and State?’¹³

Methodist preachers were aware of those criticisms and therefore constantly affirmed their loyalty to the crown throughout the eighteenth century. Until John Wesley's death in 1791, the Methodist societies professed their belonging to the national Church and to the national community. Even after the official separation from the Established Church, Methodists continued to defend the social and political *status quo*.

The development of Methodism in the long eighteenth century can be better accounted for by considering the redefinition of sociability at that time. Wesley wanted the advent of a sociable religion based on regular meetings and on the communication of feelings, yet he desired to enforce a strict discipline while his teachings were criticised for the supposed unruliness they defended:

‘Conform yourself to those *Modes of Worship* which you approve; yet love, as Brethren, those who cannot conform. Lay so much Stress on *Opinions*, that all your own (if it be possible) may agree with Truth and Reason; but

have a care of Anger, Dislike, or Contempt toward those whose Opinions differ from yours. You are daily accused of this: (And indeed, what is it, whereof you are not accused?) But beware of giving any Ground for such an Accusation.¹⁴

Methodism, with its association of individual spiritual experience and collective practices, its professions of peace and the controversies it started, shows many of the contradictions of religious sociability in Britain and in colonial America in the eighteenth century. Its official separation from the Church of England shortly after Wesley's death in 1791 solved most of the issues it raised. Methodist societies were no longer threatening the established Churches from within. Methodists had become ordinary dissenters.

1. The Works of John Wesley, vol. 18, [1739], eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heintzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 124.
2. George Whitefield, *The Nature and Necessity of Society in General, and of Religious Society in Particular. A Sermon Preached in the Parish Church of St. Nicholas in Bristol, and before the Religious Societies, At One of their General Quarterly Meetings, in Bow-Church, London, in the Year 1737, The Fourth Edition* (London: James Hutton, 1738), p. 12.
3. John Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist* [1742], *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9, ed. Rupert E. Davies, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 32-33.
4. See John Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle upon Tyne* [1743], *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9, p. 67-75.
5. See John Wesley, 'Minutes of the London Conference of June 25-29, 1744', *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10, ed. Henry D. Rack, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), p. 136.
6. The Act of Toleration (1689) was an Act of Parliament that granted freedom of worship to dissenters who pledged allegiance to King William III, believed in the Trinity, and were not Catholic. It was inspired by John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, published in the same year.
7. See for instance anonymous religious pamphlets like *An Antidote against Bigotry in Religion: or, a Discourse proving from the Testimony of Kings, Nobles, Judges, Bishops, Deans, Doctors, &c. that Wise and good Men may differ one from another both in Doctrine and Discipline, and maintain Christian Charity amongst themselves. By a True Berean*, (London, 1694).
8. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* [1695], ed. John C. Higgins-Bridle, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 170.
9. See Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, n° 147, Saturday, August 18, 1711, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. 2, p. 78-81.
10. William Warburton, *The Doctrine of Grace, or the Office and Operations of the Holy Spirit Vindicated from the Insults of Infidelity, and the Abuses of Fanaticism; Concluding with Some Thoughts (humbly offered to the consideration of the ESTABLISHED CLERGY) with Regard to the Right Method of Defending Religion against the Attacks of Either Party*, in two Volumes (London: A. Millar, J. and R. Tonson, 1763), p. 186.
11. See for instance John Wesley, *The Principles of a Methodists* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1742), p. 6-7, in which the preacher affirms that even though he believes in justification by faith alone, true faith necessarily produces good works, and that he therefore advocates the very opposite of antinomianism. See also John Wesley, *Two Dialogues Between an Antinomian and his Friend* [1745], *The Third edition* (London, 1798), and John Wesley, 'The Minutes of The Bristol Conference of August 1-3, 1745', *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10, p. 153, in which three questions are dedicated to clarifying the Methodists' position regarding antinomianism.
12. On this point, see for instance George Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1749-1751), Part I, p. 41, which deals with the use of the phrase 'real presence' in Methodist

writings about the Eucharist.

13. Edmund Gibson, *Observations upon the Conduct and Behaviour of a Certain Sect, Usually Distinguished by the Name of Methodists*, Second Edition (London: E. Owen, 1744), p. 20.

14. John Wesley, *Advice to the People Call'd Methodists* (Bristol, 1745), p. 10.

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[The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies \(1743\)
On Attending the Church Service \(1771\)](#)