1

The Protestant recovery

One of the persistent myths of modern British history is the myth of the so-called evangelical revival. From about 1730 (it is said) a dramatic, divinely inspired return to true Christianity balanced the moral budget of the British people. Lives were changed, society was reformed, and in the longer run the nation was saved from the tempting freedoms of the French Revolution. A Protestant nationalism became the hallmark of the British. The instruments of this divine intervention were John Wesley and his followers, the Wesleyans or Methodists.

In the full-grown version of the myth, the evangelical revival is referred to regularly, not just as an established historical event, but as evidence of the importance of religion in modern history, and even of the importance of a national return to orthodox Christianity in the present day.

What then was Wesleyanism, and what actually happened to give it this role at the centre of a myth, accepted by writers in the United States as well as Britain? Why did it take root in eighteenth-century British society? How did it leave the bitter legacy of the 'Religious Right' in the United States? The answer seems to be that in the 1730s the primary religious impulses of certain social groups, especially in the Church of England, were unsatisfied. The primary religious impulse is to seek some kind of extra-human power, either for personal protection, including the cure of diseases, or for the sake of

ecstatic experience, and possibly prophetic guidance. The individual's test of a religious system is how far it can supply this 'supernatural' force. People's primary religious impulses tend to accept a religious system, such as Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism, because it is there, because they knew it when they were children and had their minds tinged with its view of the world. Truth and falsity hardly matter: one is to a degree a product of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and so on.

Wesleyanism took root and expanded because, in a slowly modernising society, in which until the late 1780s the dominant elites continued to become more tolerant and enlightened in outlook, primary religion also inevitably survived, exercising what we should now call fundamentalist pressure on the existing religious institutions. John Wesley thought that Wesleyanism grew because he was preaching the true gospel, but he succeeded because he responded to the actual religious demands and hopes of his hearers, many of whom thought that religion ought to function as a way of influencing and changing the present, quite apart from what might happen at the future moment when the Second Coming revealed the wrath of God. They wanted a reduction in their personal anxieties, a resolution of their practical problems, and a greater degree of self-approval. This was not a matter of class, and it was certainly not a product of poverty, though at times those who were drawn into Wesleyanism came from groups which had found themselves excluded from the mainstream of eighteenth-century society. Many of those who responded to Wesleyanism were finding their personal existence unbearable. The Wesleys helped them to create space in which they could develop themselves and find new relationships with other people. In effect, Wesley was offering a transformation of personal identity as an antidote to despair or as a cure for

circumstances, and it is evident from the start that his approach appealed to numbers of people who were dissatisfied with their personal or social lives.

Historians of eighteenth-century England have usually thought of 'Christianity' and 'religion' as interchangeable terms. The religion of the English was Christianity, or, to put it another way, when the English were being religious they adopted some form of Christianity. This did not imply social unity, because institutionally Christianity had divided. The Church of England had survived the wars of the seventeenth century to become the state church of the Hanoverian dynasty and so the official religion. There was, though, no question of a confessional state – one in which members of the state were automatically members of the Church, and vice versa – because the competing groups of Dissenters and Roman Catholics had also outlasted the time of troubles, and had to be tolerated, however unwillingly, for political reasons. There was no systematic expulsion of either Dissenters or Catholics from the country, on the European model; and in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Huguenot refugees were admitted willingly, partly because they were being violently persecuted by the French Catholic state.

In some parts of Europe religious hysteria reached a pitch at which it was respectable to believe that religious cleansing (it could hardly be called 'ethnic') was divinely approved. One can find social reasons for this hysteria, but little evidence that religious leaders opposed such behaviour on religious grounds. When their own group was in the ascendancy they were happy to take advantage of what happened. In England, where the domination of politics by religious forces was dwindling rapidly during the reign of George I, the relationship between the three main religious groups became

as much political as religious, and a question of the official position of Anglicanism. Although during the American War of Independence in the 1770s many Anglicans blamed the American secession on the plotting of English Dissenters and became very hostile to them, there was no question of the political leadership expelling English Dissenters to America in order to cleanse the nation; and the deeper social trend (with which the majority of Anglican ministers had no sympathy) was towards giving the Dissenters greater rather than fewer social rights. When the British seized and occupied French Canada, no religious persecution followed, and Lord North's government accepted the legal presence of the French Roman Catholic Church. There were moments when Anglican hostility to British Dissent became oppressive. Thomas Paine (1737–1809), the radical political and religious writer, who had a Quaker background, had to take refuge in America from the 1770s. Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), a liberal Unitarian scientist and political philosopher, also retired there in 1794 as the ruling elites drew together against the revolutionary French. Richard Price (1723–91), a Welsh Dissenting minister who moved gradually towards Unitarianism, was a distinguished moral philosopher who applauded the early stages of the revolution in France, and so found himself the target of Edmund Burke's rhetorical denunciation. But no equivalent of these three Dissenting intellectuals appeared in Hanoverian Wesleyanism.

In Hanoverian England institutionalised religion responded to the social need for ethical norms and for a coherent vision of the world's creation and future. What the apologists asserted was not necessarily religious in itself, but was put forward as truth revealed from heaven. Protestant (and Catholic) Christianity relied on claims – already challenged in the seventeenth century – to the authority of a direct, written

self-revelation of the divine as interpreted by various Christian traditions to lay down both the theological system and the ethical patterns by which people would, it was hoped, live their lives. Everyone from the elites to the most wretched shared in personal needs, hopes and anxieties, ranging from a sophisticated dislike of intellectual incoherence to the fear of death as extinction; they also shared, with varying degrees of conviction, the hope that supernatural power might be invoked to ensure one's health, wealth, happiness and so on. Primary religious practices – and it was often more a matter of practice than theory – offered the possibility of harnessing supernatural power.

By the early eighteenth century there could be a wide gap between what ordinary people wanted from religion and what different religious bodies offered, or thought they were offering. There had never been a perfect fit between the intellectual structures of what claimed to be orthodox Christianity and the alternative interests of proliferating local cults, often with a long, varied history. More or less orthodox theologians, men with a strong preference for the linguistic inheritance of Christianity, elaborated ideas of human sin and redemption around the figure of Jesus and the New Testament Epistles, especially those of Paul. Other people were more concerned to obtain supernatural power for a variety of human ends. Evidence of the presence of divine power might be found not only in specific cases of personal and communal 'deliverances' and healings, for example, but also in the form of prophecy, 'spiritual guidance', ecstasies and glossolalia (speaking with tongues). In England, however, official Protestant opinion had become suspicious of claims about divine intervention at any but the most general level, such as the fate of the nation itself, and nursed the fear that religious 'enthusiasm' – the word frequently used to identify the whole bundle of primary

religious ideas and practices – could lead to a repetition of seventeenth-century violence and social disruption.

This analysis may help us to see what was happening in eighteenth-century English religion more clearly. One should avoid making too simple a distinction between elite and other ways of being religious, as though the distinction was social – between what the better-educated believed and did, and what was believed and done by the mass of illiterate and often very poor people, in towns as well as in the countryside. 'Popular religion' is a term sometimes used to describe a system of witches, wise women and cunning men, and the charms, curses and fortune-tellings they provided – in which case it seems to denote no more than a particular example of the forms which primary religion has often taken. For example, 'folk religion' is defined as 'a residue of pagan magic and superstition which in some areas exercised a powerful hold over the minds of the common people well into the nineteenth century'.[1] The term is also sometimes used to indicate a set of religious institutions organised by poorer people, for example, working-class people, such as agricultural labourers. This can lead to drawing a thick boundary-line between popular religion and what is regarded as official religion. In the case of the English eighteenth century, however, it would seem a mistake to distinguish sharply within early Wesleyanism (that is, from the 1730s into the 1760s) between one group of followers and another.

Let us distinguish, therefore, a primary level of religious behaviour, when human beings, caught between strong, limitless desires and fears on the one hand, and a conscious lack of power over their situation on the other – and this applies whether one is talking about material or moral needs and ambitions – assert that there may be supernatural powers which can be drawn advantageously into the natural environment; they also suspect the existence of hostile supernatural powers, against

which defences must be devised. This fundamental level of religious behaviour should be distinguished from the secondary theologies which develop around it, and which, in the world's religious systems, produce fresh expectations of what being religious means and what effects being religious may have on the individual. Institutionalised theologies are imposed on the primary level of religion and breed sects, denominations, churches, what you will – sources of power in themselves, social and political. But the primary level, with its basic belief in intrusive supernatural power, survives at all times and (and this is frequently forgotten) at all social levels. Belief in an interventionist version of Christianity, for example, is not a product of social position.

We are also too apt to think of religion in terms of theologies, instead of analysing theology in terms of its relation to religion and society. Thus both George Whitefield – a Calvinist, and therefore technically with no use for human free will – and the Wesleys – Arminian, and therefore anxious to preserve a meaning for free will, however abstruse and qualified – took it for granted that what mattered in the activities in which they were taking part was the speculative theology they used to understand and control events. They believed that to satisfy the conditions of salvation one must hold correct views on matters like predestination, an idea which seemed to rule free will out of court, and 'works', a doctrinal description of human effort which limited the possibility of human goodness to the time after conversion. Fierce disagreements broke out at this level, and the competing preachers attributed success to divine approval of their doctrine. They did not suspect that what counted much more than doctrine was the freedom which primary religious aspirations found for at least two generations in the social frameworks which the various Methodist leaders devised.

The Anglicanism in which early eighteenth-century Wesleyanism appeared no longer relied on early modern Roman Catholic methods of harnessing the natural to the supernatural, had dispensed with the Marian theology, and had ceased to direct primary religious activity towards the shrines of local saints; Anglicans had also become deeply critical of the abstract Catholic theology which buttressed the system. This was true of both evangelical and liberal Anglicans.

What got Wesleyan Methodism off the ground in the 1740s was the Wesleys' encounter with and response to the demands of primary religion, a passionate hunger for access to invisible powers, and so for ways of changing the life and prosperity of the adherent. Throughout the early period, as readers of the *Journals* which men like George Whitefield and John Wesley published as a public record of their activities, can see, Wesleyanism hovered at the edge of claiming visible prodigies, miracles in the commonsense meaning of the term, and was often alleged to have done so by Anglican critics. Roman Catholic apologetics had always appealed not only to the miracles described in the Bible and in the history of the early Church, but also to modern, recent evidence of dramatic action by Christ, the Virgin Mary or the saints. Official Protestantism, however, inherited from the sixteenth century a deep suspicion of modern miracles. This was a fundamental theme in the mental processes of the Renaissance as well as of the Reformation, but the liturgical language of Protestantism remained ambiguous, because of its close ties with the language of the Bible, as to how far divine intervention might be expected. There was always the belief, for example, that Providence must prefer the Protestant to the Roman Catholic cause. But these were ecclesiastical or national expectations: it was easier to believe in the providential control of history, in the signs of the times, than to sanction a healing cult in a local Anglican

parish church, or approve of the occasional exorcism.[2] On its Hanoverian side the eighteenth-century Protestant recovery was both secular and political, the two facets supplying mutual support for united expansion. The early Wesleyans, however, wanted divine action in everyday life for everyday purposes, whether 'miracle' were the appropriate word or not.

With these distinctions between primary religion and theology in mind, let us look at some examples of eighteenth-century Wesleyan religious behaviour:

> On my way to meet Mr Wesley at Perth [in 1769] my mare fell with me, and cut her knees so much, that I was obliged to go to Edinburgh. 'What I do, thou knowest not, but thou shalt know hereafter.' This accident made me visit Dunbar [his birthplace] sixteen or eighteen days earlier than I should have done; where, to my great surprise, I found my mother on her death-bed. I attended her in her last moments; and sincerely hope that I shall meet her in that day when the Lord maketh up his jewels. She had always been a tender and an indulgent parent to me; and her best interests, present and eternal, always lay near my heart. I could not help admiring the hand of Providence that had arrested me on my journey, by the misfortune that befell my mare, that I might once more see my mother before she died. About this time one of the most amiable members of the society died also. She was a sensible and pious woman. I preached a funeral sermon both for her and my mother.[3]

This is a Protestant ex-voto, a characteristic account of how Providence ordered apparently hostile circumstances for the good of the narrator, one of John Wesley's full-time travelling preachers, Thomas Rankin (1738–1810), who was then about thirty years old. The genre did not require illustration, though pictures were sometimes added to make the story more vivid, and the action was attributed directly to Christ or Providence, because there was no question of saintly mediation. In this case the narrator had not even asked for intervention – the divinely controlled accident was an unsolicited favour, an

event which showed how Providence, though a little hard on mares, shaped a benevolent world for believers, and watched over the spiritual interests of Rankin and his mother.

The widespread disappearance of images of and prayers to Roman Catholic saints in eighteenth-century England, Scotland and Wales did not mean an absence of effective Protestant intercession, any more than the segregation of the mass in the surviving Roman Catholic subculture meant that the eucharist became unavailable to Protestants. There was no significant spiritual deprivation. The fundamental impulse to ask for supernatural intervention remained unaltered, and found the customary satisfactions. The early Wesleyans cultivated the habit of interpreting selected everyday events as divine action, and as a sign of divine favour, while John Wesley talked about the Last Supper as a 'converting ordinance', which hardly suggests a cult of absent power. Rankin, though Scottish and Presbyterian in origin, became part of the English Wesleyan drive to release the interventionist God from the grip of a moderate Anglican lack of expectation. This also helps to explain his comment on a drunken sea captain, with whom he had sailed between America and England as a young man, that 'he had been truly converted to God; and for years was a burning and shining light; but that fatal opinion, that he could not fall from grace, had been the bane of his spiritual happiness'. If one thinks of 'faith' as 'trust', one might say that two kinds of 'trust' were working here, both equally valid (or invalid), but the Wesleyan characteristically thought that the Calvinist kind of objective trust in predestination had no warrant, and the Calvinist thought that the Wesleyan claim to subjective certainty (assurance) of personal salvation was just as unwarranted. They were not in fact too far apart, because the deep psychological attraction of Calvinism was that the system freed the believer from anxiety about constant ethical