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978-0-521-88918-6 - Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism

Phyllis Mack

Excerpt

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Introduction

the *act* of believing is one thing, and the *joy* of
believing is another...

Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, "Watchwords"¹

You still complain of *vile self*: I wish you joy, for your
knowing your enemy. Let vile self be reduced to *order*,
and, though he be a bad master, he will become an
excellent servant.

John Fletcher to Lady Mary Fitzgerald, 1782²

In the autumn of 1762, the Methodist preacher and hymn writer Charles Wesley asked his friend William Briggs to attend a revival meeting and inform him about what was going on there. Two years earlier a group of Methodist leaders had begun preaching perfectionism, the doctrine that those who are sanctified in Christ are incapable of sin. Several cases of instantaneous sanctification had been reported: sinners groaning for deliverance, shrieking as though they felt the pains of hell, and then suddenly announcing that God had saved them and made them perfect. There were rumors of even more bizarre behavior: secret healing rituals, visions seen in darkened rooms, and outrageous doctrinal statements, like the promise that those who attained perfection or sanctification would live forever, while those who did not would surely go to hell.³

Briggs went to the meeting and was appalled.⁴ First the preacher, one George Bell (a former soldier who later defected from the movement), promised to help everyone – both ‘babes in Christ’ and mature Christians – achieve a state of perfection.

¹ Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, "To the inhabitants of Madeley Wood and Coalbrookdale with all who have been accustomed to worship with us," "Watchwords," F/T, MAM Fl 27/4/3.

² John Fletcher to Lady Mary Fitzgerald, August 28, 1782, *AM* 19 (1796), p. 249.

³ On the perfectionist controversy, Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the people called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 209–11.

⁴ William Briggs to Charles Wesley, October 28, 1762, DDPr 1/10.

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He next prayed, and soon ran into such an extraordinary strain, screaming in such a violent manner to compel a blessing upon the present meeting, that he seemed to be in a rapture and in fact was as one raving with agony. I could not help thinking of the Sibyl described in Dryden's "Virgil" and was under apprehension of seeing him fall down and with foaming mouth, wild eyes and uplifted hair, deliver a prophecy.

The crowd then began a debate on the doctrine of perfection, with men and women shouting at each other across the room, the noise almost drowned out by hymn singing. "In short the wildness on one side, the rage of the other and uproar of all made it a scene of the most diabolical frenzy; and finding my soul opposed with sorrow... I quitted the place before it was half done and found a crowd in the street laughing us to scorn!" Briggs lamented John Wesley's inability to control his followers and his tendency to condone heretical and anti-social behavior in the hope of discerning some genuine spiritual experience. "It is horrible beyond expression," he fumed, "when a poor creature can talk to the Almighty with less respect than to an earthly magistrate." He suggested that a few select men and women be invited to debate the matter, with John Wesley presiding. "If the brethren are right, let them be encouraged, without censuring those who cannot join with them; but if their scheme is big with such kind of rant as the French Prophets, and likely to prove a reproach to every thing serious, the brethren should be admonished."⁵

What was all this noise and confusion really about? Could an abstract religious doctrine generate this degree of enthusiasm and apparent anarchy? Did Methodists really believe that they could lose both the ability and the desire to sin? John Walsh, who had experienced the perfectionist revival from the inside, decided to investigate these questions systematically.⁶ Walsh was an army officer who claimed that he had been a drunkard at age 6, a justified Christian at age 10, a deist (and a believer in witchcraft) in his teens, and a Methodist since 1756. Tormented by his sexual urges and unable to sustain a conviction of his own perfection for more than twenty-seven hours at a stretch, he proceeded to interview eight other people who claimed to be perfect:

Mrs. Burroughs of Deptford told me she...shed many tears; and saw daily...the air full of spirits; the good resembling stars, or pieces of silver coin, and fewer in number than the evil; which resembled eels or serpents, and entered the mouth, nose and ears of every person...and would frequently lay themselves

⁵ The French prophets were Huguenot refugees who came to London and prophesied in the early eighteenth century. Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American prophecy in the age of revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 24–33.

⁶ John Walsh to Mr. Berridge, May 28, 1761, copied and sent to Charles Wesley on August 11, 1762, EMV.

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[a]cross their eyes; but the good were far swifter in operation. The shadows of the evil appeared to her also in the water, when passing the Thames, and I think the good with them... Mr. Joyce...said, Satan brought the figure of a naked woman to tempt him every night, but on his praying, it disappeared; and a round light...then appeared until he fell asleep.

Walsh saw nothing wrong with Mrs. Burroughs's or Mr. Joyce's outward life, "except it were [Mr. Joyce's] desiring me to...get him the place of master sail maker in Deptford Yard because of the great good a perfect man might do with such a salary." Another "perfected" person never returned money she borrowed from him; still another confessed that, though his body was perfect, his mind sometimes roamed from God. Walsh rested his case, writing to Charles Wesley, "I strive to know the trees, my dear friend, by their fruit: for discernment is a useful part of Christianity." He later attended a meeting where Mr. Bell preached, "and felt a strange overcoming power, without any joy, while he prayed that God would make me perfect."

Methodism began in the late 1730s as a renewal movement led by the Anglican ministers John and Charles Wesley and a small cohort of ministers, lay leaders, and lay preachers, both male and female. By the time of John Wesley's death in 1791, it had attracted over 72,000 members in Britain and 60,000 in North America. By the mid-1800s it had burgeoned into a vast, highly organized international movement – in historian David Hempton's words, "the most dynamic world missionary movement of the nineteenth century."⁷

Every student of this extraordinary religious revival labors in the shadow of the historian E. P. Thompson, whose denunciation of Methodism was one of the most dramatic chapters in his classic work, *The making of the English working class*.⁸ It was Thompson who endowed the early Methodists with their unhappy image as apostles of bad sex, citing the necrophilic and "perverted eroticism" of the images in Methodist hymns and the depiction of Christ's bloody wounds as openings of the sacred, the thwarted craving for sexual penetration subsumed by an equally perverted desire for the oblivion of the womb.

O precious Side-hole's cavity
I want to spend my life in thee...

⁷ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, orig. 1978), p. 404. David Hempton, *Methodism: empire of the spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 2. Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the struggle for Methodist identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980), ch. 11, "The transforming power of the Cross," pp. 385–440.

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There in one Side-hole's joy divine,
 I'll spend all future Days of mine.
 Yes, yes, I will forever sit
 There, where thy side was split.⁹

Thompson particularly noted the intermittent aspect of the Methodists' emotionalism: the bleak sobriety of their daily lives, punctuated by revival meetings where believers engaged in "psychic masturbation," their repressed desires erupting in "sabbath orgasms of feeling." For him, this was not merely the false consciousness of all religious believers, but the neurotic religious imagination run rampant. While he did acknowledge some Methodists' "profound moral earnestness, a sense of righteousness and of 'calling', a 'Methodist' capacity for sustained organizational dedication and (at its best) a high degree of personal responsibility," his argument's overwhelming thrust is that the history of evangelicalism is a story of dehumanization and repression. If the chapter's analytical power stemmed from Thompson's social conscience and Marxist principles, its vituperative eloquence was surely the fruit of his experience as the son and grandson of Methodist missionaries and as a student at a Methodist boarding school.¹⁰

One effect of Thompson's work was to generate two completely unrelated historiographies of Methodism that are reflected in the illustrations: one by members of the Methodist community, which focused on theology, biography, and hagiography (depicted in the stained-glass portrait of Wesley and his followers shown on the jacket cover); the other by secular writers, who saw Methodism in relation to collective hysteria, anti-revolutionary politics, the Industrial Revolution, and class formation (depicted in the engraving by Hogarth, "Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism," shown in the frontispiece).¹¹ In different ways, each of

⁹ Thompson, *Making of the English working class*, p. 408.

¹⁰ David Hempton and John Walsh, "E. P. Thompson and Methodism," in Mark A. Noll (ed.), *God and mammon: Protestants, money, and the market, 1790–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 99–120.

¹¹ On the separation between scholarship published within the Methodist tradition and that of secular writers, Jeremy Gregory, "Wesley's tercentenary and the state of Wesley studies," in Jeremy Gregory (ed.), *John Wesley: tercentenary essays, proceedings of a conference held at the University of Manchester, June 2003*, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 85 (2003), pp. 19–23. A secular history of Methodism is Gerald Wayne Olsen (ed.), *Religion and revolution in early industrial England: the Halevy thesis and its critics* (Lanham, Md. and London: University Press of America, 1990). Halevi and others argued that Methodism prevented a revolution in England and was essentially reactionary, while Bernard Semel discusses the Wesleyans' Arminian theology and belief in the possibility of human perfection in order to show that the movement was essentially progressive and liberal, and prepared its adherents to be players in modern society. Bernard Semel, *The Methodist revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

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these scholarly traditions promoted an image of the ordinary Methodist as a person without autonomy or agency: terrified of damnation, mesmerized by charismatic preachers, hysterical in public worship, imitative of conservative bourgeois values, enslaved to an inflated work ethic, emotionally repressed in intimate relationships. A contemporary theologian defines popular Methodism as the “chaotic underside” of the movement: a collective, inarticulate craving for contact with the supernatural, an eruption of “primary religion” that was triggered by the ministers’ field preaching and manipulated by the forces of “male hegemony” but was utterly independent of the leaders’ theology and values.¹² The literary critic Henry Abelove argues that Methodists ignored Wesley’s instructions for daily life – thus asserting some autonomy – but he also insists that they misunderstood Methodist theology and were so besotted by Wesley that they tried to obey him even as they cheated by waking up late or enjoying sex with their wives or drinking tea.¹³ Other scholars explain popular behavior by focusing on external forces (the general atmosphere of social and economic uncertainty, the threat of war, the ubiquity of illness and untimely death) or on the disjuncture between the self-loathing of the worshipper and the triviality of his actual sins (thereby emphasizing the influence of the leaders).¹⁴ Even historians writing from within the Methodist tradition have generally analyzed the movement from the perspective of John Wesley’s theology and charismatic authority. The overall result is a set of interpretations that implies either the manipulation of emotionally needy followers by the Methodist leadership or – as in William Briggs’s rendition – a mob of hysterical worshippers run amok. In short, Methodists have rarely been viewed as thinkers and actors, as participants in the cultural discourse about the nature of feeling and sensibility that preoccupied so many of their contemporaries. On the contrary, they were – and are – more commonly viewed as specimens of undiluted or repressed emotion, as part of the problem that more reflective philosophers, novelists, and theologians were seeking to address.

Scholars who characterize Methodist discipline as creating a culture of repression or religious invalidism are not unequivocally wrong. It is certainly plausible to interpret some Methodists’ behavior (John Walsh’s, for example) in terms of sexual dysfunction or other kinds of neurosis or self-alienation. But such explanations do not account for the vitality of the

¹² John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleys: religion in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹³ Henry Abelove, *The evangelist of desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), chs. 5–7, pp. 49–109.

¹⁴ Watts, *The Dissenters*, pp. 406–21.

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movement or its radically democratic and improvisational aspects – like giving women permission to preach after they had already done so. In any case, Thompson was less interested in Methodism as a renewal movement within Anglicanism than he was in the movement's post-Wesleyan transformation into a tightly organized and disciplined church in the 1790s and early 1800s.

Turning again to William Briggs's report on the revival meeting and its aftermath, we find much more going on than audience manipulation on the one hand and popular hysteria on the other. The meeting was hardly typical of the average Methodist's daily life or worship, but it provides a point of entry into the dynamism and cacophony of eighteenth-century religious culture, when Moravians, Quakers, and believers in witchcraft rubbed shoulders with physicians, scientists, and social radicals, and when the most intense religious ardor might co-exist in the same individual with a democratic spirit and a clear-headed empiricism.¹⁵ When William Briggs pondered what to do about the mayhem he saw at the revival meeting, he suggested that a group of representatives, both men and women, be invited to a debate; when John Walsh doubted his own capacity for perfection, he conducted a series of interviews to see how other people's progress (or lack of it) compared with his own.

Focusing even more closely on the men and women who crowded into Methodist revival meetings, we find that, far from exhibiting mindless enthusiasm or an inchoate desire for contact with the supernatural, many people actually had trouble generating those emotions. Indeed, the most cursory reading of unpublished sources shows not the unthinking hysteria of people's emotional outbursts, but the conscious effort that often preceded and reinforced them. So Mary Thomas wrote to Charles Wesley in 1742,

When anyone did cry out in the room I always wished to be the next... There was two young women sat behind me and telling how...they had cried out such a time and what an agony they had been in before they had received forgiveness. And they said that those that did not feel those agonies that they deceived themselves. Here the devil got me again in his snare in putting me to think I was not justified because I had not been taken in such a manner.¹⁶

George Story reported that,

Attending to the experience of the people, [I] observed that almost all of them... were exercised with horrible fears and terrors; and thence I concluded it was necessary I should have the same... I therefore used every method to bring

¹⁵ Peter Lineham, "Methodism and popular science in the Enlightenment," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 17 (1998), pp. 104–25.

¹⁶ Mary Thomas to Charles Wesley, May 24, 1742, EMV.

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myself under dreadful apprehensions, hoping this would break my stubborn heart; but I could never find that kind of experience...¹⁷

Mary Jane Ramsay wondered about the sincerity of all that groaning and weeping: “how did I look on those relenting souls that wept and were in strong conviction – them I called hypocrites every one that I saw weeping O thought I you are an hypocrite to be sure for any one can be as much affected without all that...”¹⁸ James Rogers worried that he would not be able to generate the required degree of angst:

I had still retained a notion that my repentance was not sufficient; that I must be much more in earnest, feel more terror, more sorrow, deeper convictions...my friends...told me...[that] for me to pray for this, and to wait a little and a little longer, before I would dare to look for His favour, was the ready way to lose even the distress I then felt.¹⁹

These statements are interesting, not because they discredit the conventional perception of the revival as a site of emotional excess, but because they remind us how seriously people worked to make sense of both the content of the preaching and their own reactions to it. They also remind us that the Methodist renewal movement was not “about” sex or social dislocation, but religion. People who wept and shouted at the revival meeting did not embrace religious enthusiasm in order to vent their emotional or sexual frustrations; rather their frustrations (of which, incidentally, they were well aware) had moved them to ask questions about their spiritual lives. Secular historians need an angle of vision that allows them not only to accept these spiritual concerns as sincere and legitimate, but to share, however imperfectly, the struggles of ordinary Methodists and lay preachers, to stand with individual men and women as they worked to shape their own subjectivity, not in a single cathartic moment at a revival meeting, but over a lifetime. The philosopher Hannah Arendt’s observation on modern totalitarianism applies equally to evangelicalism – a movement that has too often been viewed as a species of religious totalitarianism:

The sources talk and what they reveal is the self-understanding as well as the self-interpretation of people who act and who believe they know what they are doing. If we deny them this capacity and pretend that we know better and can tell them what their real “motives” are or which real “trends” they objectively represent – no matter what they themselves think – we have robbed them of the very faculty

¹⁷ “The life of Mr. George Story,” *Lives*, vol. III, p. 162.

¹⁸ Mary Jane Ramsay to Charles Wesley, June 4, 1740, EMV.

¹⁹ “The life of Mr. James Rogers,” *Lives*, vol. II, p. 442.

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of speech, insofar as speech makes sense... Self-understanding and self-interpretation are the very foundation of all analysis and understanding.²⁰

I began writing this book because I wondered how ordinary men and women understood the seismic shift from the religious culture of the seventeenth century to the so-called “disenchantment of the world” that developed in the wake of the Enlightenment. I also wanted to contribute to a growing body of scholarly writing that affirms the importance of religion in eighteenth-century British culture and in the constitution of modern society.²¹ Through a study of many kinds of published and unpublished writing – prayers, pamphlets, hymns, diaries, recipes, private letters, accounts of dreams, rules for housekeeping – I wanted to understand the ideas and emotions of ordinary Methodists and to recognize their agency. Rather than assume that repressive doctrines invariably generate repressive mentalities, I hoped to understand how the Methodists’ rigid routines and extreme self-discipline might engender a sense of freedom and possibility, how some devout and disciplined Methodists did, in fact, become not only active, but happy. The problem was that the relationship between religion and agency turned out to be far more murky and complex than I had imagined, both as an aspect of the Methodist mentality and as a theoretical concept. How can the historian write about the agency of people who claimed that obedience was their greatest achievement and weakness and passivity their greatest virtues?²²

Religion and agency

The scholar Robert Orsi once used the example of a congregation of snake handlers to urge readers to confront the “otherness” of religion (the otherness he referred to was not the snakes but the aggressive

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, “On the nature of totalitarianism: an essay in understanding,” quoted in Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my mind: writing a diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 11.

²¹ On Methodism, Hempton, *Methodism*; Hempton, *The religion of the people: Methodism and popular religion c. 1750–1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The evangelical conversion narrative: spiritual autobiography in early modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jeremy Gregory, “Charles Wesley and the eighteenth century,” in Kenneth G. C. Newport and Ted A. Campbell (eds.), *Charles Wesley: life, literature and legacy* (Werrington: Epworth Press, 2007), pp. 18–39.

²² For a discussion of the question of agency from a non-European perspective, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 102–105.

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dogmatism of the preacher).²³ I think that the otherness we need to confront has less to do with dogmatism (which flourishes in many secular settings) than with the religious person's conception of agency.²⁴ Most liberal, secular thinkers define agency as the free exercise of self-willed behavior: the capacity to know and to do what one wants. The implication is that those who are motivated by religious ardor or who live under the influence of a religious institution or discipline have no agency or limited agency, whereas secular society, which locates religious authority and practice outside the spheres of politics and the marketplace, allows for domains of free, autonomous behavior. Indeed, for the vast majority of intellectuals who view modernity as synonymous with secularization, religion is perceived chiefly as a form of self-estrangement.²⁵ These writers analyze the search for spiritual enlightenment as a secondary phenomenon, one derived from more fundamental, often unconscious human needs. Words like *sacrifice*, *redemption*, *conversion*, *repentance*, or *ecstasy* are not understood in terms of their stated meaning or their meaning for historical actors, but as pointers to other, more profound meanings: *poverty*, *social marginality*, *sexual desire*, *the desire for power* – terms that have come to define both the core elements of human nature and the categories of modern social science.

Clearly, if we want to understand the early Methodists on their own terms, we need a more complex definition of agency than the liberal model of individual autonomy used by most secular historians, for Methodists and others defined agency not as the freedom to do what one wants but as the freedom to want and to do what is right. Since “what is right” was determined both by absolute truth or God and by individual conscience, agency implied obedience and ethical responsibility as well as the freedom to make choices and act on them. And since doing what is right inevitably means subduing at least some of one's own habits, desires, and impulses, agency implied self-negation as well as self-expression. The goal of the individual's religious discipline was to shape her personal desires and narrow self-interest until they became identical

²³ Robert A. Orsi, “Snakes alive: resituating the moral in the study of religion,” in Elizabeth A. Castelli (ed.), *Women, gender, religion: a reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 98–118.

²⁴ For a more extended discussion of this subject, see Phyllis Mack, “Religion, feminism, and the problem of agency: reflections on eighteenth-century Quakerism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29, no. 1 (2003), pp. 149–77. And see Webb Keane, *Christian moderns: freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 3–5.

²⁵ Brad S. Gregory, “The other confessional history: on secular bias in the study of religion,” *History and Theory* 45 (December 2006), pp. 132–49. In the same issue, David Gary Shaw, “Modernity between us and them: the place of religion within history,” pp. 1–9.

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with God's desire, with absolute goodness. The sanctified Christian wants what God wants; she is God's agent in the world.²⁶

For many modern observers, this definition of agency must seem to convey the ultimate in self-alienation: a lack of self-worth, the internalization of (often oppressive) social norms, and an absence of personal authority alongside an assumption of personal guilt. As Methodists (and others) understood it, submission to God and the religious community enhanced personal integrity and public credibility. By affirming her own nullity, the effacement of her personal will, the individual felt her superficial desire for self-gratification overcome by her deeper love of God and of universal truth. This made her able to act rightly and authoritatively and in ways that were intelligible to others. To dismiss her gestures of surrender and self-denial as a rhetoric of self-abnegation, as false consciousness, or as disingenuous – a covert form of resistance to the dominant order – is not only an over-simplification of her psychology; it is an avoidance of our responsibility not only to look for strategies of self-assertion in a patriarchal, class-based culture, but to look steadily at women's (and men's) own ideas about ethics, autonomy, and spirituality. We need to think about what Robert Orsi, writing about the devotional lives of American Catholic women, called "in-betweenness": the way that self-abnegation and surrender become the ground of choice, action, and healing.²⁷ Or, in the more abstract language of the literary critic Richard Rambuss, "the conditions of devotional subjectivity itself – this place where the subject is attenuated between the hyperbole of his or her own agency and longing at one pole and a matching desire for the self's utter abasement, even dissolution at the other."²⁸

It is relatively easy – at least in principle – to assent to the idea that a secular, liberal concept of agency is inapplicable to those in non-Western societies. Beside the overwhelming evidence of our daily newspapers, we have the work of psychologists like Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama that compare the Western assumption that individual autonomy is both the norm and the ideal with interdependent cultures like Japan, where choices are made on the basis of relationships rather than individual will and where the expression of one's inner feelings – sincerity – is

²⁶ In thinking about ideas of religion and agency, I have been stimulated by Jochen Hellbeck's study of diary writing in Stalinist Russia, *Revolution on my mind: writing a diary under Stalin*, "Prologue: forging the evolutionary self," pp. 1–14.

²⁷ Robert Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude: women's devotion to the patron saint of hopeless causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 185–211.

²⁸ Richard Rambuss, *Closet devotions* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 60.