

Wesley and the Wesleyans: Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Professor John Kent brings a distinguished reputation as a historian of religion in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain to the near-impossible task of saying something new about John Wesley. Few lives have been so thoroughly documented as that of the subject of this book and Wesley's ability to project his own version of events to subsequent generations through his published *Journals*, letters and sermons matched his ability to inspire an audience through field-preaching. However, it is not Professor Kent's purpose to offer a biography of Wesley (though his approach to Wesleyan Methodism is broadly chronological) on the lines of the excellent life published by Henry Rack in 1989.⁽¹⁾ Instead, this is a blast of the iconoclastic trumpet, and the first image which is listed for destruction is no less than that of the 'evangelical revival' itself.

The tone of the book is confident, assertive and provocative; its style is a highly accessible and lively one, and in its relatively inexpensive paperback form it will probably (and deservedly) attract a wide readership. As with many provocative books, *Wesley and the Wesleyans* will arouse many disagreements. With a work of this kind, however, a reviewer needs to be on guard against the temptation to dismiss the book's central thesis on the one hand, while undermining its claim to novelty by maintaining that sensible historians (often including the reviewer) have been advocating it for years. The snares of that temptation are evident in some reviews of the first edition of Jonathan Clark's *English Society 1688-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), a work of which Professor Kent takes due account.

Professor Kent sets himself the task of destroying what he calls 'the myth of the so-called evangelical revival'. This myth, he argues, holds that 'from about 1730 . a dramatic, divinely inspired return to true Christianity balanced the moral budget of the British people . The instruments of this divine intervention were John Wesley and his followers, the Wesleyans or Methodists'.(p. 1) If acceptance of this myth were

indeed widespread in academic studies of evangelicalism, this book would be providing an essential service by arranging for its demolition. However, since it would be extremely difficult to find the work of any serious historian of the subject (none is cited) which advances claims of this nature, the reader may be forgiven for a sharp sense of windmill-tilting. Nonetheless, the author proceeds to offer a synoptic and highly critical analysis of the origins and development of the Wesleyan movement, from the 1730s to the beginning of the nineteenth century, which amounts in effect to a debunking exercise. John Wesley himself emerges as a self-confident, indeed authoritarian, leader who 'found in religion a means of imposing his will on some of his contemporaries, though rarely on his social equals'.(p. 189) One of his principal skills lay in his ability to manipulate men and women whose social and educational levels were lower than his own.

Central to the book's argument is the concept of 'primary religion', an expression unfamiliar in use in eighteenth-century England. Its meaning, as understood by Professor Kent, is entirely different from 'primitive religion', in the sense of the 'true' religion practised by the Apostles and their contemporaries. 'Primary religion' is defined as the search for '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'.(pp. 1-2) It is further defined as a belief in the direct, personal intervention of providence in everyday life, 'as distinct from a more general providential protection of the nation, and in visibly interventionist supernatural forces'.(pp. 10, 22) 'Primary' religious impulses, involving hope and prayer for divine succour in the struggle with life's vicissitudes, were always present in early modern (and indeed later) societies and hence, since 'primary religion' had not declined, there was no question of its being 'revived'.

Instead, John Wesley and his colleagues tapped into an existing pool of 'primary religious' aspirations which were unsatisfied by an increasingly moderate and rational Church of England. The Church feared that such aspirations would lead to the sort of religious fanaticism that had disfigured the seventeenth century. Hence Wesleyanism made little headway among the better educated and became trapped among those whose religious behaviour - involving emotionalism, convulsions, claims of 'perfection' and even of healing powers - left its authors exposed to the dreaded charge of 'enthusiasm'. But the Wesleys succeeded in restoring the freedom of 'primary religion' in Britain to express itself in a Protestant context, in the absence of opportunities for the invocation of saints available in Catholic societies. There are some interesting practical examples of 'primary religious' assumptions and conduct, some of them drawn from the journal of John Cennick in 1741.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine early (1740-70) and later (1770-1800) Wesleyanism. Professor Kent outlines the traditional explanations for the success of the Wesleyan movement in the 1740s, one of which is that it amounted to a reaction against the radical types of religious philosophy associated with Deism. He dismisses this explanation, quite reasonably, by pointing out that 'radical' philosophers (John Locke, Samuel Clarke) did not threaten either 'primary religion' or social stability, as distinct from orthodox Christian theology - moreover, they did not 'touch the majority of ordinary people'.(p. 49) Other traditional explanations, however, cannot be completely set aside. The legacy of highly intellectualised preaching bequeathed by Archbishop Tillotson, for instance, surely contributed to the way in which, as Professor Kent observes, Anglican teaching moved away from the immediacy and alleged superstition of 'primary religion', and thus created a void filled by the Wesleys. Similarly, the Wesleyan emphasis upon Trinitarian orthodoxy (skilfully delineated by Henry Rack [\(2\)](#)) may be seen as a response to a perceived advance of Arian speculation among the English Presbyterians, as well as among a minority of the Anglican clergy. Moreover, the personal asceticism and self-denial, moral reformation and regular self-examination preached by the Wesleys owed something to High Church Tory resentment against the materialism of the Robincocracy and Whig domination of the Church. An important theme of these two chapters is the flexibility of the eighteenth-century Church of England; although it could not embrace Wesleyanism, it never formally expelled the Wesleys. Indeed, it was only the persistence of one litigious clergyman that led to the exit from the Church of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.

Professor Kent discusses the ways in which later (post-1770) Wesleyanism moved away from 'primary religion'. After its initial phase, the societies established by Wesley 'gradually lost their appetite for ecstatic experience, because the members were beginning to feel themselves in control of their social and personal

circumstances'.(p. 42) The movement was 'torn between primary religious activities and the pursuit of preferably urban stability in large respectable chapels'. In effect, a new denomination was emerging, with increasingly formal structures, a second generation of leaders and a declining reliance on spontaneity. The process that Professor Kent describes here is a classic example of the transition from 'sect' to 'denomination' delineated by Bryan Wilson's *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London: Heinemann, 1967) and developed in Volume I of Michael Watts's *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). This is entirely consistent with Wesley's political conservatism, which Professor Kent is anxious to stress. Chapter 3 concludes with a dismissal of the possibility that Methodism prevented revolution in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century (one wonders which serious historians now maintain that it did). Revolution was never possible because the Hanoverian state was quite prepared to use military force to suppress social disorder.(p. 100) There might, of course, have been other reasons for the avoidance of revolution, including the widespread intellectual and popular support for loyalism, the public reputation of George III as a conscientious paternalist and the relatively effective operation of the Poor Law and private philanthropy in times of the severest dearth. More account could, perhaps, also have been taken of the Methodist contribution to reforming, as distinct from revolutionary, politics.

Chapter 4 takes the form of a discussion of the role of women in the early years of Wesleyanism. That role, argues the author, offers further instances of the operation of 'primary religion' and female autobiographical writings show that many early Methodist women found satisfaction 'in the belief that they had access to supernatural power, which protected them as individuals and excited in them ecstatic experience'. The expectation that such accounts would need to conform to pre-set formulae is something which Professor Kent neatly recognises by commenting that these women usually 'described their experience in language which had already been laid down for them by male authorities' (p. 106). There is an extended treatment of Grace Murray's story, a narrative which is used to illustrate the Wesleys' ability to manipulate and to 'shape the underlying religious anxieties and expectations of those who came to hear them by making use of the secondary theological concepts of justification and sanctification'. Professor Kent clearly demonstrates the tortuous nature of the interplay between what he calls the 'primary' religious unfamiliarity with the 'concept of a God who could be offended and repulsed' (p. 115) and the more disciplined mental approach of the 'official' religion. The most positive feature of Wesley's relations with women presented in this chapter is the way in which he helped his female acolytes to change their perception of themselves, often in a manner which led them to seek a greater measure of control over their own lives. However, Professor Kent insists that Wesley did not intend to bring about such outcomes, and that he was really unaware of them.(p. 138)

Chapter 5, the longest and most substantial section of the book, examines the varied Anglican responses to Wesleyanism. Here the author is at his most convincing. He rightly observes that perceptions of Anglicanism as a social religion, imbued with civic piety and a culture of benevolence, were powerful in the upper reaches of the Church. Anglican resentment at Wesleyan claims to be purging the Church and to save the nation, and at intrusion into the parish system was thus understandable. To those with such a view, Methodism was tolerable only when it brought religion to communities that the Church had failed to reach, not when it intruded into parishes where the Church exercised a firm influence. Many among (and beyond) the elite sought 'a politer, more prosperous, more tolerant and more rationally moral society' (p. 156), rather than anything which seemed redolent of 'enthusiasm' and seventeenth-century fanaticism. Fears of the latter were indeed increased by the publication of Wesley's *Journal*. Archbishop Secker believed in a reasonable, mixed spirituality, in which faith and works combined. He spoke for many who remained deeply suspicious of those who 'believed that they could bring supernatural power directly into the community, either through the invocation of Mary and the Saints' as with Catholics, or 'through the invocation of the Holy Spirit' (as with Wesleyans). Professor Kent rightly contends that moderate Calvinism won far more support among the Anglican clergy than did Wesley's movement.(p. 145)

A characteristically trenchant conclusion subjects John Wesley's personality to a rigorous analysis that confirms the authoritarian tendencies set out in the earlier chapters. His movement is held to have achieved relatively little by the end of the eighteenth century: its societies 'seem to have lacked intellectual curiosity and aesthetic pleasure' (p. 201), apart from the appreciation of music. Wesleyanism abandoned the attempt to

sustain a 'holiness' movement or to 'function as a pietist reforming movement inside the Church of England'.(p. 204) Its political impact was minimal; the real political successes were scored by single-issue campaigning societies, principally those concerned with missionary work and anti-slavery, which were inspired by Evangelicals within the Church of England.

None of this, however, is sufficient to confirm Professor Kent's central claim that there was no evangelical revival. A successful vindication of such a claim would require a consideration of the nature of, and criteria for establishing, the nature of revivalism itself, as undertaken, for instance, in the work of Richard Carwardine. It would also involve an examination of the impact of evangelicalism upon the older Dissenting denominations, notably the Congregationalists; it is a fundamental mistake to conceive of evangelicalism solely in terms of Wesleyanism, or to deny the existence of a revival on the basis of Wesleyan membership statistics. Professor Kent, of course, makes no such mistake, and his brief references to the international successes of Methodism in the nineteenth century (p. 204) indicate that there is much more to evangelicalism than the career and character of John Wesley. Similarly, the concept of a 'confessional state' in eighteenth-century England is brushed aside too lightly, especially as Dissenting grievances under the Hanoverian regime and the fear of the Church hierarchy that Wesley was leading his followers towards Dissent are correctly highlighted. In many closed parishes, dominated by one or two gentry families and a resident clergyman - parishes which Wesleyans often found extremely difficult to penetrate - the 'confessional state' was an everyday reality.

To handle such broad and ambitious themes in six chapters of a relatively short book represents an extremely demanding challenge. Professor Kent raises more questions than he answers and *Wesley and the Wesleyans* has a certain gadfly quality, with a power to provoke, to invigorate and to force the re-examination of received wisdom on nearly every page. It is highly readable and stimulating throughout. The many disagreements that it will, undoubtedly, invite do not diminish its value. Dr Johnson said of Joseph Priestley that his works 'tended to unsettle every thing, and yet settled nothing'. Professor Kent is no academic 'settler' and for that we should be grateful.

Notes

1. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast. John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Henry D. Rack, 'Early Methodist visions of the Trinity', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 46 (1988), 65-9.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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