Dissent, Descent, or just Decent?

Andy Kemp explores Methodism's 300 year identity crisis.

Three Enlightenments

Was the Enlightenment a Christian movement? If we were to list as many of the key figures of the Enlightenment as come to mind, few would have described themselves as atheists. Most called themselves Christians. And yet, would we list John Wesley as one of the giants of the Enlightenment era? Would we see Methodism, the movement he founded, as one of the driving forces of the Enlightenment? Concomitantly, Methodism has always struggled to understand itself, its ethos and its purpose, in the face of socio-religious change.

The eminent American historian, Gertrude Himmelfarb, in *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French and American Enlightenments* (Random House, 2008), argues that the Enlightenment was very different in character in those three nations. In France, the Enlightenment was founded upon an 'ideology of reason', the thoroughgoing pursuit of which led to revolution and the overthrow of monarchy and the church. In America, it manifested as the 'politics of liberty', the vehicle for ultimate independence from the British Empire. In Britain, however, Enlightenment took the form of a broad 'sociology of virtue': the search for a 'healthy society' driven by 'a reformist temper in a revolutionary age'. This approach enables Himmelfarb to gather into the Enlightenment project several individuals who have not usually been considered as significant contributors. In particular, she sees John Wesley's ministry and the emergence of Methodism as highly significant in forming the character of the British Enlightenment.

The spirit of Wesley

Born in 1703, John Wesley grew up in the period – 1690-1730 – identified by Don Cupitt in *Jesus and Philosophy* (SCM, 2009) as one of significant transition: between the full hegemony of the divine or moral law, and the emergence of an 'emotivist' ethic based on human fellow-feeling. Though an admirer of Locke's writings on reason, Wesley maintained a belief in the possibility of miracles and warned against the power of witchcraft. Nevertheless, some would claim he was the greatest religious leader of his age, and had the widest and most positive influence on religious practice of anyone since the 16th century. The historian J. H. Plumb assigned Wesley a still more momentous role, seeing him as one of Hegel's 'world-historical individuals', alongside Luther, Lenin, Gandhi or Napoleon.

The religious experience that changed Wesley's life immediately preceded the major economic crisis of 1739, providing a context ripe for religious revival. Thousands thronged to hear Wesley, his brother Charles, and their collaborator George Whitefield, as they reanimated a religious spirit no longer satisfied by the older dissenting sects or the Church of England. While the Deists attempted a 'rationalising' of religion, the Methodists achieved a 'socialising' of religion. They propounded an eclectic theology, not always logically consistent, but well suited to the temper and concerns of the working classes of early industrialism. Their Arminian amalgam of justification by faith and good works made salvation appear accessible to all, regardless of class or condition. Wesley's particular genius was to couple this heart-warming and generous creed with a superlative organisational structure, combining a practical and contextual egalitarianism, with a highly effective – if authoritarian – hierarchy.

' The poor are the Christians,' Wesley proclaimed, and he did not mean just the decent, respectable, 'deserving' poor. He made a point of descending from his own social position: seeking out 'the outcasts of men', the 'forlorn ones', and the 'most flagrant, hardened, desperate sinners'. No one was too poor to be saved, no one too benighted to be lifted up, spiritually and practically. His watch-words were: 'Gain all you can' (though not at the expense of your own or another's bodily or mental health, or subsistence), 'Save all you can', 'Give all you can'. Wesley's workload and what he expected of his ministers and collaborators was phenomenal. Their achievements in providing charitable relief, schools, orphanages and other facilities were extraordinary. Wesley's tireless itinerancy, his thousands of

sermons and his theological writings are famed. Less well known is his huge publishing output for the working classes: over fifty volumes in many editions of works on medicine, electricity, natural history and literature, along with translations of continental theological works. Many of his itinerant and local preachers doubled as amateur doctors and pharmacists. Wesley's *Primitive Physick*, prescribing remedies for 288 specific ailments, went through twenty-three editions by 1828. Wesley was criticised as anti-intellectual, but Johnson told Boswell that he especially enjoyed talking with Wesley, if only the man 'would allow himself the leisure of conversing'. The Wesleyan Enlightenment was not that of the salons, the *philosophes* or even the coffee houses; but its reach, amongst millions of working people, was immense.

Strangely warmed – a personal interlude

Though of dissenting stock, I was not born in song and mine was not a Methodist cradle; in fact, dear reader, I married into her. I first encountered Methodists in inner-city Sheffield in the early 1980s, hanging on by their finger-tips in the face of rapid industrial decline and almost as rapid numerical collapse. Even as an already sceptical twenty year-old, later I had my own 'strangely-warmed' moment, singing 'O Love that wilt not let me go' amongst Methodists at full throttle, in their 'Primitive' chapel perched beside a fenland drain.

My own 'descent' from the middle-class to be 'alongside the poor' came in Toxteth three years after the 1981 riots. The Church of England produced the *Faith in the City* report, but it was the Methodists who ran the youth and community centre and its multitude of projects, at the heart of the black community. It was the Methodists too who turned another galleried chapel into engineering workshops and classrooms. They offered a second chance at education, training and life-skills to mainly black teenagers who had missed out, the odds stacked heavily against them.

Back then Methodism claimed more than 600,000 members in the UK. Thirty-five years later and despite many vicissitudes, I find myself still working in the Methodist Church, for two charities responding to the very poorest in our unequal nation. True to its history, much of contemporary Methodism is conservative, comfortable, clean and decent (and elderly). Parts of it remain radical: challenging, down and dirty. The Church now has 180,000 members; its decline is not untypical but has been more rapid than most.

Black Lives Matter

John Wesley was a Tory in his politics. He was 'for' the Church of England in its 'highest' form, for monarchy and for empire, and he fiercely disapproved of American independence. And yet, out of this Toryism, he and the Methodists developed a liberal, even radical, social ethic. The impetus for this may have grown out of the tense relationship with his Oxford Methodist co-founder, George Whitefield. It was Whitefield, the wealthy Whig Calvinist, who provoked Wesley, the Tory Arminian, into preaching in the fields, amongst the agricultural and early industrial poor.

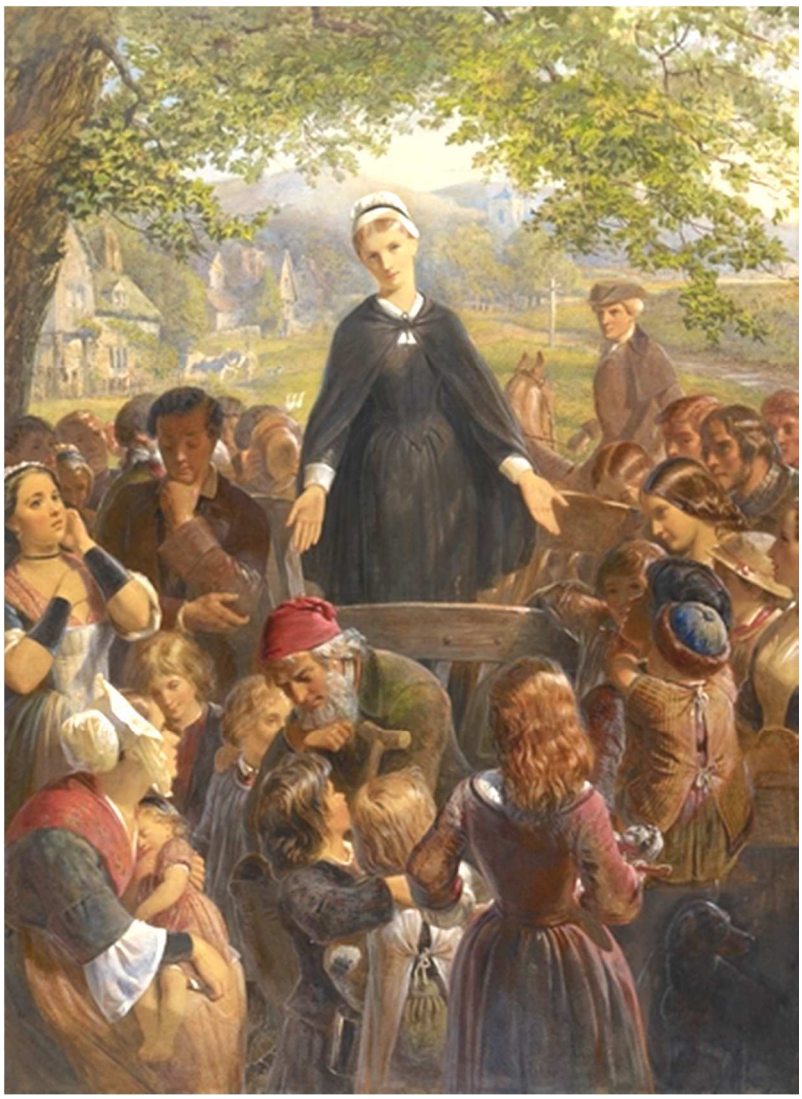
In 1736-7 they visited the British colony of Georgia. Here Wesley encountered enslaved people for the first time. The experience left him with a deep loathing of slavery. Whitefield, on the other hand, was an estate owner and kept slaves. He was opposed to unnecessary cruelty, but saw no way of ending the practice. Wesley was involved in trying to create a slave-free state in Georgia, but by 1751 the argument for the ideal was lost, and indeed Whitefield came to justify the continuance of slavery as 'biblical'.

Wesley became increasingly vehement in his opposition to slavery, initially to its cruelty and inhumanity, but ultimately to the entire attitude which allowed its continuance. 'Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary action. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion. Be gentle toward all men; and see that you invariably do with everyone as you would he should do unto you.' In 1774 he wrote an influential tract – *Thoughts on Slavery* – that went into four editions in just two years. He attacked the trade, the owners and the traders, and proposed a boycott of all slave-produced products. In 1787-8, at considerable risk to his now ageing person, he preached publicly against 'that execrable villainy' in Bristol, the heart of the slave network in Britain. 'An African is in no respect inferior to the European. If he seems so, it is because the European has kept him in a condition of inferiority, depriving him of all opportunities of improving, whether in knowledge

or virtue.' Wesley wrote to the Abolition Committee, and corresponded with William Wilberforce. After Wesley's death and the Methodist secession from the Church of England, the Wesleyans continued to campaign for abolition, and were active in getting Wilberforce reelected in 1806, to continue his work in parliament. The British slave trade was abolished the following year.

#MeToo

Wesley was broadly affirming of women's ministry. From as early as 1742 female class leaders were appointed at the Foundery Chapel in London. They were encouraged to speak of their spiritual life in public, and to exhort mixed gatherings and women's meetings to faith and repentance. The decision to encourage women into the preaching ministry was more controversial, but by the 1760s a significant number of women shared in this itinerant ministry, the most famous being Sarah Crosby and Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher.



Dinah, the Methodist preacher in *Adam Bede,* preaching on the common. Painting by Edward Henry Corbould (1861). rct.uk/collection

In her novel *Adam Bede*, George Eliot portrays the attractive character of Dinah Morris, the Methodist preacher. Disappointingly, after Dinah's marriage, Eliot has her ceasing to preach; quietly supporting her husband in his ministry. The translator of Strauss and Feuerbach had done her research. *Adam Bede* appeared in 1859 but the story starts in 1799. Eliot based the character of Dinah Morris on the experience of her aunt, Elizabeth Evans, an early Wesleyan preacher. After Methodism's secession from the Church of England, concerns over the new denomination's 'respectability' led to increasing nervousness on the part of the governing Conference about itinerant women preachers. They were either silenced or limited to preaching in their local chapel. By 1803, the Wesleyan Conference had ruled against women's preaching ministry altogether. Eliot's tale of Dinah Morris is true to the experience of many. There were, of course, those who resisted and continued to preach; the most prominent of these was Mary Barritt-Taft.

As the 'Wesleyan Methodist Connexion' became more regimented, conservative and middle-class, the Methodist movement continued to fragment. Those who held to Wesley's 'preference for the poor' felt marginalised. In particular, the Primitive Methodists and the Bible Christians, who seceded in 1811 an 1815 respectively, continued to encourage ordinary men and women in their ministries as local preachers. Finally, in 1918, the Wesleyans relented: women could be local preachers once again. Almost all the Methodist groupings were eventually united into one, uneasy church by 1932. The Methodist Church did not ordain women as ministers until 1974, nearly sixty years after the Congregationalists and only twenty years before the Anglicans: this is perhaps the most revealing statistic when gauging where Methodism has generally positioned itself on the socio-religious fence.

The 'Gig Economy' and Social Mobility

Marxist historian, E P Thompson, saw Methodism as an anti-intellectual and reactionary influence, distracting the working class from pursuing its true interests through revolution. Wesleyan Methodism in particular, at least at the official ministry level and in its Conference pronouncements, was hostile to all forms of radical organising and working-class protest. At grass-roots level, however, especially among the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians, things were very different.

Five of the six 'Tolpuddle Martyrs' – a group of Dorset men sentenced to deportation for illegally forming an agricultural workers' Friendly Society in 1833 – were active Wesleyans, three of them were prominent Local Preachers. And yet, the Wesleyan conference condemned their action and offered them and their families no support. Later in the century, Joseph Arch, a Primitive Methodist preacher, was successful in establishing the first National Agricultural Labourers' Union. In 1885 he became the first agricultural labourer to be elected to Parliament. The precarious nature of day and piece labour, on the land, in the dock-yards, in textile finishing and in many other areas, drove much grassroots Methodist charitable concern and community support.

Regardless of whether the respectable, quietist theology of its ministry matched the socialist aspirations of its own rural rank and file, it was undoubtedly the genius of Methodist organisation which propelled the urban working class move-ments of the Victorian age. In the 1830s, the Chartists adopted the small 'class', local 'society', area 'circuit' and regional 'district' system of Methodist organisation. They borrowed the 'Camp Meeting' model from the Primitive Methodists, and there is considerable evidence of direct overlap between the Chartist and later political movements and the active Methodist 'machine'. Preachers and speakers, missioners and fundraisers, were often interchangeable.

When in 1953, the politician Morgan Phillips, delivered a speech penned by Dennis Healey, containing the statement: 'The Labour Party owes more to Methodism than Marxism', he was reflecting upon the birthing of socialist politics in 19th century Primitive Methodism, the particular genius of Wesleyan organisation, and the Methodist gift for nurturing social mobility amongst the new industrial working class.

Still conflicted?

Methodism's equivocation between 'descending', as the left wing of a diverse, dissenting, 'free church' field – and a respectably decent re-adoption as the 'fighting wing' of establishment, remains unresolved. Continuing retrenchment, the slowness of the centre in adjusting its structures to denominational shrinkage, and the continual 'churn' of evangelical and liberal presidencies of Conference, means that the confusion over Methodism's identity has been perpetuated right up to the present.

Methodism, like most of the other mainstream denominations (and unlike the Quakers and Unitarians), has never got to grips with Enlightenment's inevitable and fatal critique of orthodox Christian doctrine. In his *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age* (SCM, 2002) Clive Marsh wrote: '…agnostic onlookers and theological non-realists must not be excluded from the Christian Search for God… indeed it should be accepted that they are already an integral part of organised Christianity. They should be welcomed in Christian communities… My guess that there are many *de facto* agnostics and non-realists sitting in churches, week in week out, is not merely an expression of hope. It is more a reflection on the evident questioning and searching that people do in private, or in contexts other than in the life of the Church.'

Marsh – recently appointed as Principal of The Queen's Foundation for Ministerial Education, Birmingham – was Vice-President of the Methodist Conference in 2019-20, along with Barbara Glasson as President, the founder of 'Somewhere Else' (the 'Bread Church'), a place of radical sanctuary and hospitality in central Liverpool. Their year of dissenting, descending leadership, however, must be viewed against the backdrop of conservative Methodism's commit-ment since 2018 to 'God for All: an Emerging Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth'. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems that available project funding is no longer to address 'mission' – alongside the poor or otherwise – but is rather to be targeted on 'evangelism'. Methodism's centuries-old identity crisis continues.

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