

WESLEY
AND THE WESLEYANS

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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

failure. Rankin's casual use of biblical quotation is interesting, since the 'burning and shining light' refers to John the Baptist (John 5: 35), the human witness who has to give way to the new, more powerful messenger from heaven.

Rankin's account suggests a mind fed on biblical language. The traditional Christian claim that God had revealed the meaning of the scriptures to the Church (and not, in the last analysis, to the Jews), had made every verse and phrase within a verse in the Jewish Old as well as in the New Testament manipulable by the Christian imagination. In pure theory the true believer's imagination was helped or enlightened by the divine Spirit, but in practice there was no rational limit to what the texts might be made to mean: everything hinged on the style of piety with which they were approached. So Rankin, faced with the unexpected, quoted, careless of incongruity, 'What I do, thou knowest not, but thou shalt know hereafter', a passage which comes from John 13: 7, and is Jesus's answer to Peter's question at the Last Supper, 'Lord, dost thou wash my feet?' In reply, Jesus explains the symbolic intention of the footwashing – that 'you also ought to wash one another's feet' – and at the same time throws out hints that one of the apostles is about to betray him. It was important that Judas's action should be seen to take place within a providential order; Jesus is portrayed as knowing what what was going to happen, and telling his hearers that he would be betrayed.

The context of Rankin's quotation was tragic, but he virtually ignored the Crucifixion narrative and instead drew a parallel between Peter's failure to understand what Jesus was doing and his own initial failure to grasp the significance of the mare's injury. He used the biblical reference to underline what he called the providential nature of the mare's accident. '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.' This is Providence in Dr Johnson's sense of 'the care of God over created beings', and the idea is expanded by Rankin with the further biblical picture of 'that day when the Lord maketh up his jewels', a reference to Malachi 3: 17, where the Jewish prophet sees God as promising that at the final judgement the wicked would be destroyed but that 'unto you that fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings', a promise which Christian theologians had transferred to Christians, interpreting the 'sun of righteousness' as Jesus. God's care for created beings extended to the destruction of the wicked (including, presumably, the Calvinist sea captain), but Rankin did not apply that idea directly to his mother, whom, as he said, he sincerely hoped he would meet among the jewels. It is worth noting, however, that at a much earlier point in his narrative he had said that when he was a teenager, and had lost his father, who been autocratic, 'my mother was too indulgent and fond of me (as she had never any other son but myself) and this made her authority but very light over me – I bless God that I was mercifully preserved from open wickedness'.⁴ Augustine of Hippo casts a long shadow.

This is very much a preacher's narrative, intended to make the reader recognise that Rankin's life had been divinely guided as a series of events in which one could not help admiring the way in which the not altogether invisible hand of Providence had mercifully preserved him. Others had not been preserved, and the implication is always that they did not deserve preservation. He recalled that when the British troops and American colonists began to fight one another in 1775 he had told his congregation 'that the sins of Great Britain and her colonies had long called aloud for vengeance'.⁵ This was traditional pulpit rhetoric, a standard reaction of the professionally religious to the disasters of the nation, any nation.

In practice the war made Rankin a British revival preacher increasingly unwanted in America, because, despite his description of the conflict as a deserved punishment for the sins of the whole community, he fiercely took the side of the Hanoverian regime.

So far we have discussed Rankin in terms of his attitude to religion as the practice of a piety which promotes freedom from anxiety and gives one, in theory at least, a moral superiority to the current state of affairs, because one knows that when things go wrong it is because Providence has moved from judgement to vengeance. Whatever one's sufferings, one is not a subject of that vengeance, but can count on appearing with the jewels at the end of the day. This was not an unusual kind of piety in the eighteenth century. Let us therefore also look at an account which Rankin gave of a service he took in the American Colonies in June 1776, some little distance from Philadelphia, about a year after the battle of Bunkers Hill:

After dinner I observed to brother Shadford that I feared that I should not have strength to preach in the afternoon. A little rest, however, refreshed me, and at four o'clock I went to the chapel again. I preached from Rev 3: 8 'I know thy works'. Towards the close of the sermon, I found an uncommon struggle in my breast, and in the twinkling of an eye my soul was filled with the power and love of God, that I could hardly get out my words. I had scarcely spoken two sentences, while under this amazing influence, before the very house seemed to shake, and all the people were overcome with the presence of the Lord God of Israel. Such a scene my eyes saw, and ears heard, as I never was witness to before . . . Numbers were calling out loud for mercy, and many were mightily praising God their Saviour; while others were in an agony for full redemption in the blood of Jesus. Soon, very soon, my voice was drowned in the pleasing sounds of prayer and praise. Husbands were inviting their wives to go to Heaven with them, and parents calling upon their children to come to the Lord Jesus; and what was peculiarly affecting, I observed in the gallery appropriated to the black people, almost the whole of them upon their knees; some for themselves, and others

for their distressed companions . . . As my strength was almost gone, I desired brother Shadford to speak a word to them. He attempted to do so, but was so overcome with the divine presence that he was obliged to sit down; and this was the case, both with him and myself, over and over again. We could only sit still and let the Lord do his own work. For upwards of two hours the mighty outpouring of the Spirit of God continued upon the congregation . . . From the best accounts we could receive afterwards, upwards of fifty were awakened and brought to the knowledge of a pardoning God that day; besides many who were enabled to witness that the blood of Jesus had cleansed them from all sin.⁶

This second account points us to the distinguishing elements of the first two generations of Wesleyanism. In the first passage quoted Rankin described a primary religious attitude which above all helped to diminish anxiety: the value of religious practice was that it brought peace, calmness in the face of life and death. The American example shows us something altogether different, a state of passionate fear and ecstasy in which not only the individual but the whole group felt bound for the moment in a common experience in which they believed they had been possessed by supernatural power. The belief that one could make direct contact as a group with supernatural power in a visibly disorienting way, so that other people could see what was going on, was vitally important.

There are many descriptions of such events, and here is another, more individual, from the account which George Shadford (1739–1816), who came from Lincolnshire, gave of his sister's conversion:

About this time [c. 1762], I went to see my sister, near Epworth [in Lincolnshire], to inform her what the Lord had done for my soul. At first when I conversed with her she thought that I was out of my mind; but at length she hearkened to me. She told me a remarkable dream she had some time before, in which she had been warned to lay aside the vain practice of cardplaying, which she had been fond of. After I had returned home, she began to revolve in her mind what I had

said; and thought, 'How can my brother have any view to deceive me? What interest can he have in so doing? Certainly my state is worse than I imagine. He sees my danger, and I do not . . .' She therefore could not rest until she came to my father's house; and before she returned, was thoroughly convinced she was a miserable sinner. In a short time I visited her again, and asked her to go to hear Samuel Meggitt preach. She heard him with great satisfaction. Afterwards there was a lovefeast, and she being desirous to stay, at my request, was admitted. As the people were singing a hymn on Christ's coming to judgement, she looked up, and saw all the people singing with a smile upon their countenance. She thought, 'If Christ were to come in judgement now, I shall go to hell, and they will all go to heaven.' Instantly she sunk down as if she were dying, and lay some time before she was able to walk home. She continued praying and waiting upon God for about a fortnight; when one day going to the well to fetch water (like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well) she found the God of Jacob open to her thirsty soul his love, as a well of water springing up within her unto everlasting life; and as she returned from the well her soul magnified the Lord, and her spirit rejoiced in God her saviour.⁷

The final sentence, which runs together references to Jacob, Jesus, Mary and the Psalms, works in a preaching style to authenticate the woman's experience by identifying it with biblical categories. It is not so much a description as a translation. Like the Samaritan woman, Shadford's sister at first does not recognise the Messiah, but then she feels the springing up of everlasting life in her soul and, like Mary, she is obedient. This actually tells us very little about what may or may not have happened, except for the suggestion that the symbolism of drawing water from her local well played a part. In the whole story of her 'conversion', however, one gets further glimpses of the background. In a familiar formula, the woman has already had a warning dream before her brother comes to her, and the playing cards stand for the society of which pietists disapproved. In the intense communal pressure of the lovefeast (a quarterly meeting of the society, borrowed from

the Moravians, at which everybody consumed plain cake and water), her choice seemed to be narrowed to that between heaven and hell, and no doubt she fainted, took time to recover, and found it difficult to walk home. A fortnight later she was convinced, when alone, that God had forgiven her. In effect, she may have done no more than recover her self-approval, shifted from an Anglican to a Wesleyan religious style, and in doing so accepted that she could not leave the social and family group from which she came for another; but at the same time she had, however briefly, felt herself in contact with what she took to be supernatural power. And if the supernatural power existed, it might be turned to for various kinds of assistance on other occasions.

This is a domestic example of how religious power could be used to change oneself. There is a sense, however, in which the resources offered by religion were being used by those who wanted to protest against the surrounding society. There was not much left of the Levellers' mid seventeenth-century hopes of an abrupt eschatological transformation of society into a communal banquet of peace and love, but in the first generation of Wesleyanism (1740–70) the itinerant preachers felt themselves to be at least the intermittent vehicles of an interventionist power with which they could challenge the local social leadership. The dominance of the gentry and clergy had often been attacked in the previous century, and now they frequently reacted violently against the influx of new religious groups into the countryside and small towns. This was dramatically described in the account John Cennick (1718–55) gave of his adventures as a twenty-three-year-old itinerant in Wiltshire in 1741. Cennick had been brought up an Anglican by parents who had originally been members of the Society of Friends, but between 1735 and the early 1740s he moved through Wesleyanism in Whitefield's direction; he

started a number of societies in a socially disruptive tour of part of Wiltshire, and ended by taking these groups with him into the Moravian Church, which shared his sympathies with predestination.

Cennick recounts how, on 23 June 1741, Howell Harris, with about twenty-four on horseback, went from Brinkworth to Swindon (both then quite small places).⁸ The party was attacked by a mob, which fired guns over their heads, covered them with dust from the highway, and then used an engine to spray them with ditchwater. They returned to Brinkworth. 'This persecution was carried on by Mr Gothard, a leading gentleman of that place, who lent the mob his guns, halbert and engine . . . and himself sat on horseback the whole time laughing.'⁹ The leading gentleman was almost certainly Pleydell Goddard, whose family had held the manor of Swindon since the late sixteenth century, and continued to do so until the middle of the twentieth century. There followed a portent: in a storm 'an oak-tree which stood in a field of Mr Gothard's was split into the finest splinters and scattered all over the field. This seemed to portend somewhat ill.'

When Cennick himself preached at Stratton, a village not far from Swindon, the same mob obtained blood from a butcher to use in the engine, 'because I preach much about the blood of Christ'.

But before I came to Stratton God struck with particular judgements all the authors of this design at once. Mr John and Thomas Violet esqrs, the parson of Stratton and Sylvester Keen a bailiff: all bled at the nose and some at the mouth without ceasing till one of the former fell into dead fits and could not be any more trusted alone. The Minister did not recover until it brought him to the grave, and Sylvester Keen continued to bleed at times at such an extravagant rate that it threw him into a deep decay in which he lingered ten days without having anyone who would come near him because he stunk alive and on March 31 following he died cursing terribly.¹⁰

Whether these events happened exactly as described does not matter, only that Cennick expected them to be believed. They follow a recognisable pattern, and one of the biblical roots of this kind of story may be found in the account given in Acts of the death of Herod:

Upon a set day Herod arrayed himself in royal apparel, and sat on the throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people shouted, saying, The voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten up of worms and gave up the ghost. But the word of God grew and multiplied.

The divine punishment and terrifying death of the atheist, the blasphemer or the tepidly religious became a staple of eighteenth-century religious literature.

In August 1741 Cennick started a meeting-house in Brinkworth which was to have a long history as a Moravian chapel. On 13 August 1741, when he was preaching at Foxham, another of the small places in the area, another mob, led by a Mr Lee, who seems to have been a farmer, attacked them:

But after he had done this several of his best horses died, his swine were bitten by a mad dog, and all things made against him till he was ruined and obliged to abscond. He lived in that house which afterwards fell into the Brethren's hands. The others were tried for horse-stealing, and one of them was hanged and another transported.¹¹

Rankin's mare was as nothing when compared to this mixed bag of horses and swine, nor is there any obvious sympathy for the wretched human being involved, whose ultimate damnation is more or less taken for granted. The final reversal of fortunes was that the farmer's house fell into the hands of the Moravian Brethren themselves.

What these accounts tell us about the Wesleyan and Moravian mind is that the disappearance of Roman Catholicism from wide areas of eighteenth-century English society

did not make it any more difficult for ordinary people to satisfy the needs of primary religion. In the absence of shrines devoted to the Virgin Mary and to local saints, people relied for supernatural intervention on direct invocation of the persons of the Trinity, and especially of the crucified Jesus or the Holy Spirit. As can be seen above, there was no lack of apparent results, or any sense of an absence of supernatural power. The contrast between a Catholic and a Protestant culture, when stated in terms of religious efficacy, has been much exaggerated; the power of producing a visible effect might rather be described as equal. One can discount the view of Maximin Piette that Wesley's career marked the point at which Protestantism began to recognise the weakness of its mistaken theology and to turn back in a Catholic direction: any renewed Protestant vitality could therefore be attributed to a Catholic source.¹²

The climax of the Wiltshire prodigies was still to come. Cennick preached at Stratton on 6 September 1741. Fifty on horseback and fifty on foot went with him from Brinkworth. Gothard and the Swindon mob came again and dispersed the meeting. The party withdrew towards Lineham, but 'our horses were so startled that it was a real mercy we had not been killed, or killed others that were on foot, for we rode thro the midst of the people, for our persecutors whipped them with all their might, while the footpeople to save themselves rushed into the hedges and hid themselves where they could'. Cennick's shoulders were black from the blows for three weeks afterwards. However:

not many days passed, ere, as [Gothard] was riding on the same horse on which he sat laughing to see us abused at Swindon, a servant of his was cleaning the guns which had been fouled in firing at us, that letting one off just as his master rode into the court his horse startled, and by that means he received some inward hurt either from his saddle or from

his fall which in a little while caused his death, and because he died without a will and his relations did not know who should be his heir, he was left unburied till the stench of his corpse was intolerable . . . He left the world in about a fortnight afterwards raving with pain aged about fifty years.¹³

Pleydell Goddard actually died in 1742, when the estate passed to Ambrose Goddard of Box. One need not assume that Goddard's resistance to Cennick sprang from any religious convictions; his actions expressed the reaction of a closed local community to invasion by 'foreigners'. The *Victoria County History* for Wiltshire notes that throughout the eighteenth century Swindon remained closed to Wesleyanism and Non-conformity in general. The first Nonconformist chapel to be opened there was the Newport Street Congregational chapel of 1804. The divine retribution alleged by Cennick had no other effect as far as one can see.

Rankin's claims that Providence had a hand, so to speak, in the accident to his mare, and that one could feel and (in a sense) see the supernatural forces acting in the Wesleyan meeting – ideas echoed in Shadford's story of his sister's premonitory dream, and of her fainting during the lovefeast, together with John Cennick's passionate belief in the willingness of supernatural power to strike at his opposers – help to throw light on the way in which many educated Anglicans reacted to these fresh examples of primary religion. Few of them would have found Rankin's story of a supernatural power which allegedly lamed a mare in order to bring the Rankins together at a critical moment a cause for admiration, while Cennick's view of Goddard's death would have seemed the survival of an unsophisticated moral sense, rather than evidence of a revival of the proper understanding of Christianity. They would have felt equally negative about George Shadford's description of his sister falling to the floor in a kind of a seizure at the Wesleyan

lovefeast, and would not necessarily have agreed that she was reacting to the presence of divine power.

Although Bishop Butler, for example, in his *The Analogy of Religion*,¹⁴ still made the providential pattern of human creation, fall, salvation, and judgement the explanatory theme of human history, his justifying arguments depended on morality, rather than the miraculous. The original revelation of this scheme through scripture and the history of the early Church was certainly (he would have said) authenticated by miracles, but such evidential miracles had ceased to occur; and our later, imperfect human grasp of the divine plan was based on our possession and use of our moral judgement. Butler would have called Rankin an enthusiast, and for Butler the word never quite lost the meaning of someone claiming to be possessed or inspired by a god, a kind of behaviour which should not (he thought) be taken seriously in the eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson defined an enthusiast as ‘one who vainly imagines a private revelation’, and quoted from John Locke’s sceptical criticisms of late seventeenth-century religious pietism in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). Pietism was a Lutheran reform movement which combined an emphasis on ‘rebirth’ (the divine creation of a new person in the old sinner) with the idea of setting up local societies of the reborn within the wider Church.

All three Anglicans mentioned above shared the view that it was rash, not to say irrational, to suppose that one could detect evidence of what Butler called the invisible government which Christ at present exercised over his Church. It was generally observed, he said, ‘that human creatures are liable to be deceived from enthusiasm in religion, and principles equivalent to enthusiasm in common matters, [here the implied criticism was of secular, political fanaticism] and in both, from negligence’.¹⁵ Religion in its primary sense, a passionate

longing for power to transform both the individual and society, had flourished in Europe in the seventeenth century, disastrously. Now, revulsion at what had happened in the past persuaded an intellectual minority, stretching from the deists through liberal Anglicans to commonsense lawyers, that they ought to try to reduce the plausibility of the primary belief in visibly interventionist supernatural forces. Witchcraft, the darkest manifestation of invisible power, and Wesleyanism, which taught men and women to believe they were filled with the Holy Spirit, became equally suspect. This means that while liberal Anglicans in particular also trusted in what seemed to them a benevolent, beautifully designed universe, part of the ground of their faith was that they no longer felt obliged to believe in the kind of detailed supernatural intervention in the details of the common life which fascinated Rankin. How widespread this attitude became can be seen in an essay by the Dissenting philosopher Joseph Priestley, when he commented on David Hume's statement that there was a gloom and melancholy remarkable in all devout people. Priestley replied that what Hume must have seen was 'some miserably low superstition, or wild enthusiasm, things very remote from the calm and sedate, but cheerful spirit of rational devotion'.¹⁶

What was happening in the early eighteenth century was the partial replacement of an official form of Anglicanism, which had itself developed as a protest against the excesses of a seventeenth-century mixture of religion and politics, by a new expression of primary religion, which eschewed political power and was indifferent to the decline of Dissent, but which also found moderate Anglicanism unresponsive and sought religious forms which took seriously the demand for supernatural empowerment. The early attraction of this new Wesleyan (and initially Anglican) type was that it seemed to be more efficient in calling down supernatural power into the

individual's situation. This stress on the individual's immediate satisfaction, in either material or spiritual ways, however modified by theological references, was the point of similarity between the Protestant recovery and the enlightened side of eighteenth-century culture.

This leads us to a further discussion of how primary religion became so prominent in the early eighteenth century. England was then still recovering from the seventeenth-century Civil War and from the long conflicts engendered by Louis XIV's efforts to dominate Europe. European and English Protestantism had survived politically on the field of battle, but was deeply scarred socially and emotionally, both by the rejection of Roman Catholicism and by the conflict between the internal varieties of Protestantism. Primary religious energy had become detached from the main drive of the official forms of Protestantism towards theological self-confidence and social power. In such circumstances one might expect new religious groups to form, less hostile to primary religion, and offering to change the present drastically. Adventist cults had appeared and disappeared throughout the seventeenth century and were visible again at the beginning of the eighteenth. Magic, superstition, prayer, group rituals of various kinds, a search for personal transformation, all interacted to create a lively expectation of the marvellous.

There is much, therefore, to be said against describing what took place on the English religious scene in the first half of the eighteenth century as an evangelical revival, a Christian institutional recovery prompted by the Holy Spirit and involving the recovery of theological preaching of a purer, primitive form of the gospel. This view is part of a conscious, quasi-political desire to provide the evangelicalism of the twenty-first century with a history which may supersede the Catholic and Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic

versions of the growth and consolidation of the modern Church. Primary religious behaviour does not revive in this technical, theological sense, because, as far as one can see, it does not decline in the first place. At the present time various kinds of fundamentalism, Catholic and Protestant, flourish precisely because they keep close to the primary energies of religion, offering both excitement and power.

The so-called decline of religion is a concept which makes better sense when applied statistically to institutional, professionalised religion. (By professionalised I mean movements which have created a distinct gap between the professional priest or preacher and the laity.) There was, for example, a fall in the number of professional pastors and priests of the traditional Christian type in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, but that is not necessarily a sign of the decline of religion. The missing professionals have been amply replaced by other kinds of carer, healer, spiritual adviser and wonderworker. Primary religion is liberally provided for, and that gives less scope to groups which concentrate on building up the social and political influence of religious institutions. Primary religion, as a search for ways of bringing divine power into the secular, human condition, seems to be constant: what changes is the relationship between the search and its historical context. There the underlying impulses do seem to gain or lose in self-confidence, in their willingness to be publicly recognised, as well as in their ability to gain public acceptance. In the eighteenth century the Wesleys and their itinerants to some extent restored the freedom of primary religion to be itself in a Protestant context. Examples of healing, prophecy, personal protection, special providences and ecstasy occurred in the Wesleyan societies for a long time and were only very slowly squeezed out in the course of the nineteenth century.

It is in this context that one should approach the problems presented by the growth of eighteenth-century Wesleyanism. English religious life in the eighteenth century did not consist of Christianity, made up of a hegemonic Anglicanism, together with subsidiary groups of Dissenters and Roman Catholics, while on the less well-documented fringes of society there was popular religion, which survived chiefly among agricultural workers and had no importance. As I have already suggested, this description overemphasises the traditional view that an evangelical revival began in the 1730s because a small group of men returned to the primitive faith of Christianity and evoked a fervent response in a largely unconverted population. This was John Wesley's own view of what had happened: for example, he told the Leeds Conference in 1766 that:

in November 1738, two or three persons who desired to flee from the wrath to come, and then seven or eight more, came to me in London and desired me to advise them. I said, 'if you will meet me on Thursday night, I will help you as well as I can'. More and more then desired to meet with them, till they were increased to many hundreds. The case was afterwards the same at Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle, and many other parts of England, Scotland and Ireland.¹⁷

In this particular instance Wesley reduced the causation to the work of the Holy Spirit, which impelled people to look for salvation, and to his own role, as being able to tell them what they should do. To these incidents Wesley ascribed his absolute power to appoint when, where and how the societies should meet, and to remove those whose lives showed they had no desire to flee from the wrath to come.

The strong element of primary religion in the first generation of Wesleyanism, from about 1740 to 1770, meant that the steady growth of a new religious organisation had for some time only slight sociopolitical consequences. The early Wesleyan societies were unconcerned about their possible

political form or significance. Down to the 1770s the English political elites were involved in extending the overseas empire, cultivating their self-esteem, and increasing their wealth and standing in an aristocratic, hierarchical society. As part of this programme they wanted to maintain the religious arrangements an earlier generation had put in place in the 1690s; these guaranteed the position of Anglicanism as the official form of Christianity, left space for legal but hardly free Dissent, and reduced direct persecution of Roman Catholics to a minimum. This system could, accidentally and at the official level, accommodate the Wesleyan societies, provided they were both Protestant and respectable. The choice remained with the Wesleyans, who were most conscious of occasional ferocious local, often rural, Anglican opposition to their appearance in fresh areas. The country was still recovering from the strains of the previous century and an unpredictable local instability sometimes culminated in violence, in which the agitators seem to have been as likely to label the intruding Wesleyans Roman Catholics as Dissenters. Certainly the grounds for violence were normally that the Wesleyans (or the Moravians in Wiltshire in the 1740s) were not what they claimed to be, and that their real identity threatened a precarious social stability. In 1745, during the Jacobite invasion of England, when choice and loyalty mattered greatly, John Wesley himself, emotionally tied to the Hanoverian succession, openly backed the status quo. Even Jonathan Clark, who contrived a moving fiction of Samuel Johnson as a possible youthful Jacobite sympathiser, would not convince us that Wesley came out for the Young Pretender.¹⁸ Wesley's campaign to push Protestantism deeper into Irish Roman Catholic society could have had immense political repercussions, but years of preaching had little result.¹⁹ Quite apart from the otherness of Ireland, which Wesley suspected but

never properly understood, primary religion was already too deeply embedded in Irish Catholicism to need the outlet of Wesleyanism.

By the 1770s the Wesleyan societies of the second generation were beginning to form a denomination, in which some of the emerging body of semi-professional itinerants, who were full-time preachers entirely dependent on John Wesley, were seeking greater official standing. The older group of Anglican Wesleyan leaders (especially Charles Wesley) had at first been deeply affected by their exposure to primary religious energies, and had been carried along by the idea of a self-sustaining, reforming movement, but in their hearts they felt that such a movement had to find a way of coming to rest. They had no enthusiasm for maintaining a separate institution. They wanted what had happened to be accepted by the Church of England authorities and to be gently enfolded within the established system. Even as late as 1775, for example, the not oversophisticated John Fletcher, an Anglican clergyman whose background was Swiss, still thought that Wesleyanism was a movement meant to leaven the established Churches of England and Scotland; he wanted Wesley to approach the Anglican bishops with a request that they ordain selected Wesleyan itinerants, who would bring the societies into close association with the Church of England. What was beginning to work here was a horrified sense of form which found primary religion unbearable. Fletcher, though deeply loyal to Wesley at the level of abstract theology, would not itinerate, but concentrated on his own parish. Fletcher's Methodist Church of England would have defended the Establishment, or an idealised image of it, against Dissent. The new Wesleyan structure he favoured would have had revised Articles and a corrected Liturgy, though the changes proposed did not suggest any theological novelties.

Why any of those concerned should have supposed that the Anglican episcopate would consider plans of this kind is a puzzle, though a certain self-importance, and a desire for improved status in a few cases, probably played a part. To Anglican observers the difference between the Establishment and Wesleyanism was far greater than it seemed either in Fletcher's Shropshire country parish or in Wesley's chapel in the City Road, on the outskirts of the City of London.

There does seem to have been a gradual Wesleyan shift away from contact with primary religion in the second generation of the movement (1770–1800). In the 1770s and early 1780s Wesleyanism had still not settled on its future; the history of local Wesleyan societies suggests that in many cases the principal development came when John Wesley was either very old or dead. What followed differed from what had been the case in the earlier period. Wesley's death in 1791 meant that decisions about continuity could no longer be put off, and that the drive of the itinerants for some kind of ministerial status and authority could no longer be resisted. In the wider society, amid the alarm caused by the French Revolution, moderate evangelical Calvinism was on the brink of an official recognition in the established Church which would enable it to grow into a major ecclesiastical party in the course of the nineteenth century. Wesleyanism made a renewed attempt from the 1790s to throw off anything which would identify the new 'Connexion' with the Dissenting past, and therefore with the turbulent state of the rural and urban working class during and after the French wars.

This did not imply disloyalty to the Wesleyan past. The movement had never responded to the condition of the poor in a political manner. Wesley, like many others, had deplored poverty and encouraged charity; he preached to the disadvantaged, who would listen to him, rather than to the

rich, who seldom interested themselves for long in what he said. Eighteenth-century primary religion, whatever its social background, restricted itself politically to a vaguely delineated apocalypticism. There were the French Prophets at the start of the century;²⁰ there was the wild excitement which transformed the Lisbon earthquake of 1760 into a direct divine threat to London; and there was the wider adventist movement which was stimulated by the French Revolution. Powerful biblical images were briefly charged with primary religious emotion: people were attracted to or horrified by the possibility of a decisive divine intervention which would cancel life's problems and profits at a stroke. But the apocalyptic pictures were aesthetic rather than political; they formed part of the official as well as of the popular stock of Christianity; they illustrated the way that the endgame would go, but they had no lasting political message or effect. At the time of the Lisbon disaster the thought of an apocalypse could still thrill and frighten crowds in a major city like London, but the consequences were no more political than moral. In the twentieth century Orson Welles, in a radio broadcast, had to invoke a Martian invasion to terrify sections of New York's population in a similarly satisfying manner, but New York did not change as a result of the excitement. Such fantasies have too little grip on what people want to flourish for much longer than a firework fiesta.

Indeed, John Wesley's own view of the future was essentially cheerful: in 'The Spread of the Gospel' (1783) and 'The Signs of the Time', a sermon preached as late as 1787, he described Wesleyanism as having started a process of conversion which would spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another, until the world was leavened – leaven being one of the New Testament images of the kingdom of God.²¹ This was the closest he came, though he put it in eschatological, and therefore

primary, terms, to the benevolent view of creation which appealed widely during the Enlightenment.

The conservative shift of eighteenth-century Wesleyanism stranded a few small, usually urban, Methodist groups which had become attached to radical politics, and were therefore seen in official Wesleyan circles in the 1790s as promoting subversive attitudes. The Wesleyan itinerants did not want Wesleyanism pulled in the direction of Dissent, which was still suffering from the belief of the Anglican elites that Dissent regarded the French Revolution as a natural extension of the democratic and righteous spirit of the American rebellion. From the 1790s onwards any kind of strong external social or political stimulus tended to produce a split in Wesleyanism. This destructive process culminated in the Wesleyan breakdown and institutional divisions of 1849, after which the new United Methodist Free Church and the larger Primitive Methodist Connexion moved in the direction of the radical wing of the Liberal Party, leaving Wesleyan Methodism in the political and religious centre. Neither the Methodist Free Church nor the Wesleyans proper remained closely in touch with what I have called primary religious anxieties and activities, though these may still have been found among the Primitive Methodists in rural areas such as East Anglia as late as the 1880s. In these general terms, Wesleyanism's internal divisions meant that a powerful but somehow impoverished new denomination drifted in the direction of an equally divided Church of England.