Agnes Bulmer: Poet of Methodist Experience

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Agnes Collinson Bulmer was born on August 31, 1775 in London, the third daughter of Edward and Elizabeth Collinson of Lombard Street. Her father was an early convert to Methodism while Elizabeth Collinson's parents were themselves Methodists and friends of Wesley (Stevenson 497). Edward Collinson was one of the trustees of the prestigious City Road Chapel and a prosperous London tinman and ironmonger (Stevenson 250, 497). He and Elizabeth were personal friends of John and Charles Wesley and the young Agnes was baptized by John and received her first class ticket from him in December 1789. She was placed in Hester Ann Rogers' class in the City Road society, where she would remain a member for the rest of her life. Like most London Methodists of this time, however, the Collinsons were also faithful adherents to the Church of England – a practice that Agnes never fully gave up over the course of her life. As her friend and later editor William Bunting put it, the Collinsons were “equally allied, like most of the first followers of Mr. Wesley, to the established Church of England, and to the Society of ‘people called Methodists’” (Letters v), and the two were not seen as mutually exclusive. Also in common with a growing number of London Methodists, the Collinsons were decidedly middle class and the young Collinson girls appear to have received what was, by the standards of the age, an excellent education. This, combined with her natural curiosity, led the young Agnes Bulmer to read widely and voraciously, a practice that she would continue over the course of her life.

By the age of twelve, Bulmer was reading Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, a favorite of Wesley and evangelicals more generally, and this work was to have a tremendous influence on her own poetry. In 1788, at the age of fourteen, Bulmer published her first poem, “On the Death of Charles Wesley,” in the *Arminian Magazine*:

Ah happy man! thy griefs are passed away;
    Thy struggling soul to heaven has took its flight:
To bliss eternal winged its wondrous way,
    And safety lodged in realms of pure delight

Summoned by God to join the heavenly band,
    And dwell with Him in everlasting rest
Thou now art happy in Immanuel's land,
    Where grief and pain shall never more molest.

But ah! how many will thy loss deplore?
    Unmindful that 'tis eternal gain;
They mourn their Friend so quickly gone before,
    Forgetting he is gone from toil and pain:

Forget the he is gone to joys on high,
    And join the angelic hosts in heavenly lays
Far, far above yon bright ethereal sky
    To aid the concert of eternal praise.

And now for every pang he felt below,
    His soul receives a full, and sure reward;
While heavenly joys in streams of glory flow,
    And Jesus crowns him with divine regard.
Then why should Death appear so great a foe?
Why with such terror is the subject fraught?
Since he relieves the just from every woe,
And brings them bliss, beyond the reach of thought! (AM 11:557)

Though the subject is undoubtedly conventional, the execution is of the poem is surprisingly solid, especially for a fourteen year old. Even here we see evidence of a lively intellect at working, already writing about themes that will come to occupy her adult life – Christian service, pain, death, and the purpose of human life on earth. The poem is all the more interesting in that Bulmer is eulogizing a poet whose role as religious bard she herself would most fully carry on into the nineteenth century. John Wesley sent the young Agnes Collinson a personal note thanking her for this poem and cautioning the prodigiously talented child to “Beware of pride; beware of flattery; suffer none to commend you to your face; remember, one good temper is of more value, in the sight of God, than a thousand good verses. All you want is to have the mind that was in Christ, and to walk as Christ walked.” It was characteristic Wesley, but the simple fact that he took the time to respond to verses from a child indicates that he was impressed by the young woman's talent and promise.

The young Bulmer continued to write poetry even as she became more and more involved with the Methodist society at City Road. She was a member of Hester Ann Rogers class and during this time came to know the older Elizabeth Richie Mortimer, whose biography she would later author, and Sally Wesley, Charles Wesley's only daughter. These three women were at least fifteen years older than Bulmer and very close to John Wesley. In fact, all three of these women attended Wesley at his death in 1791. Upon Hester Ann Rogers' untimely death in 1793, Bulmer wrote an elegy titled Thoughts on a Future State, which was published with the 1794 edition of Rogers' famous Account. Like her “Lines on the Death of Charles Wesley,” Bulmer once again takes up the subject of death and what happens to a Christian after death. In the Methodist tradition death was an especially important event as it provided an opportunity for the dying individual to testify of his or her faith to the end. Thus accounts of “holy dyings” in the Ars moriendi tradition abound in literature by Methodists and Bulmer's poetic take is particularly powerful.

In 1793, at the age of eighteen, Agnes Collinson married Joseph Bulmer, a London merchant and warehouseman who was also a member of the Methodist society. Joseph Bulmer was born at Rothwell, near Leeds, on May 16, 1761. Though his mother was religious, she died when he was nine and it is unclear whether she was a Methodist or not. He grew up in Leeds, where he served and apprenticeship, and early on came to associate with the Methodists there. In 1780 he moved to London where he apparently became quite prosperous (Joseph Bulmer 818). His influence within London Methodism is evidenced by the fact that over the course of his life he served as the treasurer and one of the stewards of the important City Road Chapel, London Circuit Treasurer, Treasurer of the Methodist Missionary Auxiliary Society for the London District, General Treasurer of the Children's Fund, a member of the Preachers' Friend Society along with several other non-Methodist charities (819). All of these positions would have been bestowed on him not only because of his commitment to Methodism, but also due to his success in business affairs and management of money. In fact Joseph Bulmer is regularly listed in the Methodist Magazines of the time period as a major donor to causes like the Children's Fund and Missionary Auxiliary Society. For example, the April 1839 issue of the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine lists Bulmer's legacy to the Missionary Society at nearly 200 pounds (351). Clearly Agnes had come from the middle class and married into the middle class.

Agnes Bulmer and the Shifting Character of London Methodism

That the Bulmers were undoubtedly part of a very middle class, conforming version of Methodism is reflected in the fact that they quickly became friends with many of the leading lights of the second generation Methodists. As early as the autumn of 1795, Bulmer became acquainted with Dr. Adam Clarke (1760-1832), the prominent Methodist theologian, author of an influential Commentary on the Whole Bible and President of the Methodist Conference. His daughter, Anna Rowley, describes the meeting over forty years later:

She was then in the twenty-first year of her age; and, I have heard my mother say, was one of the most interesting young women she ever met with. I recollect her narrating to me her earliest impression respecting Mrs. Bulmer, in the following words: – “The first time I saw her was in the old chapel at Spitalfields; and so strong was the feeling on my mind towards her, that I could not help, at the close of the service, inquiring who the young lady was to whom I had felt so irresistible an attraction.” This was introduction enough. When they met on the next day they felt that they were not strangers. My father was equally pleased with her; and at that hour commenced a friendship which, built upon the only sure foundation, proved so strong, so rational, and so abiding, as to brace unharmed the varied trials of nearly forty years. (Rowley 804)

This meeting was the beginning of an intellectual friendship that lasted until Clarke’s death. He once commented that “That woman astonishes me. She takes in information just as a sponge absorbs water. The nature of the subject seems to make little difference; for whether it be philosophy, history, or theology, she seizes upon it, and makes it all her own” (Rowley 804). Clarke and Bulmer frequently exchanged books with one another and sent each other lengthy letters discussing philosophy, theology, and history.

Also included in this circle of friends was Richard Watson, another important Methodist theologian and President of the Conference; Joseph Benson, the editor of the Methodist Magazine; Jabez Bunting, the de facto leader of Methodism for much of the early nineteenth century; and William M. Bunting, his son. As William Bunting wrote in his introduction to Bulmer's published Letters, she was notable in this circle for her:

keen, irrepressible, and, if we might so say, passionate intellectuality; a thirst for all truth, fully as evident as was her pleasure in imparting
Clearly Agnes Bulmer was the intellectual equal of these important men. She could, and did, stand up to them in conversation and arguments on all subjects. As another member of this circle remarked years later in a reminiscence in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, “In discussion she was a match for men like Adam Clarke, Jabez Bunting, and Richard Watson; her forte being the resolute insistence on precision and consistency. ‘Define your terms, Sir,’ she would say to any one who tried to draw her into an argument” (Gregory 850). This clear, lively, and precise type of thinking is evident in her letters, both to these men and others. While many spiritual letters written during this time by Methodist women tended to be full of platitudes and common Methodist truisms, Bulmer’s are alive with a clever and searching intellect, always seeking to analyze a situation or argument and provide clear and cogent thoughts on the matter at hand.

On the other hand, though most of her male contemporaries seem to have viewed Bulmer as their intellectual equal, every one of her biographers felt the need to qualify this fact by playing up her “feminine” and “domestic” qualities, often immediately after praising her “masculine” intellect. William Bunting is perhaps the worst offender for, after offering the effusive praise of her intellect quoted above he goes on to remark that “These qualities... were set off by a most feminine delicacy of sentiment, yet suavity and charmness of demeanour; by a cheerfulness, soft, quiet, and lambent as the fire-shine on the hearth around which we met her... and by the utmost shrinking, in practice and in taste, from all the airs and annoyances of a teaching or a talking female” (xxv). Elsewhere he comments on her “masculine robustness of intellect, with none of the affection of masculine manners” (xiv). Clearly Agnes Bulmer is an exceptional woman, but she is chiefly exceptional (in Bunting’s mind) for the skillful way she blends feminine grace and sociable conversation around the hearth with a “masculine” intellect which is at the same time not threatening because she seems so “feminine,” according to the standards of the age.

This might be expected of Bunting, but similar sentiments are found in memoirs by both of Bulmer’s female biographers. Anna Rowley, for example, comments that “as a wife, her wisdom and influence were so exercised as to contribute in every respect to the honour and comfort of her husband” (807), while Anne Collinson lauds the way her sister balanced intellect pursuit and domestic duty:

> With a heart capable of the warmest affection, she possessed an uncommon degree of prudence, and employed the great influence which she had over him, for the best of purposes, and was truly his fellow-helper in the road to Zion. If she had a wish to shine, it was in his sight; and he in his turn felt proud and delighted at her intelligent and unassuming manners. A new sphere of duties and employments being thus opened to her, she assiduously applied herself to move regularly in it, and never permitted her love of study to intrench on the peculiar duties of her sex. Her household arrangements evinced her well-disciplined mind; – every thing was in order, and she herself was never in a hurry, though always employed (8-9).

Here as well is a separate “sphere of duties” that Bulmer was meant to balance with her scholarly activities. Collinson thinks it is vital to point out that, though he sister excelled as an intellectual she never let this get in the way of her “domestic duties,” and as late as 1889 Annie Keeling felt it necessary to remark that “The careful heed with which she fulfilled every domestic duty, interfered neither with her intellectual nor her spiritual progress” (151). These comments are especially difficult to square with Bulmer’s role as a very public Methodist author and intellectual. Though it is clear that others want to frame her as a domestic paragon of virtue who wrote on the side, it is far from clear that Bulmer viewed herself this way. Though it is perfectly clear that she loved her husband deeply and took pleasure in working with him, no writing of her own has survived that would indicate she saw a tension between intellectual and wife – in all likelihood she saw the two vocations as perfectly compatible.

This tension between Bulmer’s roles as public intellectual and author, on the one hand, and wife, on the other, is indicative of a larger struggle over women’s roles in Methodism during the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the death of John Wesley in 1791 intense battles were also fought within Methodism, especially over the issue of women’s preaching. Though, as we have seen, Wesley clearly sanctioned women’s preaching on the grounds of an “extraordinary call,” issued Sarah Mallit with a license to preach, and actively supported the independent work of women like Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, Sarah Ryan, and Sarah Crosby, his was always a minority opinion within the movement. Even his support was qualified and, with his death, women preachers lost their most powerful defender. The Methodist Conference (made up entirely of men) moved quickly to circumscribe this activity by first discouraging women’s preaching and then by outright banning in 1803. Often prominent women preachers like Sarah Mallit, Mary Barritt Taft, and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher simply ignored this prohibition and, often with the complicity of their circuit leaders, continued to preach well into the 1840’s. Likewise women’s preaching was common in the Primitive Methodist Connection. However the attitude of the Methodist leadership was clear and as the century progressed the roles for Methodist women became increasingly limited to the instruction of other women and children and visiting the sick and dying or what were considered “proper” domestic roles. The London “Church Methodism” of City Road Chapel would have thus been far more inclined than East Anglian Methodism (where Sarah Mallit preached) to embrace prohibitions on women’s preaching activities. I all of this Adam Clarke’s own *Commentary* played an influential role in that it codified many of the restrictions on women’s ministry and relegated them to the domestic sphere through conservative interpretations of disputed Biblical passages.

Furthermore, the focus on domesticity and sociability in these comments about Bulmer indicate the extent to which Methodist sociability itself, especially in London, was changing. Whereas during the early days of Methodism sociability had been largely defined by the single-sex class and band structure, in the London Methodism of the early nineteenth century this was fast becoming a relic of the past. Though the structure still existed...
That we can greet this morning with a song,
Say, my loved friend, what happiness is ours,
To be the cords of bondage to their souls;-
The bands design's for comfort, peace, and love,
While others, stung by disappointment, feel
Exposed to all the beatings of the storm;-
Like lonely trees upon a blasted heath,
The cheering aid of Friendship's social power,
In single solitude, without the aid,
While some are doom’d to bear the load of life
In single solitude, without the aid,
The cheering aid of Friendship's social power,
Like lonely trees upon a blasted heath,
Exposed to all the beatings of the storm;-
While others, stung by disappointment, feel
The bands design's for comfort, peace, and love,
To be the cords of bondage to their souls;-
Say, my loved friend, what happiness is ours,
That we can greet this morning with a song,
A song of praise, to that all-gracious Power,
Who in the counsels of his matchless love,
First form'd our union, and then kindly join'd
our hearts and hands by his own sacred ties!
Obtaining strength by him as years increased,
More and more firmly have our souls been bound;
And spared by grace, this ninth revolving morn
Finds us more join'd in cordial, constant love,
Than we first before the altar bow'd.

Hail! welcome morn! thy glad approach we greet,
And bless the as the happiest of our lives.
Still may thy sun rise cloudless; and the years
That yet may roll their courses o'er our heads,
Increase, mature, and sanctify our love.
While, as we travel o'er life's varied path,
Upheld by mutual tenderness, we rise
Above the storms that sometimes cross this way,
And, by participation sweet, receive
A richer pleasure from its brightest scenes;
While humble gratitude, with careful eyes,
Noting the boundless gifts of Love Divine,
Leads us together to the mount of praise,
To adore the Author of our numerous joys.

For Bulmer marriage is a means through which God empowers men and women to serve him better in the world. It is God who “First form'd our union, and then kindly join'd / our hearts and hands by his own sacred ties! / Obtaining strength by him as years increased,” and it is God who makes them more useful together than they could be one their own. Though, as we will see, others tried to paint Bulmer's marriage as the ideal of a Christian woman's submission to her husband it is clear from this poem and others like it that Bulmer saw her marriage as more of a partnership in Christ. This also represents a distinct shift in how Methodist women viewed marriage. Whereas before a woman like Sarah Ryan or Sarah Crosby could travel and preach by themselves and saw no problem with it, increasingly roles for women were defined by marriage. Though widows like Sarah Mallit in fact outlived Bulmer, they were increasingly a dying breed, especially after the prohibition on women's preaching in 1803. If women were to find a role within Methodism it was increasingly within a domestic space – though women like Agnes Bulmer continued to trouble this dynamic.

Between 1793 and 1822 Bulmer was mainly employed in the regular activities of a middle class Methodist woman who was under no obligation to work. She was a Class-Leader at the City Road Chapel, visited the sick, dying, and poor, and spent much of her time writing. She also participated in a weekly Ladies Working Society which, in addition to discussing religious subjects, made garments for the assistance of the poor (Stevenson 190).

Her friend Anna Rowley notes that Bulmer was “naturally retiring and timid,” and thus “had great difficulties to overcome in the performance of those duties which brought her at all into contact with other persons; yet for many years she employed herself in various departments of public usefulness” (808). Her sister confirms this, remarking that she was “not only a contemplative, she was also an active Christian” and that:

For above thirty years she was a Class-Leader among the Wesleyan Methodists in London, and deeply felt the responsibility of the situation she filled. Those can best appreciate the value of her advice who enjoyed its advantages in those religious meetings, which, to use her own expression, “provide for the minuteness of individual instruction, and adapt themselves to that variety of experience which as distinctly marks the spiritual as it does the intellectual or material man.” (74).

This work as a class leader also extended into her publishing activities during this period, in which she published poems and essays to both the Methodist and Youth’s Magazines and began publication of her Scripture Histories, adaptations of Bible stories for the use of children (Collinson 27). Though intended for the young, Scripture Histories are in many ways prose studies of the Biblical episodes that she would later render in poetic form in Messiah's Kingdom. The fact that she wrote them for a younger audience, however, indicates both that she was (like Hannah More) alive to the need for good children's instructional literature and at the same time being pigeonholed into teaching only women and the young – the proper role for pious women. That the Scripture Histories are in many ways theologically sophisticated is only one further evidence of the way Bulmer was able to use a genre that was open to her as a means of opening a space for scholarly women.

On July 23, 1822 Joseph Bulmer died after a long illness and two years later her mother followed him. This was a deep period of grief for Bulmer which she expressed primarily through poetry that not only acted as an outlet for her grief, but also framed the deaths in light of the Methodist hope of an after-life. Especially poignant is her Memoir of a Lyre Resumed: or A Requiem at the Tomb of a Beloved Friend, and Songs in the Night of Affliction, which beautifully capture her feelings following her loss. One in particular, “Pensive Musings Composed on a Journey, July 1823” is evocative of the type of synthesis between emotion and piety that characterizes her poems. Writing almost a year after her husband's death, she uses
nature as a canvass upon which the express her feelings – a technique that she will later master in Messiah’s Kingdom. She does not shy away from exhibiting sorrow, in fact she embraces her grief in a way that is unusual for an evangelical poet – telegraphing it onto the landscape before moving on to describe memories with the absent loved one that mirror her current surroundings. Death is a very real presence in this poem and though, by the end she is looking forward to a reunification in heaven, the separation is very real and very felt.

In 1835 Bulmer turned to another genre, publishing the Memoirs of Elizabeth Mortimer, which memorialized the Methodist “mother in Israel” who had been a close friend of John Wesley’s and a long-time member of the City Road Congregation. Bulmer befriended the older woman and from her learned about the early days of Methodism. The Memoirs is unique in that it is one of the few biographies of an early Methodist woman written by a woman and it would go on to become Bulmer’s most famous and most published book on both sides of the Atlantic. It is also notable for its Introduction, which clearly lays out a theory Christian biography, calling it “a treasure of no ordinary value; [which]… applies the proper test to principles; and calls forth experience to vouch for truth” (12). This appeal to experience to vouch for truth was uniquely Methodist. Here Bulmer applies Wesley’s experiential theology to the subject of biography – working from the empirical details of experience upwards to the higher truths of religion. It is this process that sets the Memoirs apart from other account of holy women, including the Memoir written about her by her sister. By applying experiential theology to her work Bulmer is able to eschew simple hagiography and construct a picture of Elizabeth Mortimer that, while biased, nevertheless serves the interest of a larger truth.

However it was her epic, Messiah’s Kingdom, that Bulmer likely considered her most important work. Published in 1833 by Rivington, Messiah’s Kingdom was the result of over nine years of work begun during her early widowhood and represented the culmination of all her religious and poetic interests. Spanning twelve long books, its scope is tremendous, beginning (like Milton) with the fall of man and proceeding through the major events of the Old and New Testaments, the establishment of the Church, the Reformation, and up to the establishment of the British empire (which Bulmer views as God-ordained, especially in its missionary endeavors), and the evangelical fight against slavery and other social ills. As Bulmer herself expressed it, the main purpose of the work was to delineate the evangelical salvation message as presented in the grand narrative of scripture:

The work is not a poetical version of Scripture History; a development of the great scheme of human salvation, through a Divine Incarnate Redeemer. This, from its first announcement to its final consummation, is pursued through its various forms of manifestation, – in the Patriarchal, Levitical, Prophetic, and Christian Revelations. And the great moral of the poem is, (as the in the first book enunciated,) “Propitiation through sacrificial blood; typically, at first, under the introductory dispensations by the blood of slain beasts; and finally, and really, by the offering up of the great Antitype, “The Lamb who taketh away the sins of the world.” In the prosecution of this great subject my line of order has been to follow the course of its development in the Sacred Scriptures, – the spring-head of my inspiration; and time, place, and circumstance have been subordinated to this primary design (Collinson 103).

Its overriding theme is thus the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth, first through his redemptive work on the cross and then through the actions of the individual Christian in society.

By any account this was a monumental achievement – running to over 14,000 lines, it is certainly one of the longest poems of the nineteenth century and perhaps the longest poem ever written by a woman. It was the work of her widowhood and, as she put it, represented the role poetry played in her life, especially during seasons of affliction:

I am under more than common obligations to that gentle art, which almost in childhood taught me to give expression to thoughts and feelings unconnected with a merely sensitive world, and which otherwise might not have been seriously cherished; and I owe much also to its soothing influence in seasons of deep sorrow, when I was enabled to resort to it as an alleviating and refreshing occupation, during days and years of pensive and almost melancholy depression (Collinson 118-119).

It is impossible to treat the poem holistically in this space – however I have attempted to outline some of its major themes here and you can read the full text of the poem beginning here.

Agnes Bulmer died suddenly on August 20, 1836, just shy of her sixty-second birthday and exactly ten months before the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne. She had traveled to the Isle of Wight with several family members in the middle of August when she fell ill of an unknown complaint – several days later she was dead. Her funeral sermon was preached by her friend, the Rev. William M. Bunting, son of Jabez Bunting, President of the Methodist Conference and she was interred next to Bunting at the burial ground of the City Road Chapel, of which she had been a member her entire life. Her epitaph reads: “The sweet remembrance of the just / Shall flourish when he sleeps in dust” (Stevenson 498) and her obituary in the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine remarked, “Of retiring and modest habits, her mind, nevertheless, was well cultivated, and calmly elegant…. Even the list of those English females who have done honour to their sex, loses nothing of its luster by having her name inscribed on it” (15:807). Her works continued to be published long after her death and her one hymn, “Hymn for the Ancoats’ Methodist Chapel,” was a part of the Methodist Hymnbook well into the twentieth century. Its third stanza perfectly encapsulates her life and work:

We, like Jesse’s son, would raise
A temple to the Lord;
Sound throughout its courts His praise,
His saving name record;
Dedicate a house to him,
Who, once, in mortal weakness shrined,
Sorrow'd, suffer'd, to redeem,
To rescue all mankind.

References and Additional Resources

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Writing

*Posted on January 26, 2012 | 2 comments*

One evening I was much drawn out in prayer, and received a blessed visit from my Lord, and Master! My soul seemed to be filled with the love of God. Another night I walked out to praise the Lord. The night was beautiful and clear; the stars seemed as so many seraphs, shining forth their Maker’s praise, and I saw a beauty in the whole creation. The very air seemed to breathe sweetness, and my soul glowed with love divine! As I was looking up to heaven, praising my great Creator, I felt that my sins were forgiven. At this my soul was wonderfully transported.
First published in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1787, it is easy to become captivated by the raw spirituality and genuine piety on display in Rachel Bruff's conversion narrative. Following the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative form, Bruff lays out what her life was like before her involvement with the Methodists and the ways in which this experience with God wrought in her sense of self and orientation toward the world. I have written elsewhere about how these spiritual experiences came to define a new sense of subjectivity for evangelical women, how they incorporated the conventions of the conversion narrative to suit their spiritual goals, and how these narratives entered and interacted with a vibrant evangelical public sphere. Here, though, I want to engage a different set of questions. Specifically I want to look past the blinding white hot piety of these experiences and ask how these seemingly mystical encounters with the divine were elicited. Upon first glance it may seem as if they spring out of nowhere – but a careful study of the language of these texts reveals that this is simply not the case. Instead, these women engaged in systematic spiritual disciplines, what Wesley termed “means of grace,” that helped elicit spiritual experience. In Rachel Bruff's case, she is engaged in intentional prayer and meditation when she has her experience with the Divine. Instead of an inner act of will eliciting spirituality – external attitude influences internal orientation.

Answering these questions does more than help us understand the nature of women's spiritual experience, however; it also helps us understand how the physical and embodied actions of these women came to shape their subjectivities and in turn their writing. In other words, the question becomes: if women's inner spiritual experience ends up working outward into the world, what is the role of their writing? Does the activity of writing itself act as a form of spiritual discipline that helps elicit spiritual experience? Or is their writing a result of spiritual experience? I will argue that the answer to these questions is that writing in fact operates in both ways. In fact, analysis of the conversion narratives in the *Arminian Magazine* reveals that women's writing participates in a sort of feedback loop of experience, print, orality, and publicity that is both caused by and causes the development of the spiritual subject. In other words, the subjectivity altering spiritual experience is both prior to and dependent upon action – action that is formed by the world of print and the public sphere.

**The Means of Grace and Spiritual Experience**

At least part of the common misapprehension about the separation between outward act and inner experience can be traced to modern assumptions about the nature of spiritual experience that have their very roots in the evangelical revival. Dissatisfied with what they saw as the dead formality of the established churches, revivalists like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards placed an emphasis on directly apprehended spiritual experience and justification by faith alone as opposed to salvation through adherence to a set of prescribed actions. In this they not only broke from the establishment, but also incorporated Enlightenment notions of the autonomous individual subject into a theory of personal salvation. Though (as I will explore later) none of these men rejected the sacraments and forms of worship as important elements of religion, they nevertheless emphasized belief and personal salvation (being “born again”) as the necessary components of saving faith. This led in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to belief, narrowly defined as assent to a set of principles, becoming regarded as almost synonymous with religion.

Elements of this idea still persist to this day, especially in the west, though in many ways a theory of religion as ideology has come to replace it in many circles (for more on these shifts see Jager 202-207).

This is not to say, however, that men like Wesley neglected the importance of the spiritual disciplines and sacraments. As a young man Wesley was deeply influenced by works like Thomas a Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* and indeed, one of the defining conflicts of the early evangelical revival was over whether these disciplines or “means of grace,” were in fact necessary for salvation. The Moravians, with whom Wesley was closely allied at the beginning of his career, held that a human could do nothing for her salvation and instead had to hold herself in “stillness” until God extended His grace towards her. Wesley, as a good Anglican, would have none of this arguing that in fact the means of grace, while not saving in themselves, could nevertheless be used by God to save the individual. This disagreement ultimately led to a split within the early revival – with Wesley going his own way to form Methodism proper while the Moravians formed their own congregations throughout the country.

In his sermon titled “The Means of Grace” Wesley defines the means as, “prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon); and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.” He goes on to encourage his listeners to practice these disciplines as means to an end and none as ends themselves. Of special interest to Wesley is the receiving of the Lord’s Supper, which had fascinated him since his days at Oxford with the Holy Club. Wesley himself was a frequent communicator – as often as once a week – which was slightly unusual by the standards of the day. He also believed that the Lord's Supper could in fact be a "converting ordinance," or the means through which an individual was converted. In fact in his published *Journal* he includes the account of a woman, believed to be Susannah Wesley, who was converted through communion (see Rack 402-409 for a lengthy discussion of this). All this to say that, however it may have been interpreted in the future, Wesley fully recognized the role of spiritual disciplines in forming the spirituality and subjectivity of his followers – believing that act could form experience just as authentic experience manifested itself in action. As Peter Böhler advised the young Wesley upon his return from Georgia he should “Preach faith until you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith” (82).

It is this disciplinary aspect of seemingly spontaneous religious expression that is most easily overlooked when considering spiritual experience.
In her book, *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood demonstrates how this outer/inner relationship works in the personal piety of the members of the Egyptian women’s mosque movement. These are women who gather together on a regular basis to be taught the practices of piety by (largely) female religious teachers. According to Mahmood, these “women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner states (intentions, movements of desire and thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gestures, actions, speech, etc.)” (31). An example she gives of this is the duty to rise before dawn for morning prayer. In one encounter she analyzes an older Muslim woman is instructing younger in the proper cultivation of the discipline of prayer. Interestingly, she does not recommend “trying” harder or strengthening willpower, but action and emotion:

> Performing the morning prayer should be like the things you can’t live without: for when you don’t eat, or you don’t clean your house, you get the feeling that you must do this. It is this feeling I am talking about: there is something inside you that makes you want to pray and gets you up early in the morning to pray. And you’re angry with yourself when you don’t do this or fail to do this (125).

This linking of emotion and action to spiritual practices thus reverses the liberal Western model of spiritual experience. Instead of the individual deciding to do something through an act of will, she is disciplined in these practices through action.

Interestingly enough, this theory of how action and emotion operate accords with what we have come to know about the neurological mechanisms of emotion and will. As far back as the late nineteenth century William James famously argued that, when it comes to emotion “we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be.” What James realized without benefit of modern neuro-imaging techniques, was that emotion was intimately connected to bodily action and bodily actions were in turn intimately connected to cognition and action. Indeed, in *The Will to Believe* James goes further, arguing that faith is actually synonymous with act: “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance” (524). The example he gives of this is a mountain climber who gets into a position where he/she can only escape by a terrible leap. “Refuse to believe,” James says, “and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself” (500). In other words it is the act of faith that forms the internal disposition and the internal disposition that creates the desired result.

In thus linking body, emotion, and act James anticipates recent developments in neuro-science which have largely confirmed the role of emotion and body in the making of decisions and indeed in the formation of consciousness itself. For example in *Descartes’ Error*, neuro-scientist Antonio Damasio details how he used neuro-imaging to examine brain-damaged individuals who seemed to have lost the ability to make reasonable long term decisions or plans. These otherwise healthy individuals seemed to reason and function normally except for the loss of any ability to use reason to prioritize tasks. What Damasio found was that all of these individuals had some type of damage to a part of their frontal lobes that largely controls decision making – in other words they had lost the ability, not to reason, but to use the underlying bodily feedback of emotion to make reasonable decisions. As Damasio puts it in his later *The Feeling of What Happens*, “the presumed opposition between emotion and reason is no longer accepted without question… emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making, for worse and for better” (40-41). Thus the body and emotions are not inherently “unreasonable,” but are utilized to better help us understand the world around us and make decisions. The damage these patients experienced to their frontal lobes disrupted the bodily systems of reasoning, thus leading them to make unreasonable decisions. This view of the body as an interconnected system or organism not only allows for a more nuanced understanding of emotion, but also calls into question the very structure of the unified subject itself. Furthermore, in the case of spiritual disciplines, it bears out the idea that an outward bodily act could affect the inward state.

More importantly for our purposes, however, is what all this tells us about how the disciplinary practices of piety affect women’s formation of a sense of self within a patriarchal structure. Mahmood, for example, argues that “the mosque participants did not regard authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained the individual. Rather, they viewed socially prescribed forms of conduct as the potentialities, the ‘scaffolding,’ if you will, through which the self is realized” (148). In other words these women did not see their adherence to outward forms of behavior as constricting, but ultimately liberating – as a means to becoming God’s agent in the world. This definition of agency, though, requires that we situate agency within the particular discourse in which it operates. In this case that means, as Mahmood puts it, we think of “agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action.” Doing so:

raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from
In thus situating agency within local discourse and as a “modality of action” we can better understand how religious women view the formation of the self, how spiritual discipline helps form inward orientation, and how this ultimately works its way out into the public sphere. For the women Mahmood studied this sometimes meant going against the wishes of their husbands and fathers when their wishes conflicted with what they saw as God’s calling. In this the women of early Methodism were very similar and it is to them that we must now turn.

Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Narratives

As I have argued elsewhere, careful attention to Methodist women’s writing reveals a powerful symbiotic relationship between internal spiritual experience and outward action in the public sphere. This action clearly includes writing, as much of the writing we have by evangelical women comes in the form of published conversion narratives, diary extracts, or letters. Many of these were published in John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine while others, like the famous Account of Hester Ann Rogers, were published as independent books. Women clearly saw writing and publishing as part of their call to action that followed spiritual experience. What I have not theorized, however, is how the actual disciplines of reading and writing came to foster spiritual experience and how the publication of such writing both acted as a result of spiritual experience and an impetus for others to imitate the spiritual disciplines of the author.

As I have already pointed out, the actual experience accounts by women are filled with references to participation in spiritual disciplines – prayer, fasting, scripture reading, attending religious meetings, listening to sermons, taking communion – and these spiritual disciplines are explicitly linked to the spiritual experiences that result. Here, however, I want to focus on spiritual reading and writing themselves as disciplines – disciplines that ordinary lay women used worked to subtly resist these binaries through their writing. In other words, it is both through their writing and because of their writing that the sense of subjectivity women form after conversion fundamentally works to break down binaries between self and other, body and mind, emotion and reason. Thus, in tracing this transformation I will focus on each of these fundamental elements, reading evangelical women’s writing in terms of how this inner emotional experience worked outwards into the rapidly developing public sphere – for the two rely on one another and any attempt to read them separately fundamentally misses how evangelical women viewed and wrote the self during the eighteenth century.

By and large very little writing by evangelical women written specifically for publication has survived (see Krueger 69-70). This is in part due to the nature of most of the printed discourse in early evangelicalism. What was valued most was the printed sermon or religious discourse and, though there were female preachers in Methodism, their sermons were not published like men’s were. The exception to this is the prolific Mary Bosanquet Fletcher who, though none of her sermons were published, succeeded in getting some of her religious discourses into print. As a result most of the writing by women that we have comes in the form of diary extracts, spiritual letters, or conversion narratives written in letter form to John Wesley or another male interlocutor. In fact the “Letters” pages of the Arminian Magazine, especially during John Wesley’s lifetime, are dominated by letters from female correspondents.

What is important about this is that clearly this writing was not necessarily meant for print – though it may have ended up there – instead it was largely devotional in nature. Imitating devotional forms and practices imbibed from works like Wesley’s own Journal women clearly used diary and letter writing as a form of spiritual discipline – incorporating scripture passages, hymns, prayers, and sermon notes into their writing as a means of forming spiritual experience. Clearly it was in the act of writing that these disciplinary practices were somehow solidified.

This is especially evident in women’s experience narratives, a genre which is itself highly disciplined. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the evangelical conversion narrative relies on a common pattern – evident in works from Bunyan to Wesley to Whitefield – consisting of 1. Consciousness of sin; 2. Acquaintance with Methodism and search for salvation; 3. Justification; 4. Opposition from within and without; 5. Search for “Christian Perfection”; 6. Achievement of perfection; and 7. Evidence of God’s grace in life and community. In exhibiting this pattern, these narratives perform the mimetic function that John Wesley hoped to instill through his own Journal. Furthermore, they also indicate that these women saw themselves as part of a larger community of readers and writers, all of whom were pursuing the same spiritual goals. As Hindmarsh has pointed out:

Through these communal practices they learned what was commonly expected in religious experience, and what was common became, in literary terms, conventional…. In expectation of conversion, evangelical discourse acted like a map, identifying the sort of terrain one might cross and the sort of destination one might arrive at if one chose to venture out (157).

Of course, as Hindmarsh also makes clear, just because these narratives were conventional, does not mean that they lack originality or insight. Instead, Methodist women appropriated readily available genres as a means to relating their own experience in a way that would be better understood by the broader Methodist community. It was precisely by using these conventions that women were able to form a unique sense of identity grounded in the broader religious culture. For, as Somers and Gibson have argued, narrative structures are powerful, illustrating that “stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives” (38). Much like the women of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, these Methodist women found agency within disciplinary structures precisely by using those outward acts to alter the inner sense of self.
Thus it is because of the disciplinary nature of narrative convention that women came both to form a new sense of self after conversion and through them that they were able to reach a wider public through publication in venues like the *Arminian Magazine*. In this the discipline of writing came full circle – working outward as a result of spiritual experience and in turn working mimaetically to form the spiritual experiences of others in the Methodist community. One of the main reasons John Wesley published spiritual experience accounts in the *Arminian Magazine* was in fact to illustrate that spiritual experience was available to all and that by imitating the examples of pious men and women, others could come to know God as they did. Women's writing was thus crucial to the formation of a developed evangelical public sphere within which the discourses of piety, spiritual discipline, and religious experience interacted powerfully in forming the evangelical subject.

References


Hunting the Wesleyan Fox?: Toleration, Sermon Preaching, and the Public Sphere

Posted on November 8, 2011 | Leave a comment

I want to begin this essay with two vignettes – one from the life of the famous radical and orator John Thelwall and another from the life of Methodist founder John Wesley – two men who would seemingly have nothing in common, but who both deeply disturbed the public space of British life:

John Thelwall
In his brilliant essay on the life and career of John Thelwall, “Hunting the Jacobin Fox,” E.P. Thompson recounts the story of the violent public reaction to a series of six political lectures Thelwall gave at Yarmouth. It bears quoting at length:

The lectures were in an exposed position in a hall on the seafront, and were attended by some two hundred persons of both sexes, including a few children. At the first two lectures the hall was surrounded by a parcel of yobbos “instigated by a Naval Officer” to pull down the house, but no serious incident took place. On the third night about ninety sailors armed with bludgeons burst in upon the audience and laid about them on all sides…. Thelwall attempted to make his escape, was seized at the door, was rescued by some friends, and (not without presenting a pistol at an assailant) made his get-away to a house which the crowd later threatened to pull down…. Several of the auditors were seriously injured and the victors carried trophies, including shawls, bonnets, wigs, shoes, hats coats and Thelwall’s books, back to their ships. To the honour of Thelwall and the Yarmouth reformers, the three remaining lectures were safely delivered (161).

These events occurred at a time when Thelwall’s movements were being carefully tracked. Barred by the infamous Two Acts from speaking openly on political subjects, the radical reformer cloaked his politics in lectures on “Roman history,” and continued to travel and speak. Government spies continually tracked him and it is clear in this instance that the mob had been stirred up by loyalists and that the goal of the sailors was to impress Thelwall into naval service (Thompson 162). Apparently Thelwall’s public lectures were so powerful that the government felt it necessary to attempt to close off the unbounded public space of his meetings. Indeed, Thelwall often claimed that the Two Acts were passed in direct response to his lecturing.

John Wesley

On October 20, 1743 John Wesley rode into the town of Wednesbury in the West Midlands. As was his custom, he proceeded to the middle of the town and began to preach in the open air. On this particular occasion his text was Hebrews 13:8 (Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever) and he remarks in his journal that there was a “far larger crowd than expected.” After preaching, Wesley retired to a local Methodist’s house. There he was engaging in his endless correspondence when a mob beset the house and forced Wesley to come with them to the local magistrate. This is how Wesley describes the scene in his *Journal*:

To attempt speaking was vain; for the noise on every side was like the roaring of the sea. so they dragged me along till we came to the town; where seeing the door of a large house open, I attempted to go in; but a man, catching me by the hair, pulled me back into the middle of the mob. They made no more stop till they had carried me through the main street, from one end of the town to the other. I continued speaking all the time to those within hearing, feeling no pain or weariness. at the west end of the town, seeing a door half open, I made toward it and would have gone in; but a gentleman in the shop would not suffer me, saying they would pull the house down to the ground. However, I stood at the door, and asked, “Are you willing to hear me speak?” Many cried out, “No, no! knock his brains out; down with him; kill him at once.” Others said, “Nay, but we will hear him first.” I began asking, “What evil have I done? Which of you all have I wronged in word or deed?” And continued speaking for above a quarter of an hour, till my voice suddenly failed: then the floods began to lift up their voice again; many crying out, “Bring him away! bring him away!” (418).
What is remarkable about this story is that 1. Wesley was an ordained Anglican priest who always preached (even in the open air) in his cassock and bands, 2. The text and message he presents are completely orthodox – in complete agreement with the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles, and 3. the vehemence of the mobs reaction and their willingness to use physical violence against the famous John Wesley.

Such incidents were by no means isolated in the early years of Methodism. Methodists, though legally still part of the established Church, were routinely harassed by fellow citizens who looked upon them with suspicion and contempt. Riots regularly broke out at Methodist meetings, chapels were vandalized and destroyed, preachers were attacked and/or pressed into the army and navy and Charles Wesley was brought before the magistrates on charges of Jacobitism. Clearly toleration had its bounds even within the establishment.

Orality, Print, and the Public Sphere

Traditional interpretations of both of these events would have us believe two things: 1. That there is little or no connection between the lectures of the secular, radical, enlightened Thelwall and the preaching of the conservative, enthusiastic, religious Wesley and 2. That the objection to both of these men’s teaching was based on radical content (in the case of Thelwall) or unorthodox doctrine (in the case of Wesley). In the first case I would argue that the distinctions between enthusiasm and enlightenment have been largely overblown, as Michael Warner has recently pointed out it is not even, “clear that enlightenment and evangelical religion were recognizable to contemporaries as opposing forces” (Preacher’s Footing 368). In the second case I would argue that objections to content or doctrine alone to fully explain the vehemence of the public reactions against both men. Instead, the violent reaction to both Thelwall and the Methodists is better explained by how both used the expanding public sphere afforded by the closely intertwined discourses of orality and print to disrupt established order in both politics and religion.

Indeed I would further argue that it is exactly the discourse that is at stake here, not the actual doctrine of justification by faith. As Michael Warner has argued, we must attempt to understand evangelicalism “not by the doctrinal emphasis which has so far dominated the intellectual history of evangelicalism since almost all of these doctrinal elements could be found almost anywhere, anytime,” and instead move toward an approach that examines the “discourse culture of evangelicalism” (Printing and Preaching 31:00). To do so we must examine the discourse of popular evangelicalism more broadly – moving beyond print to the relationship between print and orality in early evangelicalism. As Warner puts it, “In a movement context that mixes printed and preached sermons with pamphlets and newspapers, performance and print were densely laminated together” (Printing and Preaching 42:00). Likewise the opposition to Thelwall’s lectures is not adequately explained by objections to his radicalism – the ideas he presented were not new and in fact that had been largely developed by others – what was new was the way he powerfully translated these ideas into discourse.

In the case of Methodism this confluence between print and orality was inherent in the Methodist media culture. In his published Journal, John Wesley not only records his extensive travels, but also details the sermons he preached – many in the open air to thousands of listeners. However, in contrast to his printed sermons which are composed and arranged specifically for publication, in the Journal Wesley usually only recounts the Scripture passage he preached on and the number of people he preached to. These mostly ex tempore public sermons were shaped by his context and his public audience, and the account of them in the printed journal thus highlights the unbounded nature of his audience and his text. Nevertheless, the fact that an account of the sermon made it into the Journal and that some version of it was eventually printed illustrates the closely intertwined nature of Methodist public space.

However it was the very unbounded nature of open air Methodist itinerant preaching that was perceived as the greatest threat to the established social norms. Anglican parish preaching was directed in mostly set language (The Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies) to a very specific and set group of people within a sanctioned public space by an ordained priest – itinerant Methodist preachers, on the other hand, openly operated outside of this established structure. Mostly un-ordained and uneducated, and thus outside of the established structure, they moved from town to town preaching ex tempore in the open air or unsanctioned chapels. Many of their sermons were never printed, nevertheless the storm of controversy they stirred up (both for and against) clearly made its way into print and informed the national conversation on the Revival. Thus it was this “unauthorized” entrance into the public space of preaching – the claim to be able to address an unbounded audience – that caused much of the animosity towards Methodism. In other words, to paraphrase Michael Warner, it was the discourse not the doctrine of the revival that was at issue.

Like Wesley Thelwall spoke in public (either in the open air or large gathering halls), his lectures attracted a similar demographic (the poor, women), and he too was accused of engaging in “enthusiastic” discourse. In fact even his friend Thomas Amyot wrote that, “He raves like a mad Methodist parson: the most ranting Actor in the most ranting Character never made to much noise as Citizen Thelwall…” (qtd. in Thompson 158). Thus here Thelwall is explicitly compared to a Methodist preacher in that the unbounded nature of his speech is perceived as having a negative effect on his hearers – of arousing their emotions instead of appealing to their reason. Likewise the conservative Bishop Samuel Horsley blithely conflated the Jacobins and the Methodists, even referencing the Two Acts that forced Thelwall to itinerate and disguise his message, as the impetus for the explosion of radical “preaching:”

In many parts of the kingdom new conventicles have been opened in great number, and congregations formed of one knows not what denomination. The pastor is often, in appearance at least, an illiterate peasant, or mechanic. The congregation is visited occasionally by preachers from a distance…. It is very remarkable, that these new congregations of non-descripts have been mostly formed, since the Jacobins
At the end of the eighteenth century, so the narrative goes, the enthusiastic babbling of the religious fanatics was inevitably aesthetisized (in high Romantic poetry and art), politicized, and secularized (in radical reformism). According to this narrative, then, the politics of Thelwall and Wesley not only lectured and preached, but had their discourses printed and then commented on in newspapers and the public sphere at large. And it was this feedback loop of orality and print that truly threatened to break down the established public boundaries between private belief and public life.

Thus, these lines of congruence between the enthusiastic religion of Wesley and the enlightened radicalism of Thelwall work to further break down the tenuous divide between enthusiasm and enlightenment. Though espousing radically different philosophies, it is clear that both the Evangelical Revival and radical reformism arose from the same types of discourse cultures –cultures that helped simultaneously construct and disrupt the public sphere. As Foucault has pointed out, “we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform or stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (100). In this case, instead of constructed a false opposition between liberal radicalism and religious enthusiasm (as scholars like Mee and Makdisi have done) we should instead be considering that ways in which both participated in the same subversive discourses or at least used the newly available “multiplicity of discursive elements” to disrupt the status quo.

In doing so we can also call into question the problematic secularization narratives that have dominated eighteenth century and Romantic studies. At the end of the eighteenth century, so the narrative goes, the enthusiastic babbling of the religious fanatics was inevitably aesthetisized (in high Romantic poetry and art), politicized, and secularized (in radical reformism). According to this narrative, then, the politics of Thelwall and the poetry of Wordsworth are part and parcel of the same linear un-halting progression away from an “unreasonable” religious past – a complete break with its enthusiastic other. Instead what this discursive construction of enthusiasm and Enlightenment reveals is that in many ways the two worked symbiotically throughout the century to create the discourse conditions necessary for secularization itself. In other words, in many ways secularization was constituted as a discourse within religious structures themselves (see Callum Brown, David Hempton), and it then worked its way outward through the confluence of orality and print in the swirling nexus of the public sphere. Thus the poetry of Wordsworth and the politics of Thelwall are not so much the secularization of the religious impulse as they are part and parcel of that impulse itself.

Works Cited


As the Eighteenth century drew to a close, the Lockean philosophy of the individual autonomous subject endowed with inalienable rights was increasingly manifested in the political revolutions in America and France and the aesthetic revolutions of Wordsworth and Coleridge. As Makdisi argues, this brand of liberalism generally attempted to rid itself of “its other, which for its part summoned forth a world of visionary prophecies and divine interventions… a world, in short, in which ‘eternity is in love with the productions of time’” (301). In doing so, these radicals attempted to erase any type of alterity that threatened individual autonomy and property or threatened to spill over into religious “enthusiasm.”

Nevertheless, though both the liberal radicals and the state strived to suppress such visionary religious enthusiasm that threatened the status quo, subversive cultural voices still existed who challenged the supremacy of the autonomous subject and instead constructed freedom and identity in alternative, communitarian terms. Coming from radically different traditions and cultural perspectives, both Charles Wesley and William Blake used their religious, “enthusiastic” poetry to articulate a definition of human freedom and agency founded upon the Biblical construct of the “kingdom of God” which they variously develop as an intersubjective experience with the other that comes to define human actions and relations in the world and create true justice. Justice, in this sense, is not an impartial judgment in the interest of order and individual rights, but a radical embrace of the other.

At first glance, speaking about Wesley and Blake together may seem like a rather odd decision. In fact to date Martha Winburn England’s Hymns Unbidden, remains the only study that takes seriously the similarities between Wesley and Blake, pointing out that Blake seems to have admired elements of the Evangelical Revival (including John Wesley and Whitefield in Milton) and in fact owned copies of Charles’ work. Still, the differences are significant – the two men never met and Wesley's life and career were ending just as Blake's poetic work was beginning. Wesley was a Tory Church and King man to his dying day, while the radical Blake excoriates both Church and King throughout his work. Wesley's hymns and poetry are largely conventional (in a good sense), while Blake's are wildly experimental.

That said, it is precisely because of these seeming contradictions that I think the two poets are so interesting in conversation for, despite their radically different religious inclinations, both men were painted as “enthusiasts” throughout their lifetime – both claimed to directly hear from God and proclaim that message in their poetry. For this reason the work of Wesley and Blake is unique in that its conjunction between religion and poetry works to explore the tensions between internal religious experience and public social action in ways that reinvent the subject itself.

Crucial to this fundamental redefinition of the subject is the way both Wesley and Blake use religious poetry to redefine both the experience of the self and the relationship between the self and the community. In doing so both men work to break down the ideal of the autonomous self based on individual rights – instead locating freedom in the experience of the community and otherness. It is this concept that I am terming the “kingdom of God,” for though the ideal meant different things for both men – both seem to have firmly believed, with Christ, that the “kingdom of God is within you.” In doing so I hope to suggest that the ideals of freedom and agency need to be redefined within a religious context and that both Wesley and Blake use their poetry to express and emotive and affective encounter with the other that finally leads outward into life and community – the kingdom of God come down and embodied in the kingdom of Man.
For John and Charles Wesley the kingdom of God was fundamental to their attempt to renew the Church of England. Crucial to their theology was the idea that humans could be saved instantaneously by faith and both know and feel that their sins were forgiven. This element of feeling, or spiritual sense, comes to pervade almost every aspect of Methodism, and Charles’ hymns are no exception. Take, for example, Hymn 130 which begins:

Jesu, if still the same thou art,
If all thy promises are sure,
Set up thy kingdom in my heart,
And make me rich for I am poor:
To me be all thy treasures given,
The kingdom of an inward heaven.

Instead of the kingdom of God (or heaven) being something literal that the Christian waits and hopes for – performing good works in expectation of heaven, in the hymns the kingdom becomes something that is lived and experienced. As John Wesley writes in his preface to the 1777 Hymns and Spiritual Songs, “none but those who either already experience the kingdom of God within them, or, at least, earnestly desire so to do, will either relish or understand them [the hymns]. But all these may find either such prayers as speak the language of their souls (JWW 14:339).

Tied up in this sense of the kingdom as something embodied, is the deeply Wesleyan (and Lockean) idea that all knowledge is based on the evidence of the senses and experience. In fact, in his preface to the seminal 1780 Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists Wesley famously describes the hymnal as “a little body of experimental and practical divinity.” Likewise in his Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, he argues that faith cannot be based on natural sense, but spiritual. It is this spiritual sense that is granted upon conversion and allows the believer to experience God in a way that is incomprehensible and indescribable to the non-believer. Thus faith is intimately connected to sense and even in the case of spiritual sense Wesley describes it primarily in terms of natural sense and emotion as a means to validating experience. He thus treads a careful line between “enthusiasm” and “experience” – validating the supernatural, while testing it via Lockean empiricism. For this reason Methodist hymns are full of the language of sensory perception and emotion – though the experience of faith is ultimately ineffable these men, and especially women, use the language of sensibility to describe faith.
But for Methodists this internal transformation was not enough—the true evidence of the kingdom of God in heart and life was in how it worked outward into community. This ideal is reflected in the structure of the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists*, which leads the reader from inward devotion to outward action—the five major sections move from “exhorting the believer to return to God” and “describing the pleasantness of religion,” to “inward religion,” to “prayer,” and then outward in the final two sections first to believers acting in a variety of life circumstances to finally hymns explicitly for the society meeting. It was in the classes, bands, and society that Methodists truly came together for fellowship and renewal, but also to organize action in the world. As Phyllis Mack writes, “Methodist hymns...enabled communication between self and community and between self and God, and they stood as models of sincere speech and authentic emotion. Taken together, their impact was to instill in the worshipper a movement toward self-effacement and surrender to God’s power on one hand, and a heroic energy, both in conquering the self and in serving God, on the other” (48).

This reality is reflected in the hymns themselves take, for example: hymn 489 in the 1780 Collection which reads:

> Help us to help each other Lord,  
> Each others cross to bear;  
> Let each his friendly aid afford,  
> And feel his brother's care.

Or hymn 495:

> Why hast thou cast our lot,  
> In the same age and place?  
> And why together brought  
> To see each other's face;  
> To join with softest sympathy,  
> And mix our friendly souls in thee?

Didst thou not make us one,  
That all might one remain;  
Together travel on  
And bear each other's pain?  
Till all thy utmost goodness prove,  
And rise renewed in perfect love!

In both of these cases the singers come together in community to express their sense of what God has done in their lives and how this has transformed their relationship with others in the community and the world. Embedded in these two hymns is a sense in which the Methodists, though individuals, are one through and in Christ—they have found a new family. As Hindmarsh argues, “the convert felt connected through Methodism to a shared experience with others and to larger, unitary patterns of belief and practice. If the converts of the early Evangelical Revival
Ultimately these two elements – affective experience of faith and outward connection with community come to define a uniquely Methodism religious subjectivity – a subjectivity founded not upon individual autonomy and rights but on the freedom to do God's will, to enact the kingdom on earth. This is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in Wesley's famous hymn, “And can it be:"

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
fast bound in sin and nature's night; 
thine eye diffused a quickening ray;  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
my chains fell of, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Packed within these seemingly simple lines is both a complex theology and subjectivity. Not only do we have the images of imprisonment and freedom from chains, but also a liberated heart and an impetus to follow out into the world. This, likely written after his own conversion, was the kingdom of God for Charles Wesley.

William Blake’s Radical Embrace of Justice

Likewise Blake also uses the symbol of the kingdom of God throughout his work – building a conception of the millennium as an ontological space for freedom and justice that lies outside of individual subjectivity. Especially in Jerusalem Blake locates this space within the symbol of embrace of otherness that nevertheless does not erase heterogeneity. Indeed, he writes that, “We cannot experience pleasure but by means of others, who experience either pleasure or pain thro us” (E 600). Thus for Blake the Enlightenment notions of selfhood cut the individual off from this intersubjective experience with the other that makes freedom and justice possible in the first place. Like Wesley, Blake is concerned to restore human relations within a community of love that is based on a recognition of the other’s fundamental otherness and an understanding of justice that elevates the marginal.

By pushing back against contemporary definitions of millennium that are bound up in temporal political and revolutionary progress towards a new world order, Blake is thus able to interrogate and disrupt all narratives of power that seek to conspire against the marginal. As Makdisi points out, Blake not only interrogates the Church and King ideology of conservatives like Burke, but also the rational radicalism of Tom Paine and Mary Wollstoncraft, which reifies existing property relations through the constitution of the Lockean individual subject (19). True liberty and the kingdom of God is, for Blake, properly located within the individual and the individual’s power to enact justice within the community.

This vision of justice is primarily concerned with the marginal and the other not the protection of property rights for citizens. In this Blake anticipates Levinas, who argues that justice is founded not on traditional notions of “freedom” but on a relationship with the other. “Ontology, which reduces the other to the same,” he writes, “promotes freedom – the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other” (42). Instead, Levinas argues that “The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it” (88) and that it is only by inviting the other, in all its heterogeneity, into conversation that justice can be enacted:

The other qua other is the Other. To “let him be” the relationship of discourse is required; pure ‘disclosure,’ where he is proposed as a theme, does not respect him enough for that. We call justice this face to face approach, in conversation. If truth arises in the absolute experience in which being gleams with its own light, then truth is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice. (71)

Thus truth cannot be known nor true freedom and justice produced without the acceptance of the other as other – without acknowledging the difference of the other and inviting it into conversation with the self. Thus justice is not an impartial judgment in the interest of order, but a radical embrace of the other. It also refuses to fall into the cycle of revenge and retribution against the oppressor, but works to restore him or her to the community through the action of embrace. Furthermore, this is not an embrace that erases difference, but celebrates radical alterity. Thus it is in this space for the other that true justice and forgiveness are located, in the gesture of radical embrace; and it is in this space that Blake ultimately locates the kingdom of God.
In this light, Blake's epic *Jerusalem* works throughout to both criticize the existing order and create a space within which his vision of justice is possible. For example, after Albion falls asleep, his sons and daughters, under the veil of Vala, utilize the moral law to oppress and impoverish:

The Twenty-eight Cities of Albion stretch their hands to thee:
Because of the Opressors of Albion in every City & Village:
They mock at the Labourers limbs! they mock at his starvd Children.
They buy his Daughters that they may have power to sell his Sons:
They compell the Poor to live upon a crust of bread by soft mild arts;
They reduce the Man to want: then give with pomp & ceremony-
The praise of Jehovah is chaunted from lips of hunger & thirst!

This brutal oppression is thus the direct result of law and justice based upon the rule of the powerful over the weak. It is based on a notion of social progress that relies on the labor of the poor and weak to create stability and order. Driven from their land and literally compelled to live on crusts of bread distributed by "charity," the poor and marginal are constant victims of a logic of control ostensibly based on justice and stability. For Blake this was the result, not of injustice, but the "progressive" definitions of justice and rationality upon which society was founded.

This brand of order and justice also has the effect of perverting human nature. Albion's error is not simply rejecting Jerusalem, but embracing the self over the other. Thus Albion enters the "State of Satan" (J 35, E 181), which is characterized by the embrace of self over the sacrifice of self for the other. This has the effect of perverting humanity even further, of turning man into a fiend:

O! how the torments of Eternal Death, waited on Man;
And the loud-rending bars of the Creation ready to burst:
That the wide world might fly from its hinges. & the immortal mansion
Of Man. for ever be possess'd by monsters of the deeps:
And Man himself become a Fiend. wrap'd in an endless curse.
Consuming and consum'd for-ever in flames of Moral Justice.

Thus humanity, left to the influence of selfhood and moral law devolves into a state of perpetual, bloody vengeance under the guise of "Moral Justice." Because the ethic of embrace and forgiveness, embodied by Jerusalem, has been abandoned the only option left is the revenge of the law, which is "Consuming and consum'd for-ever;" a cycle of vengeance and oppression.

The solution to this problem is the forgiveness of sins, the radical embrace of the other (both oppressed and oppressor) and the absolute rejection of a definition of justice based on retribution. It is only through these apocalyptic methods that the millennium can be brought to earth and Albion awoken from his slumber. It is also only through these methods that a mental apocalypse can be performed in the minds of the reader that spurs them to actively bring Jerusalem to earth. Thus the key to this radical apocalyptic turn is to create the millennial space within which the other can
be embraced unconditionally, severed from cultural and political power structures. This creation of a space for radical justice is reflected in Blake’s representation of the “Spaces of Erin,” which are located West of Albion and come to stand for the hope provided by otherness:

Then Erin came forth from the Furnaces, & all the Daughters of Beulah
Came from the Furnaces. by Los's mighty power for Jerusalems
Sake: walking up and down among the Spaces of Erin:
And the Sons and Daughters of Los came forth in perfection lovely!
And the Spaces of Erin reach’d from the starry heighth, to the starry depth.

(J 11: 9-13, E 154)

Thus Erin (Ireland), with its literal distance and alterity becomes the space within which Los and his children can work for Jerusalem’s regeneration.

Conclusion

The lines of connection I have traced here between Charles Wesley and William Blake are preliminary at best. I have no intention of arguing for something as simplistic as “influence” or “causality.” However I do think that these two great poets can be put into productive conversation in ways that have eluded us in the past. Both operated within the dynamic nexus of religion, politics, and subjectivity that animated the late eighteenth century and this common landscape pervades their poetry. They may have come from opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum, but both were men who firmly believed that an individual man or woman could hear directly from God and both privileged the subjectivity gained through this experience over any liberal political or economic policy. As such, both Charles Wesley and William Blake use their poetry to subtly critique the spirit of the age and the discourses of liberty that dominated the late eighteenth century. By developing the kingdom of God as a communal space for the embrace of the other, both men in their own way manage to locate freedom and justice outside the categories of individuality and autonomy – pointing the way towards a definition of identity rooted in a community of love and forgiveness.

Works Cited


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Book IX

Book X

Book XI

Book XII

Jehovah, the God of the Spirits of All Flesh

Romanticism, Cheap Print, Circulation, and Readership
Romantics were less formal and more concerned with emotion and passion. The hair
begins to be let down and cover parts of the face. This is more primal and sexual, as can be displayed by any Revlon commercial with a woman...