

Methodism and Culture

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The gospel, according to Andrew Walls, is the 'prisoner and liberator of culture'. Walls, perhaps the pre-eminent Methodist missiologist of the last half-century, is suggesting by this dictum that expressions of the Christian religion are both heavily conditioned by their circumstances and powerfully capable of transforming their settings. Believers are simultaneously subject to what Walls calls the 'indigenising' principle, the desire to live as Christians in their own societies, and the 'pilgrim' principle, the willingness to identify with members of the family of faith in other times and places. They therefore accept a great deal of the way of life around them, blending it into their religious practice, and yet are likely to break with part of the accustomed lifestyle because of allegiance to distinctive Christian principles. (Walls, 1996: 7-9). For historical purposes, however, this twofold model can usefully be adapted into a threefold pattern of how Methodism has interacted with culture. In the first place, the adherents of the movement have regularly been moulded by their context, a process corresponding with part of Walls's indigenising principle. Methodists have adapted to their surrounding culture, merging their attitudes with the common assumptions of their societies, as when, during the nineteenth century, they gradually dropped their objections to reading fiction. Secondly, they have frequently challenged the stance of their contemporaries, criticising rather than accommodating themselves to prevailing habits. This dimension of their practice, closely related to Walls's pilgrim principle, is well illustrated by the commitment of twentieth-century Methodists to the temperance movement. Thirdly, they have repeatedly proved a creative element in the societies they have inhabited, adapting existing forms of behaviour and establishing entirely novel ones. This aspect of the Methodist role, partly 'indigenising' because forging fresh bonds with the host culture but

also partly 'pilgrim' because helping to Christianise it, can easily be overlooked, but it was historically important, not least in the evolution of the peoples receiving missionaries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Methodism was responsive to its setting and often willing to challenge custom, but it was also an innovative force in many lands.

This paper attempts to analyse the relations between gospel and culture in these three respects. It takes for granted the way in which Walls, as a missiologist, uses the word 'culture', as a term for the mixture of patterns of behaviour and perceptions of reality that constitute the human as opposed to the natural environment. This usage, normal in anthropology, is very broad, including the full range of expressions of social life. It therefore encompasses other and narrower applications of the word. On the one hand it takes in popular culture, whether the traditional forms encountered by John Wesley in the eighteenth century or the modern types generated by the mass media in the twenty-first. Methodism sometimes showed an affinity for the customs of the people, often proved capable of denouncing them unsparingly and at times generated fresh folkways itself. On the other hand, the broad anthropological approach incorporates high culture, whether art or architecture, music or literature. Currents of fashion in these areas affected Methodism more than has usually been recognised. So, while addressing questions arising from the widest interpretation of the phenomenon of culture, this chapter explores aspects of both the popular and the high varieties. Its central concern is with Methodism in Britain and the United States, but it also considers case-studies of other lands where the denominational family's missionaries ventured. It tries to discover how the gospel in its Methodist form interacted with culture in this diverse sense.

It may begin with the popular culture that E. P. Thompson depicted as under threat from Methodism in England. Thompson celebrated what he called 'plebeian culture', the inherited customs of the common people of the eighteenth century with their respect for fairness, their strain of neighbourliness and their rough but vibrant ways. Methodism, according to Thompson, was its inveterate enemy, trying to impose a form of psychological warping that would turn the masses into the disciplined workforce of industrial capitalism. (Thompson, 1963) In reality, however, there was far more of a bond between early Methodism, whether in England or America, than Thompson allows. Early modern England had possessed a deeply ingrained sense of the supernatural (Walsham, 1999), and it survived into the eighteenth century to mesh readily with the message of Wesley's helpers. Thus in west Cornwall, where Methodism enjoyed huge success, it was widely believed that there existed a shadowy local spirit called 'Bucca' who had to be propitiated if fisherman were to expect success. (Bottrell, 1873: 246) This openness to the supernatural smoothed the path for the reception of a gospel involving divine intervention in human life. The early preachers frequently saw visions, discerned portents and marked providences. Thus Lorenzo Dow, an eccentric but charismatic American who took camp meetings to Britain, once accurately foretold the death of a giddy girl who laughed during one of his sermons. (Woolsey, 1852: 123-4) The travelling preachers who shared a cosmology of signs and wonders with their public were not set apart by social distance. They relied for hospitality on the homes of the poor. When they moved on to other preaching stations, evangelistic work was sustained in the same cottages. In many the woman of the household took the lead in providing a haven from the troubling social changes of the era. (Valenze, 1985) Methodism displayed a definite affinity for much of the popular culture of early industrial England and early national America.

Nevertheless Methodists showed a fierce antagonism towards much of the value system of the times. Card playing, gambling, horse racing and cock fighting – some of the chief foci of male sociability – came under their censure. Dancing was condemned, especially because it exposed women and men alike to the risk of sexual immorality. Likewise the denominational magazine in England presumed in 1799 that ‘no Methodist attends a theatre’. (Rosman, 1984: 76) In the early years dress was also subject to close scrutiny. ‘Give no tickets’, the *Discipline* of 1784 instructed the American preachers, ‘to any that wear High-Heads, enormous Bonnets, Ruffles or Rings.’ The countercultural stance extended to opposing slavery outright: ‘we all agreed’, wrote Francis Asbury about the 1783 annual conference, ‘in the spirit of African liberty’. (Wigger, 1998: 101, 139) The decay of that conviction in American Methodism during the early nineteenth century formed one of the most striking instances of accommodation to prevailing norms. (Heyrman) Yet a willingness to resist customary practice persisted as a powerful feature of Methodist witness long afterwards. In the area of strong drink, in particular, there were stern attitudes. As soon as the first American state, Maine, adopted prohibition, the Methodist Episcopal Church issued tracts describing the new measure as ‘a Christian law’. (*Christian Advocate*, 27 January 1853: 14) The Primitive Methodists of England turned early to teetotalism, but during the 1850s beer was still the normal drink at Wesleyan quarterly meetings. (Penman, 1916: 26) In the 1870s, however, Wesleyan opinion veered in favour of total abstinence and entrenched Methodist policy became hostile to all forms of alcohol for much of the twentieth century. There were annual temperance sermons; Bands of Hope encouraged the young to take the pledge; and on both sides of the Atlantic the struggle against the saloon bar turned into a formidable political campaign. (Brake, 1974) A gulf opened between the poor who liked a drink and the Methodists who abominated hard liquor. Gospel and culture in its popular dimension were in constant collision.

Yet Methodism also played a creative role in the life of the people. The watchnight service on Christmas Eve, partly designed to replace noisy revelling in the street, gained a secure place in the hearts of the community at large. The class meeting and love feast, two institutions borrowed from the Moravians, became treasured possessions. ‘Where else’, asked the American Edmund S. Janes, ‘is found such Christian intimacy, such stated seasons of fellowship, such familiar conversation on religious experience, such spiritual sympathy, so much helping of each others [*sic*] faith, and such watching over one another in love?’ (Wigger, 1998: 88) So entrenched in popular mores did the class meeting become that the Chartists of England, working-class political activists of the 1830s and 1840s, copied it as a means of fostering cohesion and raising money. Perhaps the most striking instance of Methodist creativity, however, was in music. The hymns of Charles Wesley formed a major contribution to the life of the English-speaking nations. His brother was keen to ensure that singing was done properly. ‘Do not bawl’, John Wesley urged his followers in the introduction to *Sacred Melody* (1761), ‘so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation’. (Seed, 1907: 191) The Methodist people heeded their founder in paying particular attention to song. At a Sheffield Wesleyan chapel, for instance, there was a choir from its opening, and the leading singers originally received a stipend. The music was accompanied down to 1860 by nothing but a cello, which was solemnly transferred when the congregation moved premises. Some of the chief early members, it was said, were attracted by the excellent singing. (Seed, 1907: 183, 196) The major musical events of several northern English towns, such as annual performances of Handel’s *Messiah*, owed their origins to the musical enthusiasts of the Methodist chapels. In such ways as this the movement played a part in the enrichment of popular culture.

Nor was Methodism divorced from developments in high culture. John Wesley, it is increasingly appreciated, should be seen as an Enlightenment thinker. It is true that he showed a credulous side; but so did most of the other illuminati of the eighteenth century. Wesley had no sense that reason was the enemy of faith. ‘We...earnestly exhort’, he wrote in 1743, ‘all who seek after true religion to use all the reason which God hath given them in searching out the things of God.’ (Wesley, 1975: 56) Wesley displayed many of the most characteristic views of the age of reason. He disdained metaphysics as a species of obscurantism, insisting on the need for simplicity in philosophy. Equally he held a high estimate of experience, contending that faith was analogous to one of the five senses. (Dreyer, 1983) Empiricism, in fact, was his lodestar, inducing him to pursue the experiments in the therapeutic uses of electricity that he recommended in *Primitive Physic*. Wesley, like other progressive thinkers of his day, was pragmatic on a variety of issues, adopting field preaching, allowing female ministry and in 1784, though only a priest, ordaining men for service in America. The moral emphasis of the age was echoed in his constant summons to go on to perfection. And the high expectations of the future evident in the idea of progress emerging in the later eighteenth century were paralleled in his postmillennial confidence that the Evangelical Revival would usher in ‘the latter day glory’. The intellectual stance of John Wesley was to a remarkable extent that of his enlightened contemporaries.

Methodism became a vehicle for the dissemination of Enlightenment attitudes. Richard Watson, whose teaching moulded the minds of generations of Methodist preachers, appealed to John Locke on the first page of his *Theological Institutes*. (Watson, 1836: 1) Although the early preachers received no institutional theological training, one of Wesley’s men in England claimed to have read every one of the evangelist’s more than four hundred works and some of the American itinerants wrote of their ‘thirst for knowledge’ that was

slaked by intense reading. (Telford, n.d.: 6: 148; Wigger, 1998: 72) Methodism was engaged not only in the propagation of the gospel but also in a civilising mission. In England humble society members would meet on weekday evenings to instruct their unlettered friends in how to sing the Sunday hymns, and by such means literacy spread (Church, 1949: 49, 46). In America preachers were allowed a discount on their sales of Methodist literature, sometimes earning twice as much from books as from their regular salary. (Nall, 1964: 143) In the single year of 1817 on the Limestone circuit of the Ohio Conference, Benjamin Lakin sold 57 catechisms, 39 hymn books, 18 abridgements of Thomas a Kempis, 14 lives of Hester A. Rogers, 14 copies of the *Discipline*, 14 volumes of John Nelson's journal and a great deal more. (Richey, 1999: 117) The absorption of such a deluge of literature made Methodists notable in many a region for their devotion to self-culture. They were in the van of founding Sunday schools and soon played a prominent part in promoting common schools. In Canada, for example, a Methodist minister, Egerton Ryerson, became superintendent of schools for the whole of Ontario between 1844 and 1876, putting its public education system on a firm basis. (Sissons, 1937-47) For all its early exuberance, Methodism was a movement that, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, was devoted to spreading an appreciation of learning.

The legacy of the Enlightenment coloured the missionary enterprise of Methodism. The cosmopolitan thinkers of the eighteenth century and those they swayed were notably lacking in a sense of cultural relativism. One of their most cherished axioms was the constancy of human nature, so that, in their view, people in different lands were fundamentally the same. The instructions issued to Wesleyan missionaries in 1825 and their subsequent amplifications were based on this assumption. While insisting on the missionaries' duty to advance in piety and 'to increase your stock of useful knowledge', the guidelines offered no advice on how to understand the customs of other lands. In the same

spirit Jabez Bunting, the senior secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, insisted that every missionary must be prepared to go anywhere. John Hunt possessed a strong sense of call to Africa, but Bunting, telling him that in their day God gave nobody a call to a particular locality, despatched him to the South Seas. (Gunson, 1978: 339, 101) Likewise in America preachers were transferred frequently between white and Indian circuits so that they had little chance of developing an affinity for the culture of any particular tribe. (Forbes, 1993: 219) Once Hunt reached his destination, he rejoiced in the utility of love feasts and class meetings. ‘We find’, he reported in 1844, ‘these means are as applicable to Feejee as to England. “Methodism for ever!”’ (Gunson, 1978: 128) If their own distinctive institutions were universally valid, Methodists also supposed that the Western packaging of the gospel possessed merits on an absolute scale. Like other Evangelical missionaries during the early and middle years of the nineteenth century, Wesleyans believed that the delivery of the gospel must not be delayed until ‘savages’ were civilised, but equally they held that the gospel would inevitably bring the advantages of civilisation in its train. (Stanley, 2001) Hoping to rescue those whom they evangelised from barbarism, Methodists often lacked the sensitivity ideally required in cross-cultural mission.

Nevertheless it would be mistaken to conclude that Methodist missions were primarily a destructive force. It is widely believed that indigenous cultures, existing from time immemorial, were demeaned, truncated or even eradicated by the missionary movement. Stephen S. Kim, for example, has written of the ‘iconoclasm of “heathen” culture’ displayed by early Methodist missionaries to Korea. The customary Korean veneration of ancestors, he argues, was unnecessarily attacked because of an ‘identification of Christianity with American civilization’. (Kim, 1998: 220, 224) The premise of such critiques is frequently that traditional cultures embodied timeless values and so had previously been immune to

alteration. That supposition, however, is open to question, because in reality most societies throughout the world were subject to constant flux, being remodelled from inside and modified from outside over the centuries. At any point in time the issue was not whether there should be change but what form change should take. The modifications ushered in by Methodist missions, because of the attachment to a single scale of values derived from the Enlightenment that has just been considered, were sometimes ill-judged and unnecessarily drastic. Yet equally they could be beneficial, introducing innovations that were warmly welcomed and rooting the gospel in local folkways. Two case-studies, of Ghana and Fiji, both lands where Methodism made a large impact, can be used to illustrate the point.

Wesleyan missionaries arrived on the Gold Coast of west Africa, the modern Ghana, in the 1830s. In preaching the gospel they directly denounced beliefs associated with fetishism and they condemned the dancing that they would have censured at home. But, with a certain insensitivity, they went beyond these unavoidable challenges to raise objections to other practices. It was the custom on the Gold Coast to contribute to the cost of non-Christian funeral rites for fellow-members of a clan, a useful way of spreading the expenses over more than the immediate family. George Wrigley, who served as the second Wesleyan missionary from his arrival in 1836 until his early death the following year, was asked how believers should behave when called upon to pay their share. His unequivocal reply was that church members could not contribute and remain Christians. Ignoring the latitude on such matters suggested by the New Testament's discussion of food sacrificed to idols, he attacked such 'vain and foolish customs'. (Bartels, 1965:26) As in most parts of Africa, there was also tension over marriage. Polygamy was normal on the Gold Coast, but the missionaries required converts to put away all but one of their wives. What further rules should be enforced in this minefield of relationships was a matter of debate. Eventually the local synod

determined in 1885 that no member should marry a non-Christian; that no woman should marry a man already a husband; and that no polygamist was to be accepted into membership. It was left to superintendents to consider on its merits each case of a wife of a polygamist applying for membership. (Bartels, 1965: 135-6) Once more, although some missionaries were concerned to respect what was called 'native marriage', the more rigorous were inclined to ride roughshod over deeply entrenched local custom. In the case of funerals, and sometimes in the case of marriage, there was a failure to give indigenous culture its due.

Yet Ghana also provides evidence of some of the ways in which Methodism could contribute to local culture. Western practices were perceived by the people of the region as hugely beneficial. Church plantations near chapels showed the value of cultivating cotton, arrowroot, olives, vines, cinnamon, black pepper, mango and ginger. The techniques of the carpenters and bricklayers introduced from the coast to erect chapels in the interior were copied by the builders of private houses. Agriculture and architecture, in the eyes of the locals, were transformed for the better. (Bartels, 1965: 69, 54) Perhaps the greatest revolution was in education. Schools sprang up beside the chapels, training children in literacy skills and sometimes in elementary accounting and translation from the local language of Fante into English. Wrigley learned Fante as soon as he arrived, being able to preach in the language within a year. He translated the catechism, the ten commandments and portions of the New Testament into Fante before his untimely death; the first Fante primer was printed in 1863; and by the 1880s several titles were available in the tongue of the people. The effect, as in many other lands, was to generate a written literature where none had previously existed and so to preserve some of the riches of Fante culture. (Bartels, 1895: 62, 66, 22, 79, 96) Methodism inspired equally important developments in music. Singing bands from the Sunday schools accompanied preachers to outlying villages. The children's

Band of Hope generated vernacular singing that was taken up by skilled choirs. The traditional African ‘lyric’, a type of solo and chorus in free rhythm including improvisation, counterpoint and conclusion in a minor key, was retained and elaborated in the church. (Bartels, 1895: 135, 82, 234) As in the English-speaking countries, Methodism’s creativity was specially marked in song.

The second case-study, the Fiji archipelago in the South Seas, was also reached by Wesleyan missionaries in the 1830s. By 1874, the year the islands were transferred to British rule, there were over 25,000 members and five times as many attenders. Methodism had become the Fijian folk church, closely identified with land, chief and people. Even though the substance of the social fabric was Christianised intact, various customs came under the censure of the missionaries. Polygamy was challenged: one prominent chief put away seventy-eight wives on conversion. The semi-naked appearance of the people was superseded by wrap-around clothes. So closely was the apparel identified with the new faith that pagan tribesmen demanded that converts should return to the old ways by calling upon them to ‘strip or die’. (Thornley, 2002: 508, 176, 350) Missionaries successfully opposed boxing and wrestling but found it impossible to extinguish dancing, which persisted in church life. (Gunson, 1978: 182. Forman, 1996: 9) They also found the Fijian addiction to *kava*, a mild stimulant, a persistent problem. ‘What opium is to China’, wrote one of them, ‘*kava* is to Fiji.’ In the 1870s expulsions for intoxication equalled those for every other cause put together. (Thornley, 2002: 187-8, 484) Work on Sunday was banned, though the strict sabbatarian practice seems to have owed more to the zeal of the Fijians than to the sternness of the missionaries. (Forman, 1996: 7) The pagan custom of amputating the fingers of the dead was abandoned, probably largely spontaneously, and so was cannibalism. John Hunt, a leading missionary in the islands, noted in his journal in 1844 that a recent victim of the

internecine wars was brought to his island 'to be eaten'. (Thornley, 2002: 83; Kanailagi, 1996: 68) Ten years later, by contrast, pagans were astonished when a newly converted chief returned bodies to his enemies rather than consuming them. (Thornley, 2002: 73) It is not surprising, in the light of the various practices under assault, that the unconverted peoples saw the new religion as an agent of destruction. In a broader perspective, however, it might be thought that some of this transformation was a welcome change.

Methodism also acted creatively in Fiji. Missionaries encouraged the production of coconut oil, which was transported to Sydney in a vessel called the *John Wesley* and sold to defray some of the costs of the mission. Elaborate churches were erected in stone. (Thornley, 2002: 228, 359) So, as in Ghana, there were developments in agriculture and architecture that the inhabitants greeted with delight. Some of the novelties were patterned on Western models: that was true, for example, of the annual missionary meetings, when the Fijian women gleefully wore new clothes, ribbons and hats. Other fresh practices, however, had the authentic flavour of the South Seas. That was true, for instance, of the feasts that normally followed morning service. (Thornley, 2002: 489; Forman, 1996: 8) The language was turned into script for the first time by the early missionaries, with the New Testament being issued in Fijian in 1847 and the Old Testament following in 1865. The mission promoted education in the vernacular to enable the rising generation to read their Bibles. By 1874 nearly 50,000 children were in school. (Thornley, 2002: 192-3, 191, 508) And there was inventiveness in the area of music. Traditional Fijian chants were associated with the calling of spirits and so discouraged, but a visitor to the islands in 1849 observed that Methodist services were partly chanted in the old manner, sometimes inducing pagans to come in. (Jakes, 1996: 116; Thornley, 2002: 24) Although one missionary spoke disparagingly of schools teaching 'unnecessary songs and ridiculous dances', instruction in singing became a

regular feature of education. Another missionary commented that ‘Singing is peculiarly a happy employment to the Fijian, in fact at certain times it seems to take the form of meditation with them.’ (Thornley, 2002: 353, 191, 241). In Fiji, as in Ghana, music was a dimension of life in which Methodism successfully promoted the merger of gospel and culture.

Cultural innovation, however, was not confined to the mission field. Another powerful current in Western civilisation impinged on religion during the nineteenth century. The new mood, Romanticism, developed in pioneering literary circles, especially in Germany, from the last years of the eighteenth century. In Britain its most celebrated exponents were the Lake Poets, William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, and the historical novelist Sir Walter Scott. In America its early champions were the transcendentalists around R. W. Emerson. The term ‘Romantic’, however, is used here not in a sense restricted to those generations of authors, but rather it encompasses the whole cultural wave that spread out from them, enveloping first some of the highly educated and then a slowly increasing proportion of the population as the nineteenth century wore on. The preferences of the era of Enlightenment were gradually – but by no means entirely - supplanted over the decades. Instead of the Enlightenment exaltation of reason there was an emphasis on will, emotion and intuition. Simplicity was replaced by mystery, the artificial by the natural and the novel by the traditional. The new taste underlay the appeal to history of the Oxford Movement in the Church of England and the ornate display of Ultramontane ritual in the Roman Catholic Church. Coleridge was a major inspiration for other Anglicans such as F. D. Maurice who shaped subsequent Broad Church theology. By mid-century members of other denominations such as the American Congregationalist Horace Bushnell began to be deeply swayed. So

Romanticism exerted a powerful influence over the direction of Christian thought in the Victorian age. (Bebbington, 2005: 139-72)

What was initially most striking about Methodism was its stout resistance to the trends of thought associated with Romanticism. Daniel Whedon, editor in America of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* from 1856 until his death in 1885, took the stemming of the Romantic tide as his mission. The notion that human beings grow organically like flowers or trees, a commonplace of the novel body of ideas, had been turned by Bushnell, in his *Discourses on Christian Nurture* (1847), into the notion that families should enable their children to develop Christian character without any sudden change of direction. In 1861 Whedon denounced the second edition of Bushnell's work for ignoring the cruciality of radical conversion. Whedon's continuing allegiance to the older way of looking at the world derived from the Enlightenment is plain in a diatribe that was published after his death. He wanted to uphold the appeal to 'Christian FACTS' for which William Paley, the Anglican apologist of the late eighteenth century, had been celebrated: 'we would not give one ounce of Paley's evidential sense for the entire volume of transcendental gas that exhilarates the brains of ...glowing intuitionists'. (Scott, 1993: 283n, 284) Likewise in England W. B. Pope, the author of the most authoritative systematic exposition of Methodist theology of the century, took pains to rebut both Coleridge and Maurice. (Langford, 1998: 63) The refusal to draw on the theological currents flowing from the Romantic fountainhead is particularly evident in eschatological attitudes. Romanticism had revived the premillennial teaching that the second coming of Jesus was imminent, but Methodists adhered to the postmillennial doctrine that there would be a steady improvement of earthly conditions before the return of the Lord. Thus Mark Guy Pearse, a prominent English Methodist preacher, had 'a firm belief that the world was getting better'. (Unwin and Telford, 1930: 233) Still in 1914 at a representative

premillennialist conference in Chicago only 8 out of 269 delegates were Methodists. (Spann, 2005: 206n) For many years few Methodists were willing to modify the fusion of theology with Enlightenment assumptions that had marked their founder.

Only a few isolated individuals found it possible to combine strong Romantic traits with Methodist commitment. One was James Smetham, a painter in the high Victorian years who was at the heart of Methodism. His father was a minister; his brother, two uncles, three cousins, two brothers-in-law and a nephew were either travelling or local preachers. He himself was a class leader and a Sunday school teacher. But he was also an artist, producing sketches, oils and water colours in a variety of genres, his atmospheric pastoral landscapes being considered his greatest achievement. He aimed to blend his Methodism with his talent, holding, as he put it in 1853, that ‘the business of art should be to create spiritual perceptions’. Like most contributors to the visual arts of his generation, Smetham’s oeuvre was moulded by Romantic influences. He was deeply swayed by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe; he loved the poetry of Shelley, Keats and Tennyson; he praised George Eliot’s writing because it was ‘all NATURE’. Admiring J. M. W. Turner’s artistic accomplishments, he was on close terms with John Ruskin, the greatest of Victorian art critics, and closer terms with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelite painter. Smetham shared the mediaeval enthusiasms of so many creative artists, taking particular pleasure in illuminated manuscripts. His feeling for mediaeval themes was not necessarily reciprocated by his Methodist patrons. A painting of the Saxon poet Caedmon singing to an abbess and nuns, though sold to a prosperous layman, was dismembered by the purchaser, Caedmon being retained but the popish figures being discarded. Altogether Smetham possessed a love for what he once called ‘the ROMANTIC mood’. He was therefore prepared to break with some of Wesley’s more rational recommendations such as the preacher’s discountenancing of play for children. But Smetham, who suffered from an obsessional personality disorder,

found it acutely difficult to adjust his profession as a painter to his allegiance as a Christian. In 1863 he wrote that ‘to be at once Artist and Methodist is a puzzling position in the universe’. He refused to court art critics and potential buyers, considering their circles ‘worldly’, and so never achieved the breakthrough to celebrity that he craved. Becoming chronically depressed, he was ultimately classed as insane. If Smetham illustrates that Methodism could be combined with avant-garde creativity in the Victorian years, it also confirms that the task was fraught with tension. (Casterns, 1995: 71, 65, 120, 49)

Social change in Western lands was drastically transforming Methodism at the same epoch. The growing wealth of Britain, the first industrial nation, and the rising prosperity of America, by the later nineteenth century overtaking Britain in many fields of enterprise, meant that Methodism soon contained a wealthy commercial elite. Men such as Samuel Budgett, a Bristol grocer, could amass huge fortunes and, remembering the advice of Wesley, give much of it away in philanthropy. Budgett’s achievement was celebrated in an oft-reprinted biography by William Arthur, a prominent Wesleyan minister, called *The Successful Merchant* (1852). Likewise the *American Cyclopaedia of Methodism* (1878) included 148 lay members of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) who had made fortunes in business. (Marti, 1993: 267) The managerial style of the movement, allowing immense scope for lay initiative, made it attractive to men keen to imitate the successful. The Methodist artisans of Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century were notably inclined to upward social mobility and their equivalents in Stoke-on-Trent Primitive Methodism often bettered themselves in life later in the century. (Wigger, 1998: 175; Field, 1977: 209) The result of these processes was what historians have summed up as the rise of respectability. In the 1820s the Sunday school publications of American Methodism confined themselves to religious matters, making no mention of questions of gentility, but by the 1850s they were endorsing refined behaviour.

Little girls in one Sunday school now received a penny every time they remembered to wear a bonnet. (Bushman, 1992: 321; Long, 2001: 283) The *Ladies' Repository*, published by the Methodists of New York from 1841, announced in 1850 that, alongside 'pure religion', it aimed to promote 'good sense, sound knowledge, correct taste'. (Gillespie, 1993: 257) Methodists were rising in the social scale and growingly keen to advertise their superior standing.

This steady *embourgeoisement* powerfully reinforced the appreciation of newer cultural values associated with Romantic sensibility. Samuel Budgett's oldest son, James, was a leading patron of James Smetham, encouraging and purchasing his art. A Wesleyan minister who was a close friend of Smetham's, Frederick Jobson, was the author of a book on chapel and Sunday school architecture that commended the Gothic style. (Casteras, 1995: 143, 73-4) In 1855 the first Gothic Revival structure erected by American Methodists was built as Christ Church, Pittsburgh. (Marti, 1993: 266) By 1858, even in Australia, the editor of the Methodist newspaper expressed a strong admiration for Gothic. (*Christian Advocate and Wesleyan Record*, 21 September 1858: 43) In America the Gothic phase was superseded before the end of the century by a general preference for the Romanesque style, with solid masonry and theatrical auditoriums, so that when, in 1891, Christ Church, Pittsburgh, was replaced after a fire, it was rebuilt in the new fashion. Although the fresh idiom still had the mediaeval inspiration so characteristic of those swayed by Romanticism, it possessed the monumentality of commercial and public buildings. (Rowe, 1997: 118; Kilde, 2002: 107) In the grand churches of the cities, whether Gothic or Romanesque, the pattern of worship became much more elaborate and liturgically structured. Thus at Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, Denver, in 1888 the service might contain an organ voluntary, a duet, a tenor solo with chorus, a choral arrangement, a male quartet, a responsive reading, a recitation of the

Apostles' Creed and a unison prayer. It is no surprise that a woman social worker visiting the church felt herself out of place because she wore no kid gloves. (Kilde, 2002: 137-8, 144). The spontaneous cries of old-time Methodist worship had been abandoned, in deference, it was said, to 'the opinions and tastes of so-called refined and cultivated society'. (*Christian Advocate*, 14 January 1892: 17) The worship of Methodism, in content and setting, had been transformed.

Theology followed suit around the opening of the twentieth century, abandoning Daniel Whedon's resistance to Romantic trends. In England, John Scott Lidgett, deeply influenced by F. D. Maurice, published *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (1897). Despite the title, Lidgett's book subordinated the cross to the incarnation in a way previously customary among Anglicans swayed by Romantic feeling; earlier Methodist discussion of the atonement as an exercise of divine sovereignty was dismissed as mechanical; and the stress was now on the personal role of God as Father. (Turberfield, 2003: 46-55) In a very similar way in America, Borden Parker Bowne, whose thought was moulded by the idealist school of philosophy bound up with Romanticism, treated the cross as an episode of the incarnation; he constantly criticised previous coverage of the theme as tainted by 'the mechanical'; and he rejoiced in a new and stronger grasp of the Fatherhood of God. Bowne might have been speaking for Lidgett in celebrating 'a language of poetry, of conscience, of emotion, of aspiration, of religion, as well as a language of logical understanding'. (Bowne, 1909: 65) Both Lidgett and Bowne were accused of heresy, an indication of the revolutionary nature of their views, but an approximation to their stance soon became popular in their denominations. Nine of the leading bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) in the 1920s had been students of Bowne. (Spann, 2005: 201n) In that decade there was a flowering of concern for the aesthetic in American Methodism, with a writer published by the denominational press

arguing for high ideals in music and liturgy and recommending that each church should appoint a ‘Minister of Fine Arts in Religion’. (Harper, 1924: 64) In England the Fellowship of the Kingdom promoted a broader and higher version of Methodist teaching than had previously been current. Robert Newton Flew, one of its leading lights, urged in 1918 that, by contrast with the early Methodist preachers, their modern successors should see ‘a vision of God affirming the world as good, as delighting in the colour and gaiety and many-sidedness of human life, ceaselessly operative as in Nature so among men...and strengthening all impulses after the pure and true and beautiful’. (Wakefield, 1971: 44) Much of the denominational leadership on both sides of the Atlantic in the twentieth century possessed a worldview that was as Romantic as it was Methodist.

From that matrix there emerged some remarkable creative achievements catering for a mass market. In the arts, where there was less resistance than in theology, Romantic assumptions had made headway at an earlier date. In the field of literature, once shunned as worldly, Methodists already played a significant part before the nineteenth century was over. Although there was still much denunciation of popular novels (‘Fetid fiction ruins girls’, declared the *Michigan Christian Advocate* in 1907), some Methodist writers had determined to expel the bad by means of the good. Edward Eggleston’s *The Circuit Rider* (1874) drew on its author’s experience of the Methodist ministry to produce a memorable heroic tale. (Herbst, 2006: 242, 247) In England, two Cornish brothers who began in the ministry, Silas and Joseph Hocking, together with their sister Salome, composed altogether over two hundred novels between the 1870s and the 1930s. If they often lapsed into sentiment and the melodramatic, that formula appealed to the Romantic taste that was permeating a broad public. (Kent, 2002) In the visual arts there was Frank O. Salisbury, a specialist in portraits, book illustrations and the recording of scenes of historic pageantry. Salisbury enjoyed a

friendship with the British royal family and his portrait of F. D. Roosevelt was selected to hang in the White House after the president's death. A devout Methodist, Salisbury cast his thought into a religio-aesthetic mould: 'what is beauty', he asked in 1937, 'but the assurance that we might approach the precincts of God?' (McMurray, 2003: 216) In film, the potent new art form of the twentieth century, perhaps the most enterprising pioneer in Britain was J. Arthur Rank, who was also treasurer of the Methodist Home Mission Department from 1933 to his death in 1972. His early promotion of films was said to have been the result of hearing a bad sermon and looking for a more effective evangelistic medium. By the end of the Second World War he dominated the British cinema industry. (Wakelin, 1996: 215, 42) These British Methodists helped to form the popular culture of the twentieth century.

The Methodism of the United States played a similar role, but in certain instances was closer to the cutting edge of cultural innovation. Among the fine church buildings erected during the interwar years, none is more striking than the Boston Avenue Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, of 1927-29. Tulsa's novel oil wealth allowed the church's minister, John A. Rice, to encourage his building committee to be adventurous. Discarding the original architect's plans, the committee selected Adah Robinson, a Tulsa art professor, and Bruce Goff of the architects Rush, Endicott and Rush for the commission. The result, costing the huge sum of \$1 ½ millions, was a steel and concrete structure clad in limestone. The massive building occupies the whole of a large city block, contains 125 rooms and boasts a tower rising 280 feet into the sky. It is truly Methodist, for among the equestrian statues over the south porch Jesus is flanked by John Wesley and Francis Asbury, but it is also wholly modern, for its design, consistently carried through exterior and interior, is the Art Deco style of the radio age. (Brodrick, 1958: 202-6; Howe, 2003: 302-5) Equally novel was the earliest phase of gospel music. Charles Albert Tindley, the African-American pastor of East Calvary

Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, for thirty-three years from 1900, was an able preacher who catered for his largely middle-class black congregation by preparing songs for church concerts. Taking up traditional themes of black oppression as well as Christian imagery, the songs included 'I shall overcome some day', the anthem of the civil rights movement. Published as a collection, *New Songs of Paradise* (1916), his compositions were to inspire others to launch the career of gospel music as a distinct popular genre. (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990: 360-1; Southern, 1997: 457-8) In their different ways, Boston Avenue Church and Tindley's songs marked the opening of a new cultural epoch.

The novel cultural currents of the twentieth century, in some measure displacing the legacy of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, have been summed up as 'Expressivism'. In a variety of fields, starting with art and literature around the opening of the century, it became fashionable to express whatever was in the mind, including the newly discovered subconscious. The fresh temper affected bodies such as Methodism first through the Oxford Group movement led by Frank Buchman, an American Lutheran minister who specialised in youth evangelism. The Group encouraged adherents to be totally frank with each other about their failings. Although Methodists were sometimes put off by the Group's dropping of hymns for the sake of appearing modern, in the 1930s a number of younger leaders in English congregations were attracted by its insistence on the need for conversion. (Wakefield, 1966: 14) For a while there was a Methodist version of the movement called the 'Cambridge Group'. (Raynor, 1934) By the 1960s the attitudes associated with Expressivism spread to a mass audience, transmitted particularly by popular music. The counter-culture born in that decade became dominant among members of a new generation of young people. The religious equivalent was charismatic renewal, the injection into the historic denominations of an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit previously confined to Pentecostals. Two

English Methodists considered the glossolalia typical of the early phases of the movement to be a form of self-expression comparable to abstract art. Arthur Rank was among those drawn in, but by 1976 the magazine representing renewal enthusiasts in British Methodism had attained a circulation of only 6,000. (Bebbington, 1993: 248, 246; Wakelin, 1996: 207-8) In America the transfer of Oral Roberts, the most prominent evangelist identified with spiritual renewal, to the United Methodist Church in 1968 was a great boost to the charismatic movement in the denomination, but a decade later the American magazine for Methodist charismatics had no more than 12,000 subscribers. (Girolimon, 1995: 94, 100) In the relatively few Methodist congregations where renewal put down permanent roots on either side of the Atlantic, the most striking characteristic by the end of the century was up-beat music. Churches adopting this style had discovered a formula for appealing to young people formed by the culture of the late twentieth century.

In summary, it is clear that the interaction of Methodism with its surrounding culture has passed through many phases. Early Methodists had far tighter bonds with popular patterns of life than has been suggested, and, although they were forward in criticising folkways that fell short of gospel standards, they also made original contributions to their communities, especially through song. The Enlightenment attitudes learned from John Wesley were disseminated through the movement, promoting a devotion to learning but fostering a blindness to cultural relativism. Hence the missionaries could display insensitivity to local traditions, and yet Methodism brought enduring benefits to lands such as Ghana and Fiji. When during the nineteenth century Enlightenment assumptions started to be undermined by Romanticism, Methodists, except in unusual cases, initially proved resistant. The rise of respectability, however, reinforced the appeal of the new taste, which made headway in architecture, worship and eventually in theology. Methodists contributed in

significant ways to fiction, art and film and also, in America, to innovative architecture and music. The Expressivist idiom of the twentieth century did exert an appeal, but only to limited numbers. So Methodism was moulded by the successive waves of influence shaping Western civilisation. In addition it mounted sustained criticism of what it considered wrong with its host culture, whether at home or abroad. But it also proved a creative force, helping to generate new cultural forms with a distinctly Christian aspect. Methodism, we may conclude, was the liberator as well as the prisoner of culture.

Suggested Reading

A succinct theoretical framework for the analysis of gospel and culture is provided by Andrew Walls in the essays in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (1996). Doreen Rosman examines the attitudes of the wider Evangelical movement to works of the imagination in *Evangelicals and Culture* (1984) and David Bebbington explores its relationship to broad trends in Western civilisation in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (1993). David Hempton discusses Methodism in its cultural context in his authoritative *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (2005). John Wigger analyses early American Methodism in its setting in *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (1998). The collection of essays edited by Wigger and Nathan O. Hatch entitled *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (2001) and the earlier collection edited by Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt called *Perspectives on American Methodism* (1993) contain some of the most helpful material on this theme. Two illuminating case-studies may be added: Susan P.

Casterns' *James Smetham: Artist, Author, Pre-Raphaelite Associate* (1995) and Andrew Thornley's *Exodus of the I Taukei: The Wesleyan Church in Fiji, 1848-74* (2002).

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