

Methodism

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EMPIRE OF THE SPIRIT

David Hempton

Yale University Press New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the Annie Burr Lewis Fund.

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Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Baskerville & Bulmer types by Keystone Typesetting, Inc., Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.

Printed in the United States of America by Edwards Brothers, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hempton, David.

Methodism : empire of the spirit / David Hempton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-10614-9 (alk. paper)

1. Methodism — History — 18th century. 2. Methodism — History — 19th century. I. Title.

BX8231.H46 2005

287'.09'033 — dc22

2004024637

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Louanne, Stephen, Jonney, Winnie, and Margaret, with love

And this blessed gift of venerating love has been given to too many humble craftsmen since the world began, for us to feel any surprise that it should have existed in the soul of a Methodist carpenter half a century ago, while there was yet a lingering after-glow from the time of Wesley and his fellow-labourer fed on the hips and haws of the Cornwall hedges, after exhausting limbs and lungs in carrying a divine message to the poor.

That after-glow has long faded away; and the picture we are apt to make of Methodism in our imagination is not an amphitheatre of green hills, or the deep shade of broad-leaved sycamores, where a crowd of rough men and weary-hearted women drank in a faith which was a rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy. It is too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers, and hypocritical jargon — elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters. That would be a pity.

— GEORGE ELIOT, *Adam Bede* (1859)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
INTRODUCTION: Methods and Methodism	1
ONE. Competition and Symbiosis	11
TWO. Enlightenment and Enthusiasm	32
THREE. The Medium and the Message	55
FOUR. Opposition and Conflict	86
FIVE. Money and Power	109
SIX. Boundaries and Margins	131
SEVEN. Mapping and Mission	151
EIGHT. Consolidation and Decline	178
NINE. Methodism's Rise and Fall	202
APPENDIX: Methodist Membership and Rates of Change, United States and United Kingdom	211
<i>Chronology</i>	217
<i>Notes</i>	227
<i>Suggestions for Further Reading</i>	259
<i>Index</i>	269

Methodism

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Methods and Methodism

A revealing encounter took place between two eminent Victorians at a public meeting in Oxford in the early 1880s. Hugh Price Hughes, arguably the most influential figure in late-Victorian Methodism, who was then stationed in Oxford, asked the chair of the meeting, Mark Pattison, the distinguished scholar and rector of Lincoln College, why the university had no adequate memorial to John Wesley. Lincoln was of course Wesley's old college, and Pattison, no lover of religious enthusiasts, rankled at Hughes's suggestion that Wesley was one of the "greatest sons" of the university. Pattison, after all, had been one of the seven contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (1861), a controversial volume extolling the free handling of "religious and moral truth." Pattison's essay, "Tendencies of Religious Thought in England, 1688–1750," runs for more than eighty pages, but John Wesley's name is conspicuous by its absence, and Methodism itself is referred to as somewhere near the opposite pole of reasonable religion. Hughes responded that he was astonished by the university's neglect of the founder of a religious movement numbering some 25 million people throughout the world. Pattison interjected that Hughes surely meant to say 25 thousand, not 25 million. Hughes rummaged in his coat pockets for the statistics that would prove his case, but digits alone could not overcome Pattison's display of Oxonian chauvinism.¹

Hughes was put down in the intellectual heavyweight Pattison's own Oxford ring, but he was in fact correct. When some years later the aptly named Methodist trio of W. J. Townsend, Herbert B. Workman, and George Eayrs produced their *New History of Methodism*, in 1909, they included a table of world Methodist statistics showing that there were in existence some 8.7 million Methodist church members and around 35 million Methodist worshippers spread over six continents. (Historians conventionally multiply Methodist membership figures by between three

and five to estimate adherents.) By the end of the nineteenth century a new and formidable empire of the spirit had come into existence. Moreover, if one takes seriously the recent work of historians and sociologists who argue that the explosion of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century (ironically just taking off when Methodism's *New History* appeared) can best be explained as a much-modified continuation of the Methodist holiness tradition, then at least another 250 million religious enthusiasts could be added to the statistical heap. The speed of Pentecostal growth in Africa, South America, and Asia is staggering. Philip Jenkins states, "According to current projections, the number of Pentecostal believers should surpass the one billion mark before 2050." By then there will be almost as many Pentecostals as Hindus, and twice as many as there are Buddhists. Those like Pattison who find the heap of religious enthusiasm too distasteful to contemplate either minimize its size or confine it to the outskirts of their intellectual cities, but its existence still has to be explained.²

The problem before us, therefore, is the disarmingly simple one of accounting for the rise of Methodism from its unpromising origins among the flotsam and jetsam of religious societies and quirky personalities in England in the 1730s to a major international religious movement some hundred and fifty years later. During that period Methodism refashioned the old denominational order in the British Isles, became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States on the eve of the Civil War, and gave rise to the most dynamic world missionary movement of the nineteenth century. For all these reasons, there are grounds for stating that the rise of Methodism was the most important Protestant religious development since the Reformation, yet it remains remarkably under-researched, not least because of the problems raised by Methodism's expansion across national boundaries.

Taking Methodism seriously as a transnational religious movement introduces obvious complexities. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, before the explosion of scholarship fueled by the rise of the modern universities, the editors of Methodism's *New History* stated that "the task is too large, its relations are too numerous and indefinite, for any one mind, however well stored, to appreciate them all," and farmed out their project to an international team of scholars, all of them Methodists, ironically confirming Pattison's statement in *Essays and Reviews* that "we have not yet learnt, in this country, to write our ecclesiastical history on any better footing than that of praising up the party, in or out of the Church, to which we happen to belong." Since the publication of the *New History* single minds have grappled with parts of the problem, usually

THE
Oxford Methodists :

Being some ACCOUNT of a
Society of Young Gentlemen

IN
That CITY, so denominated ;

Setting forth their
RISE, VIEWS, *and* DESIGNS.

WITH
Some Occasional REMARKS

ON
A LETTER inserted in *Fog's Journal* of
December 9th, relating to them.

In a LETTER from a Gentleman near
OXFORD, to his Friend at LONDON.



L O N D O N :

Printed for J. ROBERTS, at the *Oxford-Arms*
in *Warwick-Lane.* 1733.

Title page from *The Oxford Methodists* (1733), the work in which John Wesley's name was first associated with the term "Methodist" (Courtesy of the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester)

within the narrow confines of national historical traditions, but Methodism, as the *New History's* statistics amply demonstrate, was an international movement. By the end of the nineteenth century fewer than 10 percent of Methodists lived in the British Isles. By then the United States, with over 75 percent of church members, had emerged as the powerhouse of world Methodism. There were, for example, considerably more African-American Methodists in the United States than the entire Methodist population of Europe, where the movement originated. That fact alone should be of interest to those seeking to explain the different secularization trajectories of the United States and western and central Europe. It is possible to argue, for example, that western Europe's greater secularism in the twentieth century is at least partly owing to the comparative failure of populist religious movements in the nineteenth century. Such a response, of course, only pushes the question of secularization back one stage, but it is at least a more fruitful line of inquiry than some of the material produced on this subject.³

How then is the rise of a great religious movement to be explained, and what is the approach to be followed in this volume? I should perhaps start with my own interest in the Methodist movement, which goes back over a quarter century. It all started, as it did for many people who came of age in the 1960s, with Edward Thompson's brilliant book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which sat on the shelves of many a history undergraduate as a kind of status symbol or bookend. That thundering chapter on Methodism, "The Transforming Power of the Cross," with its Blakean prose and Muggleonian Marxist ideology, has a fierce intellectual power and stylistic affluence not easily forgotten.⁴ Having grown up in Ulster, where the fusion of religion and politics is intravenously injected at birth, I chose not to believe Thompson's Marxist/Freudian portrayal of Methodism and popular politics in England during the industrial revolution. My first book, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850* (London, 1984), was an attempt to show why. The task seemed to be not too difficult, for Thompson did very little primary research on Methodism in early industrial England, and graduate students are always eager to tilt at their intellectual superiors. But I later learned that Thompson had something that I underestimated at the time: Methodism was in his genes, as it was in some other great Marxist historians of the twentieth century. "The Transforming Power of the Cross," whatever its methodological deficiencies, was both genetic and splenic, and as such it went much deeper than mere ideology, far beyond the reach of a mere graduate student.

My second book on Methodism, *The Religion of the People: Methodism*

and Popular Religion, c. 1750–1900 (London, 1996), was a set of exploratory essays seeking fresh ways to look at Methodist growth and experience. By then it had dawned on me that Methodism was not merely an English movement but had roots in European Pietism, spread rapidly for a time in Ireland and Wales, and more significantly crossed the Atlantic to North America where it achieved its greatest nineteenth-century gains. It was clear to me that any account of Methodism that failed to take into account its international dimensions was by definition incomplete, perhaps even dangerous, for it had become fashionable within the academy to think of Methodism as the religious product of a particular national historical tradition. Several other matters had also become clearer. First, Methodism was predominantly a women's movement and needed to be treated as such. Second, it was also a movement of people who claimed a particular kind of religious experience that was difficult for us moderns to understand, but could not be avoided. Third, Methodism's sheer complexity as a religious movement required a wide range of investigative techniques to get somewhere near the heart of it. With varying degrees of success, I experimented with legal history, biography, literature, and various other tools pioneered by exponents of what was then known as "popular religion," and has now been defined somewhat differently, if scarcely more satisfactorily, as "lived religion."⁵

Bearing in mind the three-strikes rule of American baseball and California law enforcement, one should probably have settled for two swings at the target and retired to the dugout. The reason for a third book on Methodism is a strong conviction that there is still something worthwhile to be done that has not been done. This conviction came after circumstances permitted a much deeper acquaintance with Methodism on the American side of the Atlantic. First I had seen Methodism as an English phenomenon, then as a British Isles movement, and now as an international movement. Although I had not self-consciously conceived of it in this way, it has become clear that my Methodist pilgrimage follows closely recent trends in the writing of English history in the early modern period as it slowly expanded to take account of the rest of the British Isles, Europe, North America, and the Empire. It was no accident, therefore, that my first book on Methodism was written largely in Britain, the second in Ireland, and the third in the United States.

Ever-expanding geographical horizons is only one part of the story, however. As the horizon receded so too did the conceptual frameworks within which much of my earlier work had been constructed. It was not just that Methodism moved from place to place and therefore needed to be contextualized, vital though that task is, but that the movement was

somehow greater than the sum of its parts, and could not be reconstructed simply by aggregating its regional manifestations. That realization determined the structure of the present book. One way of writing an international history of Methodist expansion is to approach it in the same way as Townsend, Workman, and Eayrs planned their *New History of Methodism* almost a century ago. First they tried to place Methodism in the life and thought of the Christian church, and then they parceled out “Methodism beyond the seas” to an international team of Methodist worthies with resident expertise in particular countries. They produced an excellent institutional history of the Methodist empire, the publication of which coincided with the high-water mark of the British Empire on the eve of the First World War. It would be tempting to reproduce their model a century later by assembling a team of scholars to write on Methodist growth in particular locations, but there are two problems with such an approach. The first is that it would be difficult to improve upon the quality of local, regional, and national histories of Methodism already published, especially those produced within the last twenty years, when historians of Methodism broke free from the partisan ecclesiastical and institutional priorities of their predecessors. The second problem with a team approach is that, however impressive the individual contributions might be, the final product would almost certainly lack a unified conceptual apparatus within which the rise of Methodism as a transnational movement could be located.

When this project was first conceived, therefore, the intention had been to organize the book around the chronology and geography of Methodist expansion, a strategy one might employ, for example, to explain the rise of a political empire. The realization soon dawned that it would be almost impossible to improve upon the highly specialized work already in the field, so that one would have ended up either synthesizing or plagiarizing the work of others. Moreover, the rapacious demands of supplying an appropriately comprehensive geographical coverage would have seriously limited the space available for more penetrating questions about the nature of the entire Methodist project and its relation to the world in which it grew. What follows therefore is an attempt to write a history of Methodism as an international movement — an empire of the spirit — by concentrating on eight important themes, each one designed to get beneath the hard surface of mere institutional expansion. Having neither the genius nor the luxury afforded by artistic license, my evocation of Methodism cannot hope to rival Dickens’s portrayal of the dense social fog of early industrial England in *Bleak House* or Conrad’s fictional journey in *The Heart of Darkness*, or even George Eliot’s biopsy of social

tissue in *Middlemarch*, but the same aspiration to penetrate somehow to the heart of something both elusive and important is the motivation for what follows.

Those with even a passing familiarity with Methodism as a religious movement know that it appeared to thrive on the energy unleashed by dialectical friction. It was a movement of discipline and sobriety, but also of ecstasy and enthusiasm. It was a voluntary association of free people, but also specialized in rules, regulations, and books of discipline. It railed against riches, but became inexorably associated with the steady accumulation of wealth. It once prided itself on its appeal to the unlearned, but then founded educational institutions with unparalleled fecundity. With the power of Methodist dialectics in mind, therefore, I have chosen to organize each chapter around parallel or competing concepts.

“Competition and Symbiosis” is an attempt to explore the growth of Methodism across the North Atlantic world by applying a metaphor derived from evolutionary biology. Methodism was a missionary organization that thrived on mobility and expanded in association with the rise of markets and the growth of empire. What gave it its competitive advantage over scores of other populist religious traditions, and why did it grow in some places but not in others? By examining case studies on both sides of the Atlantic the chapter shows how Methodism forged a symbiotic relationship with its host environments. The closer the environmental fit between species and habitat, the faster and more sustained was the growth.

“Enlightenment and Enthusiasm” shows how these apparent extremes on the eighteenth-century religious scale were brought into dialectical tension by a movement that owed more to enlightened thought than its critics were prepared to accept. Methodism was not a product of the Enlightenment in any neat formulaic sense, but both its theology and its ecclesiology owed a great deal to Lockean empiricism and contractualism. Wesley was without doubt an enthusiast, albeit of a particular kind, but he also absorbed, both consciously and unconsciously, some of the characteristic ideas of the Enlightenment. The contents of Methodist archives throughout the world display the trace elements of Methodism’s origins in enthusiasm and enlightenment as children carry the genetic codes of their parents.

“The Medium and the Message” is an attempt to get to the heart and center of the Methodist *message* and how it was *heard* and *experienced* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Too often the Methodist message is reduced to its theology and enters the world through learned discourse with printed texts, but that is not what made the movement fizz. The

chapter paints two triptychs, one of birth, life, and death (in Methodist parlance, conversion, sanctification, and holy dying) and another of hymns, sermons, and social gatherings. What was Methodist noise and how was it heard and appropriated by women and men? (Women were almost always the majority.) How did the noise and the experience vary from place to place and even from continent to continent?

“Opposition and Conflict” is based on the idea that opposition to Methodism is revealing both of the kind of movement it was and of its interaction with the communities in which it took root. Vigorous opposition shows that something important is at stake and sensibilities are being offended. In England early Methodism was thought to be disruptive and divisive in families and villages. Methodists were accused of fragmenting communities, disrupting work, stealing money, hosting orgies, inducing madness, and reviving Puritanism. No matter that many of these allegations were contradictory; what mattered is that they were made. In America Methodists were accused of promoting ignorance, enthusiasm, and hypocrisy. The pattern of opposition to Methodism varied with location, changed over time, and became less intense as Methodism became more respectable. Moreover, conflict within Methodism is as revealing as opposition to it. Methodism as a voluntary religious association had a way of transmitting wider social tensions into internal disputes about governance and policy. Discord within Methodism not only was a product of an egalitarian message and an authoritarian ecclesiology but also was suggestive of the stresses and strains affecting the wider society. Methodism acted as a litmus test of social tension.

“Money and Power” is an ecclesiastical version of the Watergate injunction to “follow the money.” Being neither a state church nor a federation of gathered congregations, the financing of Methodism in its great age of expansion is a complex and almost completely neglected area of study. It is also profoundly revealing of the kind of movement it was and how power was distributed within the connection. In religious organizations, as in other large corporations, money and power are rarely separated for very long, and so it was with Methodism. The way money was raised in Methodism, the purposes for which it was spent, and how fund-raising changed over time are all deeply illustrative of the wider values of the movement. Comparing and contrasting the financing of British and American Methodism is another way of penetrating to some important differences between the two most significant early traditions of Methodism.

“Boundaries and Margins” attempts to explain why Methodism recruited so prolifically among “the lower orders,” women, and African Americans. Some Marxist and some feminist historians find no difficulty

interpreting Methodism as a form of social or gender control, but the evidence is never unambiguously supportive of such an interpretation. No doubt Methodism could operate as a form of social control, and no doubt it was appropriated by many as a way of absorbing the shock of social change, but there is compelling evidence also to suggest that women, African Americans, and workers *chose* to be Methodists because it offered them tangible benefits of various kinds. Methodism's sober disciplines and tender pieties were not to everyone's tastes, but they were embraced by people who had opportunities to choose alternative forms of religious affiliation, or none, and chose neither of those options.

"Mapping and Mission" is an attempt to look at Methodism's rise to globalism in the nineteenth century on the back of two expanding civilizations, British and American. Ironically a populist religious movement was the beneficiary of the trappings of power and empire, including military conquest, commercial exploitation, and cultural imperialism. In each new space in different continents Methodism established something of its distinctive religious style. Sometimes the conflicts inherent in such transactions echo earlier controversies within Methodism as it spread throughout the British Isles and then across the Atlantic. Tensions soon arose between denominational planning and individual initiative, between bureaucratic control and personal inspiration, and between cultural conquest and inter-cultural negotiation.

"Consolidation and Decline" looks at the ways in which a populist religious association became a settled denomination and then began to experience declining growth rates. Wesley left his successors in Britain and North America with an unenviable task. Methodism's rambling connectional structure was a nightmare to govern. In the early nineteenth century the problem was less acute in America than in England because the ever-expanding frontier allowed for the possibility of Methodism marching to its old tunes. But sooner or later in every country in which Methodism established a large presence, the problems posed by connectional governance and administration had to be faced. Was Methodism's path to denominational consolidation and decline in the West the inevitable product of its transition from a revival movement to a settled church, or did Methodist leaders fatally embrace wrong strategies? What does the decline of Methodism in the West reveal about wider patterns of secularization as the center of gravity of world Christianity inexorably shifted from the developed northern and western hemispheres to the undeveloped southern and eastern hemispheres? Does the Methodist holiness tradition live on in the worldwide expansion of Pentecostalism, or is it essentially a new movement with different characteristics?

Each of these chapters has an independent claim to reveal something profound about the heart of Methodism, but together they show also the elusive nature of a religious movement that by the end of the nineteenth century had attracted the loyalty of more than 30 million people on six continents. The two things that can be said with certainty about Methodism are that it grew prodigiously from its roots as a tiny religious society within the Church of England in the 1730s to a major worldwide denomination, and that historians will continue to disagree vigorously about why such growth took place and what were its consequences. My aim has been to make a contribution to that debate by examining the rise of Methodism as a transnational movement of ordinary people not easily confined to particular times, places, and institutions.