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JOHN WESLEY

Edited by Randy L. Maddox

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Jason E. Vickers

United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio

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FOR

Richard P. Heitzenrater

Exemplary Wesley Scholar and Generous Colleague

I The long eighteenth century

JEREMY GREGORY

John Wesley's long life (1703–91) almost spanned the eighteenth century. Any *Companion* to him needs to provide some sense of this period. Scholarly biographies of Wesley have provided some attention to this topic, of which the most impressive and successful to date is Henry Rack's *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*.¹ Extended treatments of his age by Wesley scholars have been rare and rather unsatisfactory. For example, in 1938, the amateur historian J.H. Whiteley published *Wesley's England: A Survey of XVIIIth Century Social and Cultural Conditions*, as part of the celebrations marking the bicentenary of Wesley's conversion. The book is drawn from secondary sources, aimed at a Methodist readership, and fails to give a coherent sense of the period. However, Whiteley astutely recognized that "the difficulties of the project are manifold, for this is a century of England's story whose details are surprisingly contradictory and elusive."²

Eighty years later, this characterization holds. There is no consensus among professional historians about Wesley's context. Indeed, at present they are probably more divided than they have ever been about how to conceptualize the period in which he lived. Their debates (in which some of the contributors to this *Companion* have made vital interventions)³ are critical because they have a crucial bearing on how we should judge Wesley's significance, what he stood for, and what he achieved. For example, did Wesley "revive" religion at a time when, as many historians have asserted (and Methodist scholars have often assumed), spiritual and religious concerns were ebbing away?⁴ Or rather, did he build on and develop

¹ I am grateful to Henry Rack and Geordan Hammond for their comments on this chapter.

² J.H. Whiteley, *Wesley's England*, 11.

³ See David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland*, and Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*.

⁴ John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleys* (2002).

what some more recent scholars see as an existing vibrant and pastorally dynamic religious culture?⁵ Should he be viewed as opposing or extending the Church of England?⁶ Was he "anti-Enlightenment"?⁷ Or was he actually part of a wider enlightenment trend?⁸ Answers to questions such as these (let alone questions about whether Wesleyan Methodism saved England from having a French-style revolution⁹) are only possible if we have as full an understanding as possible of the period in which Wesley lived.

As this *Companion* will show, Wesley's life and works offer insights for potentially reconciling or reconfiguring the current rival views of the eighteenth century. As someone who lived as long as he did, who traveled, wrote, and said so much (he has perhaps left more of a written record than any other person who lived in the eighteenth century), and who had views and opinions about almost all aspects of his times, Wesley can cast significant light on his context.¹⁰ Thus, whereas studies of Wesley should take account of his context seriously, studies of his age should also pay attention to Wesley. He is of value to a wider group of historians than those associated with the movement he founded.

SCHOLARLY DEBATE OVER THE NATURE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The central difference between the rival views of Wesley's context can be framed sharply by a simple question: Did the eighteenth century mark the founding of modern England/Britain? Stated a bit more elaborately: Did the forces of change signposted by the Glorious, the Agricultural, the Industrial, and the French Revolutions help to transform the time in which Wesley lived into the modern era?

On one side of the debate are historians who affirm the transformative nature of the eighteenth century. In making this case, they have emphasized such topics as the rise of parliamentary government and the development of political parties,¹¹ agricultural change,¹² urbanization and industrialization,¹³ the growth of the middling sort,¹⁴ the birth of a consumer society,¹⁵ and new kinds of print culture.¹⁶ They have also drawn attention to the advance of progressive ways of seeing the world, represented variously as a scientific outlook,¹⁷ the Enlightenment, and the Age of Reason.¹⁸ Stressing how these advancing emphases would marginalize the role of religion and the churches in political, cultural, and social life, some scholars have characterized the period as the start of secularization in modern Britain/England.¹⁹ This view of the eighteenth century as one dominated by modernizing change was shared by most historians who wrote through the nineteenth and the first three quarters of the twentieth centuries, whatever their own political and religious standpoints.²⁰

This reigning view influenced strongly the way that Methodist scholars have understood Wesley's context. In 1909, for example, W.J. Townsend contrasted the period when Wesley was born (which, Townsend said, "was so different . . . from the England of today as to be scarcely recognizable"²¹) with that when he died, emphasizing progress in economic, social, political, and cultural life from around 1760 that

⁵ Inter alia, Jeremy Gregory, "The Making of a Protestant Nation: 'Success' and 'Failure' in England's Long Reformation," in Nicholas Tyacke, ed., *England's Long Reformation, 1500–1800* (1998), 307–33.

⁶ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World* (2000).

⁸ Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (1973); David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (1989), 20–74; and David Hempton, *Methodism: The Empire of the Spirit*, chapter 2.

⁹ Elie Halevy, *The Birth of Methodism in England* (1971); and Halevy, *England in 1811* (1949). For an overview of the debates his work has engendered, see *Religion and Revolution in Early Industrial England: the Halevy Thesis and its Critics*, edited by G.W. Olsen (1990). See also John Walsh, "Elie Halevy and the Birth of Methodism," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975): 1–20.

¹⁰ Malwyn Edwards, *John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century* (1933).

¹¹ H.W. Hall, *The Growth of Parliamentary Politics in England, 1689–1742* (1976). See also his later, *The Early Parties and Politics in Britain, 1688–1832* (1996).

¹² J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750–1880* (1966).

¹³ Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain, 1700–1914* (1969).

¹⁴ Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (1989).

¹⁵ Paul McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1983).

¹⁶ C.A. Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper, 1700–1760* (1962).

¹⁷ H.E. Schofield, *Mechanism and Materialism: British Natural Philosophy in an Age of Reason* (1970).

¹⁸ Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (1990).

¹⁹ Alan D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (1976); and Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1982).

²⁰ This view implicitly owed much to Thomas Babington Macaulay, *History of England from the accession of James II* (1849–61), in particular the famous third chapter, which measured the social improvements in England in the early nineteenth century against the situation in 1685, and which influenced other classic Whig interpretations of the age such as W.H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols. (1904–13), which was cited by Townsend.

²¹ W.J. Townsend, "The Times and Conditions," in Townsend, Workman, and Eayres, *A New History of Methodism*, 2 vols. (1909), 1:77–133; and "English Life and Society, and the Condition of Methodism at the Death of Wesley," 1:335–78; quote on p. 82.

anticipated something like the modern world – with Methodism intimately responding to, and helping to create, the agents of change. In Townsend's view, for example, the Methodist connexion could not have developed without a better road network, while improvements in lighting allowed Methodist evening services to flourish. Conversely, Townsend maintained that Methodism helped to transform social, cultural, and economic attitudes and behavior.²² Similarly, in 1965, in the first volume of *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Sir Herbert Butterfield, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge and an authority on the period, as well as being a Methodist (and for much of his life a lay preacher), contributed an essay on "England in the Eighteenth Century."²³ For someone who had risen to fame with his iconoclastic *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), Butterfield's essay offered a very Whiggish reading of the age, seeing the eighteenth century as increasingly more like the twentieth (whereas the seventeenth century was "a strange, violent, fantastic, baroque world")²⁴, emphasizing "modern" developments in a wide range of spheres and activities, from the creation of the Bank of England to new technologies, better transport links, the rise of political consciousness, and precursors to the theory of evolution. Perhaps above all, and of consequence in a book on Methodism, Butterfield emphasized that this was *the* significant period in what he termed "the Great Secularisation."²⁵

Those historians who came to similar conclusions did so from a variety of perspectives. Some have viewed these as generally positive developments,²⁶ whereas others have bemoaned what they have considered the loss of an organic community (something on which historians from both the left and the right have concurred).²⁷ And – of import for Wesley studies – most historians have tended to agree that religion (for better or worse) was, by and large, of less importance in the eighteenth century than it had been in previous periods.²⁸

²² *Ibid.*, 80, 342, 370–74.

²³ Herbert Butterfield, "England in the Eighteenth Century," in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, edited by R.E. Davies and E.G. Rupp (1965), 13–33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ Porter, *Creation of the Modern World*. Actually Porter's attitude to the place of religion in the Enlightenment was more complex than some of his publications suggest. For a more nuanced picture see his "The Enlightenment in England," in Porter and M. Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (1981), 1–18.

²⁷ See E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76–136, and Peter Laslett, *The World We have Lost* (1965).

²⁸ See C. J. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England* (1992).

Turning to the other pole of the current debate, a growing number of scholars have begun to challenge this long reigning view of the eighteenth century as witnessing the birth of modernity and secularization, and as most like the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These scholars contend that the period in which Wesley lived was more marked by continuities with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where religion, the churches, and traditional orders such as the crown²⁹ and aristocracy³⁰ still dominated, and where older ways of seeing the world, influenced by Reformation paradigms and ways of thought, still controlled habits of mind and patterns of behavior.³¹ A number of historians have also argued that the social and economic developments of the time were less transformative than was once thought, and that, in most regards, these changes were accommodated within long-established forms of organization and behavior.³² Although there were undoubted advances in agriculture and industry, and a marked population growth, these were more evolutionary than revolutionary in character. Indeed, many of the qualitative changes relating to quantitative growth, these scholars contend, happened in the nineteenth rather than in the eighteenth century.³³ Other historians have reassessed our understanding of the "Enlightenment," demonstrating that, in England at least, enlightenment values could go hand in hand with religion.³⁴ Most specifically, the "secularization thesis," which could be taken for granted even by someone as interested in religion as Butterfield,³⁵ and where the eighteenth century was deemed the crucial step on the ladder, has now been criticized from several directions: its start has been delayed until the nineteenth or even

²⁹ Ian Christie, *Stress and Stability in late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1984).

³⁰ John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: the Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (1984).

³¹ See, above all, J.C. D. Clark, *English Society: 1688–1832*, but also Tony Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England, 1660–1760* (2007), and Gregory, "Long Reformation."

³² Ann Kussmaul, *A General View of the Rural Economy of England, 1538–1840* (1990), and Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England* (1996).

³³ Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, 2 vols. (1981); N. F. C. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (1985); and Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures, 1700–1820* (1985).

³⁴ Porter, "England"; and Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*. See also Bebbington, "Revival and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England," in Andrew Walker and Kristin Anne, eds., *On Revival: A Critical Examination* (2003), 71–86, and Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, 32–54. My take on this is that rather than seeing Enlightenment and Evangelicalism/Enthusiasm as polarities, we should acknowledge that what we might term "Enlightenment" includes certain "Evangelical" qualities and vice versa.

³⁵ See his *Christianity and History* (1949); *Christianity in European History* (1951); *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War* (1953); and *Writings on Christianity and History*, edited by C.T. McIntire (1979).

the twentieth centuries.³⁶ Some have argued that in England this only occurred in the 1960s (ironically at just the time when Butterfield was writing),³⁷ others have denied that it has happened at all.³⁸ What was once assumed to be the inevitable trajectory, not only of Western European but of world history, looks less convincing in the early twenty-first century, when religion can be viewed as being at the center of world affairs. Taken together, these re-assessments of the period in which Wesley lived amount to a thorough revisionism of the modernizing and secularizing view of the age (although, of course, not all historians who subscribe to one part of the revisionist program necessarily agree with all of it, and they might be surprised to see their names linked together here).

Although a number of historians, writing on different topics, have contributed to this revised view of the period, the most overt and comprehensive revisionist statement continues to be J.C.D. Clark's highly influential *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (1985).³⁹ This made a powerful case for a wholesale rejection of the modernizing agenda, stressing the central role of the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the Church of England throughout Wesley's lifetime and beyond. Clark applied the concept of "the confessional state" to England between the Restoration of 1660 and the constitutional changes of 1828–32.⁴⁰ In particular, he argued that the political and hegemonic power of orthodox Anglicanism meant that real political radicalism in the period could only be expressed through heterodox theology (thereby challenging the idea of secular political advances). For Clark, the Church's dominant place within the political and social life of the country was strengthened by the Test Acts of 1673 and 1678, which ensured that to hold political

office or to be a Minister of Parliament it was necessary to be a member of the Church of England.

Although, as some of Clark's critics have emphasized, sections of the English population did not conform to the Church,⁴¹ he is surely right to argue that the centrality of the Church's legal position had a profound impact on political and social life. The State, the English universities, the army, and the civil service were Anglican strongholds; and, in the localities, clergy were often the Justice of the Peace, making them responsible for the administration of local government. But, it is perhaps more accurate to describe this position of the Church as an Anglican hegemony (another phrase Clark has used) than as a "confessional state." This alternative description is indicative of the ways in which, although its position was contested, the Church effectively dominated and sought to marginalize those who challenged its social and political role. Many Churchmen believed that the interests of Church and State were in fact inseparable and interdependent, and that enemies of the Church were also enemies of the State.

Clark might have also emphasized that those who see the eighteenth century as forward-looking do not always appreciate how the memory of the 1640s and 1650s when "the world was turned upside down" continued to frighten the majority of the political nation for a century and half after 1660. Not for nothing did Wesley's opponents accuse him of reviving civil war "enthusiasm," particularly as his grandfather had been a supporter of regicide.⁴² A good indication of the interdependence of Church and State can be seen in the Church's response to the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, when the vast bulk of the clergy and the Church's hierarchy supported the Hanoverian regime. In 1745, Archbishop Thomas Herring of York (later archbishop of Canterbury) played a crucial role in forming the Yorkshire association to defend the regime and to raise money for the government. Countering the accusations of his opponents, Wesley too took a strong pro-Hanoverian stand.⁴³

³⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (1975).

³⁷ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001).

³⁸ David Nash, "Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History: Secularization's Failure as a Meta-narrative," *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004): 302–25.

³⁹ Revised in 2000, with an amended chronology extending backwards to 1660 and a new subtitle: *Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Régime*.

⁴⁰ J.C.D. Clark, "England's Ancien Régime as a Confessional State," *Albion* 21 (1989): 450–74. This term had been used by historians of early modern Europe, particularly Germany, to denote the interplay of religion and state building from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. For an analysis of the comparison, see Andrew C. Thompson, "Early Eighteenth-Century Britain as a Confessional State," in Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms, eds., *Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century* (2007), 86–109.

⁴¹ Pendolope Corfield, "Georgian England: One State, Many Faiths," *History Today* (April, 1993): 14–21.

⁴² See *Enthusiasm no Novelty; or the Spirit of the Methodists in 1641 and 1642* (London: T. Cooper, 1739); George Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compared*, 3 parts (London, 1, and P. Knappton, 1749–51); A.T. Blacksmith (sometimes attributed to John Witherspoon), *Enthusiasm Delineated: or, the Absurd Conduct of the Methodists Displayed in a Letter to the Rev. Messieurs Whitefield and Wesley* (Bristol: T. Cadell, 1764); and S. Roe, *Enthusiasm Detected, Defeated, with Previous Considerations concerning Regeneration, the Omnipresence of God, and Divine Grace, etc* (Cambridge, England, 1768).

⁴³ Wesley, *Journal* (18 September–9 October 1745), *Works*, 20:90–94.

This temper continued into the decade after Wesley's death, where the Church was a staunch defender of the government during the French Revolution,⁴⁴ believing that threats to the State would also be destructive to the Church and to true religion generally (leading one to wonder whether it was the Church, rather than Methodism that saved England from having a revolution along French lines).

The revisionist interpretation, particularly Clark's full-blown statement, has provoked continuing debate since the mid-1980s.⁴⁵ Scholars who remain convinced of emerging modernity in the period have expanded their fields of enquiry, authoring exciting studies on the concepts of sociability and politeness, the periodical press, clubs and coffee houses, cultural history, popular politics, crime, sexuality, the body and medicine, consumerism, and women's history and gender history.⁴⁶ Many of these topics are studied within the paradigm of "the public sphere," and most have important bearings on early Methodism, given Wesley's alertness to consumerist techniques, his use of printed media, his interest in science and medicine, the role of Methodist societies as

religious clubs, and the prominence of women in early Methodism. Historians of Methodism are only now beginning to take these findings on board.⁴⁷

On the other hand, a number of publications over the last two decades have confirmed aspects of Clark's interpretation of the age, if not necessarily agreeing with all his conclusions.⁴⁸ Reviewing some of this seemingly contradictory scholarship over fifteen years ago with a question that has not yet been resolved, W.A. Speck not surprisingly asked: "Will the real eighteenth century stand up?"⁴⁹ How far, he wondered, was it a period of secularization and change, anticipating the modern world, or how far was it a more traditional and religious society, with links to the early modern period.

Reflections of the debate in standard assessments of Wesley

These different interpretations of the eighteenth century affect how historians have viewed Wesley himself and early Methodism. Despite the advances of the revisionist viewpoints, the understanding of the eighteenth century as both modernizing and secularizing has had the strongest influence in this regard. In broad terms, it has encouraged scholars to see Wesley and Methodism as counter-cultural – going against the dominant Enlightenment, this-worldly, and a-religious (if not irreligious) trajectories of the day.⁵⁰ Townsend set the precedent in 1909, portraying Wesley as a heroic individual who stood outside the degeneracy of the age.⁵¹ But, within this framework, historians have differed over

⁴⁴ Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (1990).

⁴⁵ For some discussion and criticisms, see Joanna Innes, "Jonathan Clark, Social History, and England's Ancien Régime," *Past & Present* 115 (1987): 165–200; the reply by Clark 117 (1989): 195–207; the special number of *Albion* 21 (1989) which was devoted to Clark's interpretation; G.S. Rousseau, "Revisionist Polemics," J.C.D. Clark, and the Collapse of Modernity in the Age of Johnson," in *The Age of Johnson* 3 (1989), 421–50; Roy Porter, "English Society in the Eighteenth Century Revisited," in Jeremy Black, ed., *British Politics and Society from Walpole to Pitt* (1990), 29–52; the articles by Clark, Porter, and Black in the *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15 (1992): 131–149; and Frank O'Gorman, "Eighteenth Century England as an Ancien Régime," in Stephen Taylor, Richard Connors, and Clyde Jones, eds., *Hanoverian Britain and Empire* (1998), 21–36.

⁴⁶ See respectively: Clive T. Probyn, *The Sociable Humanist: the Life and Works of James Harris 1709–1780* (1991); and Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness* (1994). Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in late Eighteenth-Century England* (1998). Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800* (2000). Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-House: a Cultural History* (2004). Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee* (2005). John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997). Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society* (1997). Robert Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment* (1991). Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century* (2004). For example, Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (2003); and Porter, *Disease, Medicine and Society in England, 1550–1860* (1987). John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *The Consumption of Culture, 1660–1800* (1995); and John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds., *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (1995). Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, eds., *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England* (1997). Michele Cohen and Tim Hitchcock, eds., *English Masculinities, 1660–1800* (1999); and Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, eds., *Women's History, Britain, 1700–1850* (2005).

⁴⁷ But, see Henry Abelow, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (1990) for Wesley and consumerism; Deborah Madden, "A Cheap, Safe and Natural Medicine", for Wesley and medicine; Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (2008) for Methodism and gender; and Barbara Prosser, "An arrow from a quiver". Written Instruction for a Reading People: John Wesley's *Arminian Magazine* (January 1778–February 1791)" (University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2008) for Wesley and print culture.

⁴⁸ See *The Church of England*, c. 1689–c. 1833, J. Walsh, C. Haydon and S. Taylor, eds., (1993). Mark Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth, 1740–1865* (1994). Judith Iago, *Aspects of the Georgian Church* (1996). Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform, 1660–1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their Diocese* (2000). J. Gregory and J.S. Chamberlain, eds., *The National Church in Local Perspective: the Church of England and the Regions, 1660–1800* (2003). W.M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680–1840* (2007). Thomas Secker and the Church of England (2007).

⁴⁹ W.A. Speck, "Will the Real Eighteenth Century stand up?" *Historical Journal* 34 (1991): 203–206.

⁵⁰ Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (2003).

⁵¹ Townsend, "The Times and Condition," 80.

whether Wesley and early Methodism represented a backward-looking force, a throw-back to an age of faith,⁵² or whether he was more forward looking, encouraging new social communities (such as the development of a working class⁵³) and, with his stress on "the religion of the heart," anticipating movements like Romanticism.⁵⁴

By contrast, the emphases of the revisionist standpoint make it possible to understand Wesley as part of, rather than apart from, the dominant habits of thought and behavior of his era. If religion was much more central to the age than the secularization hypothesis would have it, then Wesley looks less like a reaction to his context, and more like a child of his time. Indeed, Clark underlined Wesley's Tory politics and pro-establishment views as part of his argument for the strengths of the confessional state. He highlighted the fact that, whereas Wesley attacked the spiritual and pastoral shortcomings of the established Church, he shared many of its social and political assumptions.⁵⁵

In reaching their various conclusions about the nature of the eighteenth century, historians have sometimes used evidence from Wesley to underpin and support their interpretations. They have drawn particularly on his *Journals*, which offer apparent eyewitness commentary over a period of fifty-five years on the age in which he was living. The *Journals* provide us with a variety of information about Wesley's world, as evidenced by the extraordinarily rich, 160-plus page general index to the *Works* edition.⁵⁶ We find here Wesley's comments on such topics as the state of the roads, the landscape, the weather, the villages and towns he visited, agricultural and industrial changes of his time, as well as comments on the religious temper of the day.

Wesley's *Journals* are so crammed with information about eighteenth-century life that they ought to be mandatory reading for all historians of the period. This wealth of information might tempt one to see Wesley's comments and observations almost as a neutral documentary on his times, furnishing the historian with clear-cut evidence about

what the eighteenth century "was really like." However, the fact that Wesley's words have been used to bolster rival interpretations of the period indicates that this very abundance of detail in the *Journals* makes it possible to find almost anything in them. And, of course, the *Journals* are not unbiased evidence. Like any other source, they come from a particular perspective (often with an axe to grind and a point to make). They were generally written up some time after the events Wesley describes.⁵⁷ Moreover, as in other areas of his word and deed, Wesley's commentary on his times can seem somewhat contradictory. At least it seems so when pressed into an either/or dialectic – such as either "modern" or "traditional." By contrast, John Walsh has suggested a more nuanced reading, portraying Wesley as a both/and personality, who was able to accommodate and combine some of the apparent conflicting tendencies in his context.⁵⁸

Reflections of Wesley's example in a more nuanced understanding of his context

We can find in Wesley aspects of both the "traditional" and the "modernizing" eighteenth centuries. Arguably, he was influenced by, and furthered, both the Reformation and the Enlightenment. This fact should help us recognize that the binary polarities with which we have been inclined to discuss the eighteenth century in Britain/England are rather misleading. We need a more complicated and nuanced account. In particular, we need to resist the inclination (perhaps encouraged by Clark's revisionist manifesto) to align religion one-sidedly with the forces of tradition and continuity. As Roy Porter has suggested, we should not view those perennial concerns of the historian, continuity and change, as being necessarily in antagonism.⁵⁹ Traditional priorities, such as religion, can be agents of change and innovation, as evidenced by the rise of Methodism.⁶⁰ Likewise, new genres and ways of behaving, such as periodicals and clubs (as in the *Arminian Magazine* and the "Holy Club"), can be vehicles for older concerns.

RECOGNIZING THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Disagreement among historians about the period in which Wesley lived has not been limited to alternative assessments of its defining

⁵² This seems to be the thrust of Kent's *Wesley and the Wesleys*.

⁵³ R. F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (1945) and Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*.

⁵⁴ Frederick C. Gill, *The Romantic Movement and Methodism: a Study of English Romanticism and the Evangelical Revival* (1937).

⁵⁵ Clark, *English Society*, 235–39. To be sure, Clark's view of Wesley as an insider within the confessional state has been criticized by David Hempton, who emphasizes Wesley's radicalism and the conditional nature of his submission to the Georgian polity. Hempton, "John Wesley and England's Ancien Régime," in his *The Religion of the People*, 77–90.

⁵⁶ The comprehensive general index, compiled by John Vickers, is in *Works* 24:546–711.

⁵⁷ See W. R. Ward's insightful introduction in *Works*, 181–119.

⁵⁸ John Walsh, *John Wesley, 1703–1791: a Bicentennial Tribute* (1993), 12.

⁵⁹ Porter, "English Society . . . revisited," 32–33.

⁶⁰ See Robert Ingram, *Religion, Reform and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century* (2007).

features. There is divergence even over when it began and ended. Recognizing the artificial nature of defining historical periods by the century marks of a calendar, scholarly accounts of the "eighteenth century" in Britain often start with 1714,⁶¹ 1760,⁶² or even as late as somewhere in the 1780s, as in Vic Gatrell's unabashedly modernist study of eighteenth-century satire.⁶³ Particularly in the latter case, these accounts often run on long past 1800. The result is that the eighteenth century (reckoned by calendar) is split between two historical periods – dividing before and after 1760, or c. 1780.

To take a relevant example, in his contribution to *A History of the Methodist Church*, Herbert Butterfield saw changes on most fronts accelerating with increasing velocity after about 1780, using the metaphor of a tidal wave to indicate that the world after 1780 was qualitatively different from the world before.⁶⁴ But stopping, or starting, the period then (or in 1760) makes little sense when considering someone like Wesley, who lived through these divides.

In part to avoid these difficulties and ambiguities, and to make sense of the eighteenth century as a whole, historians have increasingly found the concept of the "long eighteenth century" useful. This approach has the eighteenth century beginning in 1688/9 (or even 1660), and sees it continuing well into the nineteenth century, to c. 1832 and beyond.⁶⁵ It has the merit of encouraging scholars of the period to encompass both late seventeenth-century and early nineteenth-century developments. Although the validity of this periodization will no doubt continue to be debated, it seems to make sense for someone like Wesley – whose parents, both central figures in his life, were born in the 1660s; whose own wide-ranging theological and religious authorities often came from the last decades of the seventeenth century; and whose immediate followers, as well as some of the practices he advocated (such as dual allegiance to the Church and the Methodist societies⁶⁶) continued for several decades after his death.

⁶¹ For example, W.A. Speck, *Stability and Strife: England, 1714–1760* (1977).

⁶² I.R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain, 1760–1815* (1982).

⁶³ Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth Century* (2006).

⁶⁴ Butterfield, "England in the Eighteenth Century," 22–23.

⁶⁵ Frank O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688–1832* (1997) has enshrined the concept in a book title. See also, Wilfrid Prest, *Albion Ascendant: English History, 1660–1815* (1998).

⁶⁶ See Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (2007); idem, "Croakers and Busybodies: the Extent and Influence of Church Methodism in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries," *Methodist History* 42 (2003): 20–32; Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society* (1995), 23; and the discussion of the 1851 census by John Wolfe, *The Religious Census of 1851 in Yorkshire* (2005).

IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP FOR WESLEY STUDIES

Whether historians accept the implications of the revisionist approach to the eighteenth century or not, our knowledge of eighteenth-century Britain has clearly deepened and become more nuanced over the past two decades. Many of our conventional understandings of the period (on which some Wesley scholarship is still premised) have been challenged or modified. The rest of this chapter will highlight three areas where recent research has made significant alterations to the ways in which Wesley's England has been understood: the state of the Church of England; the relationship between Anglicanism and dissent; and the nature of the British Enlightenment.

State of the Church of England

The most obvious change in our knowledge of Wesley's context is the transformation in our understanding of the eighteenth-century Church of England, and the place of religion more broadly in the period.⁶⁷ Older histories not only viewed this as an age of secularization (as we noted earlier), they portrayed it as a nadir in the history of the Anglican Church.⁶⁸ The ills most often flagged for adverse comment (and which have frequently been cited as explanatory factors in the rise of Methodism) include pluralism, which meant that the clergy were frequently non-resident in their parishes; the issue of tithes, which led to disputes between clergy and those who were not members of the church, and antagonism from parishioners who resented clergy gaining from improvements in agricultural production; the increasing gentrification of the clergy, which supposedly distanced clergy from the great majority of their parishioners; and a slothful attitude to pastoral work, which left their parishioners bereft of pastoral care.⁶⁹ Cathedrals received particularly bad press as being centers of torpor, if not scandal. At the level of high politics, bishops have been blamed for slavishly following the priorities of government ministers (even sacrificing the Church's own

⁶⁷ See note 48.

⁶⁸ See in particular, C.J. Abbey and J.H. Overton, *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London, 1878); John Stoughton, *Religion in England under Queen Anna and the Georges, 1702–1800*, 2 vols. (London, 1878); and J.H. Overton and F.C. Repton, *The English Church from the Accession of George I to the End of the Eighteenth Century, 1714–1800* (London, 1906).

⁶⁹ For modern restatements of these ills, see E. J. Evans, "Some Reasons for the Growth of English Rural Anti-clericalism, c. 1750–c. 1830," *Past & Present* 66 (1975): 84–109; and W.R. Ward, "The Title Question in England in the early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 16 (1965): 67–81.

interests if necessary), and of being voting fodder for the government in the hopes of securing ever more lucrative preferment. At the local level, parish clergy have been criticized for bowing to the requirements of the local elite.

In short, the eighteenth-century Church of England has frequently been a byword for lax standards and pastoral negligence, indicating an institution that had fallen far short of the ideals of the Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or of the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ In this scenario, Wesley (and Methodism) has been seen as a backlash against the pastoral stagnation of the established Church, as well as a counter-cultural throwback to an age of religious fervor and excitement. It is, however, worth stressing that many of the ways in which the pessimistic history of the eighteenth-century Church of England has been written, in both the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, was from what has been called a "Methodist perspective," with Wesley's criticisms of the Anglican Church being cited as proof of the shortcomings of that institution.⁷¹

For many nineteenth-century Churchmen, keen to dwell on the inadequacies of the eighteenth-century Church against which they measured their own successes, Wesley's Methodism was seen as an explicable, if regrettable, reaction against the prevailing lethargy of the age.⁷² In the first half of the twentieth century, Norman Sykes, an Anglican cleric and later dean of Winchester, developed a more positive portrayal of the eighteenth-century Church.⁷³ Sykes pointed out that the Church was more efficient as an organization, and its clergy more hardworking as individuals, than had previously been recognized. To a certain extent the criticism of earlier historians could be shown to be based on the biased opinions of the Church's opponents, or the result of anachronistic expectations, judging the eighteenth-century Church by late nineteenth-century standards.

Building on Sykes, a revisionist school of historians has emerged whose detailed work, particularly on what the eighteenth-century Church was doing at the local and diocesan level, has modified and in

some cases reversed the more negative opinions of some of their predecessors. They have highlighted the Church's successes and its strengths, arguing that in many respects it was more effective in the eighteenth century than at any time since the Reformation.⁷⁴ Perhaps surprisingly for someone who is often seen among the Church's sternest critics, they could cite Wesley in their defense. As late as 1787, Wesley could preach: "It must be allowed that ever since the Reformation, and particularly in the present century, the behavior of the clergy in general is greatly altered for the better... Inasmuch that the English and Irish clergy are generally allowed to be not inferior to any in Europe, for piety as well as for knowledge."⁷⁵

Yet, as might be expected with historical fashions, revisionism has been followed by a post-revisionism, which is wary of some of the upbeat claims of the revisionists and is concerned that they are ironing out some of the real structural and pastoral problems faced by the Church in this period.⁷⁶ W.R. Ward (himself a Methodist), for instance, warned over fifteen years ago that the fashionable rehabilitation of the eighteenth-century Church was going much farther than the evidence warranted.⁷⁷ There is at the moment, then, a debate between optimists and pessimists about the state of the Church in the eighteenth century.

Some recent scholars have maintained that, far from being a corrupt and inefficient institution, the Church had begun to reform itself long before the administrative reforms of the nineteenth century got underway, already clamping down on abuses such as pluralism and non-residence. Other scholars have suggested that the Church of England clergy remained more in tune with popular mores than has often been supposed.⁷⁸

Although historians used to argue that industrialization and urbanization were twin problems for a Church that supposedly did better in a rural context,⁷⁹ we can certainly exaggerate the ways in which these two developments were necessarily detrimental to the life of the Church. For example, it is often suggested that the Church in the eighteenth century failed to build new churches to meet the growth of the towns, and the

⁷⁰ Peter Virgin, *The Church of England in an Age of Negligence* (1989).

⁷¹ The phrase is J.H. Plumb's, *In the Light Of History* (1972), 37. Wesley's negative comments were often taken out of context, and generally were not balanced by the affection that Wesley could feel towards the Church, and in particular its liturgy; cf. Jeremy Gregory, "In the Church I will live and die: John Wesley, the Church of England, and Methodism," in William Gibson and Robert Ingram, eds., *Religious Identities in Britain, 1660-1832* (2005), 147-78.

⁷² For example, Abbey and Overton, *English Church*, 2:57-58.

⁷³ Sykes, *Church and State*.

⁷⁴ See the works cited under footnote 48.

⁷⁵ Sermon 104, "On Attending the Church Service," §16, Works 3:470. This sermon is a defense of the efficacy of the Church, even when clergy might be deemed unworthy.

⁷⁶ M. R. Snape, *The Church of England in Industrialising Society* (2003); Donald A. Spach, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (2000).

⁷⁷ W.R. Ward, "Review of John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment*," *History* 73 (1990): 497.

⁷⁸ Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society*.

⁷⁹ Gilbert, *Religion and Society*.

impression is sometimes given that apart from the fifty new churches act of 1711, which attempted to build new places of worship in newly populated districts of London (with only ten being built), little was done until the church-building explosion of the nineteenth century. In fact, some of the new urban centers like Bath, Warwick, York, and Newcastle provided a rich environment for the Church. In all these towns, and in many others, churches were either recently built or refurbished, congregations were large, and clergy benefited from the pleasures of urban society.⁸⁰ In parts of Lancashire (the area that witnessed the greatest upsurge in population and where industrialization was furthest developed, placing the greatest strain on its resources) the Church, through its use of newly built chapels of ease, was able to accommodate a greater percentage of the population at the time of Wesley's death than it had in 1740.⁸¹ Even in Manchester, whose population growth in the last thirty years of the century astounded contemporaries, the Church was not negligent in providing new places of worship – eight new churches were built in the city, including St Peter's designed by the architect James Wyatt.⁸²

Wesley sometimes blamed the pastoral failings of the Church on the bishops.⁸³ Others have echoed the charge, asserting that bishops were frequently out of touch with their dioceses, being more involved with the House of Lords than with their diocesan clergy. But, this image of bishops as negligent is misleading in many ways. Despite their involvement in politics, it is clear that the Church had many conscientious diocesan, who took care to monitor the clergy under their control and to provide pastoral oversight. Of course there were exceptions, and because there was no system for retirement, elderly bishops might lose a grip on their task, but modern research at the diocesan and local level has revealed much more active leadership than previous historians assumed.⁸⁴ For instance, despite the often-held view that the archbishops of Canterbury in the eighteenth century were by and large unconcerned with the well-being of the Church, several of them during Wesley's lifetime were outstanding administrators, such as Thomas Tenison (1695–1715), William

Wake (1715–1737), Thomas Secker (1758–68), and John Moore (1783–1805).⁸⁵ Throughout the period, a number of diligent bishops can be found. Research into the diocesan archives has uncovered correspondence between bishops (or their officials) and the parish clergy, which indicates that bishops were more in contact with their subordinates than used to be supposed. Of particular interest in recent research are the extensive replies written by clergy to the questions asked by the bishops as part of their (usually) triennial visitation of their diocese. These not only provide us with remarkable information concerning the Church's role in individual parishes (such as its personnel, the number of services offered and who attended, and how often children were catechized), they also provide information concerning the numbers of Catholics and Protestant dissenters in the parish, and the number of inhabitants.⁸⁶ As yet, no one has attempted to collate the evidence from all the dioceses over the century, but some preliminary conclusions can be attempted.

What do we know about the parish clergy in this period (about whom, as individuals, Wesley could be both scathing and admiring)? Much of the writing about the parish clergy in the eighteenth century has been based on literary evidence and has focused on the stereotypes of a clergy divided into the extremes of the fox-hunting parson or the woe-fully poor curate. But, modern studies have indicated that most clergy fell well between these extremes. By and large, the clergy were a graduate profession, and the vast bulk of those who were ordained had either been to Oxford (as had Wesley), Cambridge, Trinity College in Dublin, or one of the Scottish universities. This matched the Church's desire to have a learned ministry, and in its propaganda it liked to contrast this fact with the supposedly unlettered status of its dissenting rivals (a criticism leveled at Wesley's lay preachers too, which explains in part why Wesley

⁸⁰ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660–1770* (1989).

⁸¹ Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society*.

⁸² Chris Ford, Michael Powell, and Terry Wyk, eds. *The Church in Cottonopolis: Essays to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Diocese of Manchester* (1997).

⁸³ *Arminian Magazine* (1781): 492–93 for slurs on some of the people they ordained.

⁸⁴ See in particular, Jago, *Aspects of the Georgian Church*; Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform*; and the essays in Gregory and Chamberlain, eds., *National Church in Local Perspective*.

⁸⁵ Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform*.

⁸⁶ For examples of published visitation returns, and related material, on which much of the following paragraphs are based, see Patricia Bell, ed., *Episcopal Visitations in Bedfordshire, 1706–1720* (2002); John Fendley, ed., *Bishop Benson's Survey of the diocese of Gloucester, 1730–50* (2000); K. Wyn Ford, *Chichester Diocesan Surveys, 1686 and 1724* (1994); Jeremy Gregory, ed., *The Speculum of Archbishop Thomas Secker* (1995); John Guy, ed., *The Diocese of Llandaff in 1763* (1991); S.L. Ollard and P.C. Walker, eds., *Archbishop Herring's Visitation Returns, 1743* (1928–30); Elizabeth Ralph, "Bishop Secker's Diocesan Book," in *A Bristol Miscellany*, edited by Patrick McGrath (1985); Mary Ransome, ed., *The State of the Bishopric of Worcester, 1782–1808* (1968); Mary Ransome, ed., *Wiltshire Returns to the Bishop's Visitation Queries, 1703* (1971); W.R. Ward, ed., *Parson and Parish in Eighteenth-Century Surrey* (1994); and W.R. Ward, ed., *Parson and People in Eighteenth-Century Hampshire* (1995).

was so keen to stress that his preachers should undergo rigorous programs of reading and study). It is true that, as the century progressed, an increasing percentage of clergy came from what might be broadly called the gentry ranks, but the wholesale gentrification of the clergy can be exaggerated. Even at the time of Wesley's death, a significant number of clergy (perhaps well over a quarter) came from more humble origins and were less likely to have been out of touch with ordinary parishioners than the pessimistic interpretation suggests. Moreover, an increasing number had fathers (as had Wesley) who had also been clergy.

Certainly a large number of parishes, as a consequence of pluralism, were staffed by curates. Some of these lived up to the image of the poorly paid *lumpen proletariat*, but many were at the early stages of their career and would move on to more settled and more lucrative employment. Beneficed clergy (those in permanent employment) were either vicars or rectors: the distinction being that rectors (since they received the tithes on all produce within the parish) were likely to be richer than vicars who only received "small" tithes (usually just on the minor products of the parish). The lot of those who were most poorly remunerated was somewhat alleviated during the course of the century through Queen Anne's Bounty (established in 1704) which, through funds diverted from government resources and by raising extra money, was able to make a significant improvement to the less well endowed parishes.⁸⁷

As far as the pastoral work of the clergy is concerned it is of course impossible to generalize, depending as it did on the inclinations of individuals (although it is clear that bishops were not content with the most minimal pastoral cover). There are examples of negligent clergy, but by and large, the pastoral dedication of the parish clergy is more impressive than the traditionally hostile picture would suggest. The broad results of the visitation surveys indicate that services were regularly given on Sundays, and that the laity were generally happy to attend, as long as there was a sermon.⁸⁸ The furnishings of many eighteenth-century churches, and especially those that were refurbished or newly built in the period, confirmed the ascendant place of the pulpit (and sermon) within the interior of the church. For example, St Ann's, Manchester (built in 1711 from a donation by Lady Ann Bland) had a massive fifteen foot high pulpit, from which Wesley preached in 1738.⁸⁹ The dominance of the pulpit

within the church, and especially the three-decker pulpit (which figured prominently in Hogarth's satirical prints, but who also, of course, satirized the Methodist preacher), was much derided by nineteenth-century Church reformers who accused their forebears of neglecting the sacrament. But, it is indicative of the central role given to the sermon, and of "the word" more generally within eighteenth-century religious life. To a large extent this reflects the influence of the Reformation on the clergy of the eighteenth-century Church, and, indeed, a number of scholars have argued that the chief pastoral aim of eighteenth-century clergy was to continue the work of the Reformers, initiating parishioners into the fundamental message of the Reformation and educating them out of poverty and superstition.⁹⁰

The visitation returns indicate that clergy were involved in catechizing children, although this was usually only for part of the year, and clergy admitted to their superiors that sometimes parents were reluctant to send their children.⁹¹ Another common complaint made by the clergy was the reluctance parishioners had in taking Holy Communion, but whether this was because they devalued the sacrament or they felt unworthy to receive it is not clear. The returns also show a broad difference between rural and urban parishes. In the towns, it was much more common to find weekday services being offered and attended. Some of the larger urban centers had communion once a month and occasionally every Sunday. In rural parishes, by contrast, clergy found it hard to take parishioners away from the agricultural routine. In many rural parishes, weekday services had long since died out. The visitation returns additionally demonstrate the wider role of the Church and the clergy in the life of the parish. Clergy frequently had the role of supervising the local school, managing charitable funds, and organizing poor relief, and as such played a vital role within the parish community. Within these patterns of pastoral provision, Wesley, during his only period as a parish priest while in Savannah, Georgia, can be regarded as something of a model incumbent. He held three services each Sunday, offered the sacrament on a weekly basis and on holy days, held two weekday services, and catechized as a regular part of his pastoral practice.⁹²

⁸⁷ For an up to date discussion of the clerical profession, which synthesizes much of the available research, see Jacob, *The Clerical Profession*.

⁸⁸ See F.C. Mather, "Georgian Churchmanship Reconsidered: Some Variations in Anglican Public Worship, 1714-1830," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 268-69.

⁸⁹ Wesley, *Journal* (19 March 1738), *Works*, 182-30.

⁹⁰ See Jeremy Gregory, "The Eighteenth-Century Reformation: the Pastoral Task of Anglican Clergy after 1689," in Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *Church of England*, 67-83; idem, "The Making of a Protestant Nation: 'Success' and 'Failure' in England's Long Reformation," in Tyacke, *England's Long Reformation*, 307-33; Jonathan Barry, "Bristol as a Reformation City, c. 1640-c. 1780," in Tyacke, *Long Reformation*, 261-84; and Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform*.

⁹¹ Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform*, 223-26.

⁹² Hammond, "Restoring Primitive Christianity," 104, 161-64, 171-73, 351-58.

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the ways in which, long before Wesley's "conversion" in May 1738, Anglicanism had itself been undergoing a movement of renewal and reform. This was witnessed most obviously by the creation of the religious societies (from about 1678, first in London, then elsewhere), the societies for the reformation of manners (flourishing from the 1690s), the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1698, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in 1701 (all of which Wesley was influenced by and drew on), but can also be seen in efforts at Church reform.⁹³ The SPCK fostered a range of activities, including establishing a corresponding society for pooling and collecting information on the Church's work in the localities, encouraging the development of parish libraries, and, increasingly, publishing and disseminating religious tracts and pamphlets as a way of spreading religious education (something which Wesley would also do). During its first thirty years, it also had a special role in encouraging the establishment of charity schools.⁹⁴ The SPG reveals the extent to which the Church in the eighteenth century can be considered to be a missionary Church, recognizing that its mission was not only to its English parishioners, but also to those in its colonies.⁹⁵ Another example of the Church's links with religious groups outside the British isles were the various funds organized by the Church for the support of protestants in Europe who were suffering from persecution by Roman Catholics.⁹⁶ Wesley himself, of course, had contacts and links with a broader European religious context – as revealed, for

⁹³ J. Spurr, "The Church, the Societies, and the Moral Revolution of 1688," in Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *Church of England*, 127–42; Craig Rose, "The Origins and Ideals of the SPCK, 1699–1716," *ibid.*, 172–90; Tina Isaacs, "The Anglican Hierarchy and the Reformation of Manners, 1688–1738," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33 (1982): 391–411; Gillian Wagner, "Spreading the Word: the Church and SPG in North America," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 45 (2003): 65–76; S. Taylor, "Bishop Edmund Gibson's Proposals for Church Reform," in S. Taylor, ed., *From Crommer to Davidson* (1999), 172–186; R.A. Burns, "A Hanoverian Legacy? Diocesan Reform in the Church of England, c. 1800–c. 1833," in Walsh, Haydon, and Taylor, *Church of England*, 265–82; and *idem*, "English Church Reform, Revisited, 1780–1840," in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, eds., *Rethinking the Age of Reform* (2003), 136–62. For ways in which some of these influenced Wesley, see Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 119, 239, 354, 361, 362.

⁹⁴ Craig Rose, "Seminaries of Faction and Rebellion: Jacobites, Whigs, and the London Charity Schools, 1716–1724," *Historical Journal* 34 (1991): 831–55.

⁹⁵ See Hammond, "Restoring primitive Christianity." Although the SPG paid Wesley's salary, he was not a typical SPG missionary under the authority of the bishop of London and the Society. He was licensed by the Georgia Trustees and served as a volunteer missionary; cf. Hammond, "Restoring Primitive Christianity," 324–26.

⁹⁶ Sugiko Nishikawa, "The SPCK in Defence of Protestant Minorities in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 56 (2005): 730–48.

example, by his visit to the Moravian community at Herrnhut within a few weeks of his "conversion" experience.⁹⁷

In all of these areas of concern, the Church proved rather adept at raising funds for its activities and was particularly successful in getting money from the laity for its ventures.⁹⁸ The SPG and the Corporation for the Sons of the Clergy (which supported the widows and the children of deceased clergy) elicited money through annual concerts and services at St Paul's cathedral.⁹⁹ The ability of the Church to extract money from the laity points to one of the most important developments within the Church of England in this period, what has been termed the "laicization of religion."¹⁰⁰ It is this feature, rather than the conventional stress on this being an age of secularization, which is the hallmark of Anglican history of the time. Most histories of the Church concentrate on either the Church as an institution or on the clergy, but it needs to be recognized that (in part as a consequence of the Reformation) a considerable emphasis was placed by clergy on the role of the laity. It could be argued that Wesley's use of lay preachers was extending this to its logical conclusion.

Although as yet there are only a few studies of lay piety, it is clear that a considerable body of people not only attended the services provided by the Church, but also wanted to help the Church in other ways and to participate in debates about religion more generally.¹⁰¹ Several members of the aristocracy, such as the Duke of Newcastle, the Earl of Dartmouth, and Lady Betty Hastings were pious defenders of the Church. Not many lay people joined Samuel Johnson in writing sermons, but the general support for the Church is impressive. The fund-raising activities just mentioned, alongside regular payment of tithes and donations to individual parish churches (most of which dated from the medieval period and were increasingly in need of repair), certainly challenge the view that the Church was increasingly marginal to the life of parishioners.

It has been an axiom of much writing on the Church in the eighteenth century that it had lost its hold over the lower orders (who were

⁹⁷ On wider European links see W.R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (1992).

⁹⁸ W.M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1996), 155–85. ⁹⁹ Jeremy Gregory, "Preaching Anglicanism at St Paul's, 1688–1800," in *St Paul's: the Cathedral Church of London, 604–2004*, edited by Derek Keene, Arthur Burns and Andrew Saint (2004).

¹⁰⁰ Eykoth, *Church and State*, 379.

¹⁰¹ Jacob, *Lay People*; Mark Goldie, "Voluntary Anglicans," *The Historical Journal* 46 (2003): 977–90.

thus ready to follow Wesley).¹⁰² Certainly in this – as perhaps in all periods – signs of disaffection can be shown, particularly towards individual clergy and over particular grievances. But, this did not mean that the Church as an institution had lost its place in the hearts and minds of ordinary parishioners. The famous Church-and-King riots of the early 1790s, which among other things mobbed the dissenter and radical political thinker Joseph Priestley's house in Birmingham and burned his laboratory, were not very edifying, but they indicate that the Church could still inspire popular loyalties.

This review of the scholarship on the Church of England suggests that we should view Wesley's relationship to the Church in which he was born, ordained (by John Potter, then bishop of Oxford, and later archbishop of Canterbury), and, so he claimed, lived and died, in more subtle ways than traditional accounts of the rise of Methodism would have it.¹⁰³ Methodist scholarship is usually premised on the given fact of a moribund and ineffective established Church, but it may be that John Wesley and his brother Charles are evidence of a lively Anglican culture, and that much of what has been considered Methodist innovations should be seen as emerging from within an Anglican Church which was itself experimenting with developments in pastoral care.¹⁰⁴

Relationship between Anglicanism and dissent

It is often said that one of the clearest testimonies to the failure of the Church in the eighteenth century in the pastoral sphere was the existence of dissent, especially of Methodism (sometimes labeled "new dissent"). If the Church was as successful as some of the more optimistic judgments would have us believe, it can reasonably be asked: Why did nonconformity exist? And why did Methodism develop?

It is worth stressing that these factors in themselves are not necessarily a useful guide to the successes or failures of the eighteenth-century Church. In the first place, by the 1730s, several contemporaries were noticing a decline in "old dissent" (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers) as many erstwhile dissenters conformed to the Church of England – including some, like Thomas Secker, a future archbishop of Canterbury, who had initially contemplated becoming nonconformist ministers.¹⁰⁵ The reasons given for the decline in old dissent were varied: some held the interecine wrangling over doctrine

responsible, some pointed to the ways in which the confessional State severely limited opportunities for nonconformists to have significant political, social, and educational positions if they remained outside the Church, and others blamed the decline of old dissent on the effects of the Toleration Act (see below) which supposedly weakened the backbone of nonconformity.¹⁰⁶ Whatever the reason, it is clear that the Church gained from winning over some former dissenters and, as a consequence, the challenge of nonconformity weakened.

Secondly, it is necessary to emphasize that Methodism should be seen, at least in the first instance, as a movement *within* the Church of England, rather than as a dissenting movement outside it. Wesley, the son of the rector of Epworth, remained a member of the Church of England throughout his life (as did George Whitefield and Howell Harris). Although he could be sharply critical of contemporary practice, his energies were devoted to reforming the Church. Moreover, he strove to keep the movement he founded within the Church, by encouraging his followers to attend both Church services and the Methodist meeting, and insisting that Methodist meetings should not clash with the times of church services. While these directions were not universally respected, or put into practice, by his followers, Methodism was more of an Anglican than a dissenting phenomenon at least until Wesley's death in 1791.¹⁰⁷

In this light, it is curious that the current lively scholarship on the Church and the prolific research into Wesley have been kept remarkably separate. For example, the revisionist approach to the Church has seldom brought Methodism into its purview, except to argue that Wesley's criticisms of the shortcomings of that institution were frequently exaggerated, and to suggest that, in many parts of the country, the emergence of Methodism was rather later, and the number of adherents rather smaller, than a triumphalist Methodist reading would have it.¹⁰⁸ Future study, perhaps encouraged by this *Companion*, would benefit from bringing these research strands together.

If recent scholarship has provided a much more up-beat picture of the state of the Church of England, what can be said about the relationship between the Church and dissent? One feature of Wesley's context, which

¹⁰² Richard Brown, *Church and State in Modern Britain, 1700–1830* (1991).

¹⁰³ On this, see the forthcoming University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis by David Wilson, "Church and Chapel: Parish Ministry and Methodism in Madeley, c. 1760–1815, with Special Reference to the Ministry of John and Mary Fletcher."

¹⁰⁴ See, for example the essays by Jeremy Gregory, William Gibson, Colin Haydon, and William Jacob in Gregory and Chamberlain, eds., *The National Church in Local Perspective*.

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert, *Religion*, and Snape, *The Church*, 195.

¹⁰⁶ See Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory, "In the Church I will live and die," 162–64.

¹⁰⁸ See Michael Watts, *The Dissenters*, vol. 1 (1978).

needs to be highlighted here is the "Toleration Act" of 1689. This act is often seen as a concomitant of the Glorious Revolution, maintaining the establishment position of the Church while giving limited concessions to nonconformists. Whereas some clergy sought to have the act repealed and others lobbied to extend its concessions, it served throughout the eighteenth century to sum up the position of the Church of England as established, yet broadly tolerant of at least some of its rivals.¹⁰⁹ Although commonly known as the "Toleration Act" by contemporaries and later historians, this legislation was originally entitled an "act for exempting their majesties' Protestant subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the penalties of certain laws," which indicates that it was less tolerant than has sometimes been suggested. Protestant dissenters could legally worship only in unlocked meeting houses, which had to be properly licensed, and which were served by ministers who subscribed to all of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England except those concerning baptism and Church government. The act clearly proscribed Roman Catholic worship, as well as that of Unitarians.

One of the issues which Wesley faced was whether Methodist meetings should be registered under the act. He strongly resisted this move, arguing that his followers were not dissenters, even though a number of clergy insisted on calling them such. To support his point, Wesley liked to boast that he brought his Methodist people to Church for communion.¹¹⁰ The Toleration Act became important for the self-definition of the Church as one which was charitable and enlightened, at least compared with its competitors. Persecution of dissent was contrasted as a hallmark of popery. Although evidence can be found of mobs stoning and harrying dissenters (including early Methodists), and pulling down their meeting houses, clergy were expected to work within a framework where they persuaded rather than persecuted nonconformists back into the fold. This frame of mind explains in part why clergy were so eager to publish their views in print, as a way of competing with, rather than persecuting nonconformists. Clergy do seem to have generally treated Protestant dissenters with respect. The vicar of St. Lawrence, Thanet, for instance, reported to Archbishop Moore in 1786, with some pride: "I must do all my parishioners, both the Church of England, and likewise the Dissenters, the justice to say that they attend they public worship of God on the Lord's day, at the Church and at the meeting house, with

great punctuality, regularity and decency."¹¹¹ Note how this particular clergyman not only had a positive view of dissenters, he saw both Anglicans and nonconformists as his parishioners – a lingering suggestion of the view that the Church of England had a responsibility for the entire nation.

Of more concern to Anglican clergy was the apparently growing section of the population who did not attend any form of religious worship. Many suspected that the Toleration Act contributed to this problem, by not insisting that parishioners went to the Church of England services, it may have encouraged them to attend no place of worship at all. Whatever the cause, the growing presence of this group offered a place where the Church might join in with the dissenters. This shared pastoral purpose can be witnessed by Anglicans working with dissenters in the societies for the reformation of manners (in the 1690s and early eighteenth century) and in educational projects such as charity schools.

Nature of the British Enlightenment

If scholars of John Wesley could benefit from giving greater attention to the Church of England, there are other ways in which Wesley can be placed more centrally into recent eighteenth-century scholarship with profit. One of the most significant historiographical developments during the past twenty years has been to widen and complicate what might be meant by "the Enlightenment." Traditional scholarship, heavily based on a French model of the Enlightenment, viewed it as an anti-religious force.¹¹² On this reading, Wesley and Methodism more generally could be portrayed as a counter-Enlightenment backlash.¹¹³ More lately, scholars working on British history have contested the notion that the Enlightenment was necessarily anti-religious. Roy Porter, in particular, has argued that in the English Enlightenment piety and reason could work in tandem.¹¹⁴ Concurring, other researchers have shown that it is simplistic to place English Enlightenment figures like John Toland

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform*, 232.

¹¹⁰ Classic studies of the Enlightenment include Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1965); and Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (1967).

¹¹¹ See Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*.

¹¹² Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England," in R. Porter and M. Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (1981), 1–18. In some of Porter's later and more extended considerations of the themes, he tends to see the Enlightenment as a secularizing force. R. Porter, *The Enlightenment* (1990); idem, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2001). See also Sheridan Gilley's pioneering article "Christianity and the Enlightenment: An Historical Survey," *History of European Ideas* 1 (1981): 103–21.

¹⁰⁹ See James Bradley, "Toleration and Movements of Christian Reunion, 1660–1789," in *Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660–1825*, edited by Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett (2006), 348–70.

¹¹⁰ Wesley, *Journal* (28 November 1750), *Works*, 20:370 (9 April 1775), *Works*, 22:447.

within an anti-religious camp. Although Toland was certainly critical of the Church and the clergy, his attacks were based on what he considered to be religious principles.¹¹⁵

Conversely, central religious figures like Wesley fit well in an English Enlightenment framework, complicating the view of him as anti- or counter-Enlightenment. The lynchpin of Wesley's theology was Arminianism and universal redemption – endlessly reiterated in his correspondence, his *Journals*, and his sermons. This was not only the dominant theology of the Church of England (again indicative of the fact that we need to understand Wesley as an Anglican), but its central premises can be understood as chiming in with the Enlightenment emphasis on optimism, human potential, perfectibility, and the essential equality of humankind.¹¹⁶ Wesley's emphasis on evidence and experience can also be seen as echoing Enlightenment traits. This is not to say that Wesley was directly influenced by Enlightenment thought; he was frequently hostile to those classically labeled as Enlightenment figures, such as Voltaire, and there has been a long-standing debate about how far he was Lockean.¹¹⁷ But, there does appear to be at least an elective affinity between his central concerns and those usually viewed as belonging to the Enlightenment.

Going further, it can be argued that the whole thrust of Wesley's religious message was – in Enlightenment fashion – the centrality of experience and feeling. But, if Wesley put great emphasis on sensation and empiricism, he was – again in Enlightenment fashion – keen to ensure that the experience was a genuine one, that the convert was neither deluded nor fabricating their feelings. It also needed to be tempered by Scripture and by reason, in a characteristically eighteenth-century balance.¹¹⁸ In any case, Wesley's concern with experience and feeling should be understood as part of an eighteenth-century English emphasis

on empiricism and sentiment (seen in such a typically eighteenth-century virtue as benevolence) rather than as what might be thought to be a full-blooded Romanticism.¹¹⁹ Equally typical was Wesley's fascination with developments in natural philosophy and medicine, which led him to keep abreast of the latest research and to disseminate it to his followers.¹²⁰

More broadly, and crucially for our understanding of Wesley's context, his seeming ability to hold together faith and reason (although how far he did so in synthesis or in tension is a matter for debate) can be seen as part of a wider pattern of the age.¹²¹ Jane Shaw in her *Miracles in Enlightenment England* has demonstrated how a larger range of commentators were able to balance "religious enthusiasm" with "reason." Her reading incorporates elements of the supernatural into an enlightened worldview, challenging older models of an enlightenment hostile to religious sensibilities.¹²² Studies such as this are beginning to uncover some of this as the "age of reason" have led to an unwarranted neglect of the religious impulses and drivers of the period. Recent research into all manner of topics, ranging from the art, literature, travel writing, and even the foreign policy of the time have argued for the need to bring back the religious framework and imperatives that have been marginalized by conventional scholarship.¹²³ It may have been that Wesley made such an impact on his age, not because his context was irreligious, but because it was already suffused with religious concerns.

¹¹⁵ Even "romantic" writers may have placed more stress on reason than is sometimes suggested; see Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation* (2003).

¹¹⁶ See Laura Bartels Pellenan, "The Evidence of Things Not Seen: John Wesley's Use of Natural Philosophy," (Drew University Ph.D. thesis, 2004); Madden, *Cheap, Safe and Natural Medicine*; and Prosser, "Arminian Magazine."

¹¹⁷ See Henry Rack, "A Man of Reason and Religion? John Wesley and the Enlightenment," *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 1 (2009, forthcoming).

¹¹⁸ Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (2006). See also Robert Webster, "Methodism and the Miraculous: John Wesley's Contribution to the *Historia Miraculorum*" (Oxford University D.Phil. thesis, 2006).

¹¹⁹ See Clare Haynes, *Pictures and Popery: Art and Religion in England, 1660–1760* (2006); and Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England*.

¹¹⁵ Justin Clampton, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696–1722* (2003). See also his *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (1992).

¹¹⁶ For suggestions of the links between Arminianism, Methodist theology, and Enlightenment thought see Semmel, *Methodist Revolution*, 87–109. Semmel, however, argued that Wesleyanism should be seen as a liberalizing force. I think we can agree that there are affinities between Methodism and the Enlightenment without forcing it into a liberalizing framework.

¹¹⁷ See Frederick Dreyer, "Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley," *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 21–59, and John C. English, "John Wesley and the Anglican Moderates of the Seventeenth Century," *Anglican Theological Review* 51 (1969): 203–20.

¹¹⁸ Rex Dale Mathews, "Religion and Reason Joined: a Study in the Theology of John Wesley" (Harvard University Ph.D. thesis, 1986).