

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

---

### How American was Early American Methodism?

JOHN WESLEY, founder of the most successful religious movement in eighteenth-century Britain, began his missionary career in 1735, an employee of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, bound for General James Oglethorpe's Georgia colony. Here on the precarious southeastern edge of British America, wedged between South Carolina and Spanish Florida, the colony's frontier dissolving into an interior controlled by powerful southeastern woodlands tribes, Wesley was directed by the SPG to serve as parish priest for Georgia's heterogeneous settler population and to convert the Chickasaws. Instead, with the support of his younger brother Charles, the colony's secretary of Indian affairs, Wesley first experimented with what would become the essential ingredients of his religious movement: the introduction of intensive prayer meetings, the resorting to female church officers, the practices of hymn singing, itinerating, preaching out-of-doors, and ministering to the poor and outcast, including African slaves. Before he left the colony in late 1737, less than two years later, Wesley had published the first Methodist psalmbook and begun the process of formulating his own peculiar brand of Arminian theology, one that would stress the free will of the believer, the universal availability of salvation, and the palpability of religious conversion. Shortly after their return to Britain, Wesley and his brother Charles founded the Methodist movement, comprising a "connexion" of itinerant preachers and a network of "united societies." By the end of the 1740s, Methodism would expand into a realmwide phenomenon, sustained by increasing numbers of lay itinerants, by the Wesley brothers' massive literary output, and by John Wesley's lifelong charismatic leadership.

In time Methodism would flourish in the American setting as it did in Britain, but this was unforeseen by its founder. John Wesley considered his Georgia mission a failure. Stymied by his parishioners' recalcitrance, his own rigid attachment to Anglican ceremony, and his inability to attract more than the Chickasaws' token interest in Anglicanism, Wesley had given up trying to convert the colonies. Instead, the first Americans called "Methodists" were followers of George Whitefield, the Wesleys' evangelical comrade and Calvinist competitor, who dominated American Methodism until the arrival of Wesley's itinerants in the Middle Colonies in 1769. The coming of the Revolutionary War and Independence, furthermore, presented numerous difficulties for the first Wesleyans. Preaching their freewill evangelicalism, so unpalatable to Calvinists, Old and New Light alike, and intruding on Anglican authority as they moved from Philadelphia and New York City into Maryland and points further south, the Wesleyan itinerants were sullied by John Wesley's repeated public attacks on the patriot movement. The itinerants interfered with the rising tide of republicanism in more

concrete ways as well, by not only attracting a devoted following among women and blacks—often outsiders to the Revolutionary agitation—but also turning potential militia and Continental Army recruits into pacifist noncombatants.

After the Revolutionary War, the remaining American preachers faced the further dilemma of establishing themselves as a legitimate church under their English-born leader, Francis Asbury. The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was founded successfully, if not uncontroversially, in 1784, but in a climate inhospitable to churches and clergymen. John Wesley died in 1791; yet the American Methodist Church was not free from the presumption of British influence until the last American tour of Asbury's British cosuperintendent, Thomas Coke, in 1804. Following the lead of the English movement and despite a potentially huge southern and southwestern white membership, many of the American itinerants were also active opponents of slavery. Throughout the colonies and the new states, they were perceived as parvenus, or worse, magicians capable of seducing young and old into their cultlike revivalist societies and class meetings.

Despite these obstacles and the repeated portrayal of Methodists as enemies to the American cause and to a conflict that would establish a newly defined American republican identity, Methodist itinerants, inheritors of the Wesleys' missionary system, continued to expand their networks throughout the United States, so widely that by 1800 they had put in place the foundation of an evangelical federation extending from the Atlantic seaboard to the Ohio River Valley and from New England to Natchez. The Methodist Church encompassed itinerants' circuits, local societies, and evangelical households in every part of the new nation, with a membership of 64,000 and climbing.<sup>1</sup> Thousands more had been exposed to Methodist preaching supplied by mostly young traveling ministers at every opportunity and in every possible venue. Indians, the original object of Wesley's mission, rarely numbered among these converts, but conversion of the "heathen" remained a historical subtext of much of the Methodist missionary drive. The church indisputably depended on a substantial female following and, with the exception of the Baptists, the MEC incorporated a greater African American membership than any other church or American institution. By the eve of the Civil War, Methodist churches as a whole, although subject to schism and divided into Northern and Southern halves, accounted for an estimated one-third of American church membership; the most encompassing denomination in the country, they boasted close to 20,000 places of worship, 8,000 more than the Baptists, their closest competitors.<sup>2</sup>

The rise of American Methodism, then, is a paradox, one that should attract the interest of a broad spectrum of religious, social, and Revolutionary scholars. Yet, until recently, Methodism's compelling traits have sparked the curiosity of relatively few historians of religion and even fewer Revolutionary historians. As Nathan Hatch has stressed, while Methodism "remains the most powerful religious movement in American history, its growth a central feature in the emergence of the United States as a republic," historians have consistently discussed its success "blandly and uninspiringly as a component of the western phase of the Second Great Awakening."<sup>3</sup>

For Hatch, American historians' failure to understand Methodism as one of the shaping forces in the new republic may be attributed to a number of factors: the overemphasis on the study of religion as intellectual history; denominational scholars' tendency to "sanitize" the history of religion by focusing on its respectable aspects to the exclusion of the "enthusiasm" of groups like the Methodists; and the stigma borne by Methodism for its lower-middle-class origins. "Perhaps," Hatch suggests, "historians ignore Methodism because Wesleyans are too quintessentially American."<sup>4</sup>

A closer look at the origins of the American Methodist movement through the years of the Revolution and after, however, suggests other reasons for the Wesleyans' low profile in American historiography. For while it is true, as Hatch asserts, that Methodism was to become the American religion, its origins lie in the much wider British imperial setting, and for most of its first generation the movement had little that was distinctly "American" about it. The paradox of Methodism concerns not so much why historians have shown so little interest in this mass movement as why Americans joined it in the first place and how a British missionary society became America's church.

Methodism's broad-ranging appeal derived from many sources, but four inter-related developments account for the peculiar shape the movement took and the energy that propelled it forward. First, Wesleyan Methodism arose in a period of substantial change in British and American religion, beginning with the redefinition of the relationship between church and state at the end of the seventeenth century. The "church," John Locke wrote, severing the ancient tie between church and polity, was "a free society of men" joined together to worship God in whatever way they deemed proper. In this reformulation, the church was "absolutely separate" from the civil realm.<sup>5</sup> The product of England's "Century of Revolution," when religious sects proliferated in unprecedented numbers, the enlightened reconceptualization of the relationship of church to state provided both a theoretical justification for toleration and the moral foundations of denominationalism.

Recognition of the need for churches and religious movements to live with each other's differences came none too soon. The Wesley brothers lived in a religiously and ethnically diverse world. Their London was peopled not only by Anglicans and English folk, but by an array of English and European churches and religious "colonies," from Quakers, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians, to Huguenot, Moravian, Flemish, and Palatine refugees from European wars, as well as small communities of Roman Catholics and Sephardic Jews. In British America—the larger British universe—and particularly in the emerging socioeconomic powerhouse of the greater Middle Colonies, Anglicans and their Congregational offsprings were the minority religions in a smorgasbord of Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, German and Scandinavian Lutherans, German and Dutch Reformed, Huguenots, Catholics, Jews, and various sectarians who pass fleetingly through the historical record. Methodists, admirers of the eclecticism of early Christianity—the "Primitive Church"—accepted the diversity of this religious world as a matter of fact. For this reason, Wesley specifically invited mem-

bers of all churches and sects to join the Methodists, to seek what Wesley called “holiness” whatever their formal church affiliation.<sup>6</sup>

The invitation came in the form of the second important ingredient of the Methodist system: missionary preaching. Missionizing, as it will be called here, and aggressive outreach followed on the multiplication of denominations competing for British and colonial recruits at the end of the seventeenth century as well as the growth of an increasingly unchurched population in Britain and America. As often as not, missionizing was directed at those on the margins of society—mariners, miners, and other poor folk—and especially those on the margins of Britain’s imperial influence in North America, as evidenced by the numbers of Anglican and other ministers who started out their American careers as ministers to one or another Indian tribe.

But by the 1730s, evangelical missionaries’ scope encompassed all “hearers” within listening distance, and “heathens” were defined as those who had not yet converted to evangelical-style Christianity. At the same time, by the end of the century, Methodist preachers were at work not only in England and the United States, but also in Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, and the West Indies, soon to expand into Africa and India, among an extraordinary array of European, African, Native American, and Asian populations. As a missionary religion, Methodism displayed its most essential features: it was all-encompassing, ambitious, and “catholic,” seeking a universal and inclusive membership and dispensing with stringent tests of faith common among the more exclusivist and frequently community-based Reformed churches and Quaker meetings. It was as a missionary religion that Methodists, as their American opponents put it, “relished the manumitting Subject”<sup>7</sup> and began to attract thousands of Africans and their children into their American societies.

Throughout these relentless journeyings, Methodist preachers sought to propagate the third important aspect of the movement, what they called “the one thing needful”: religious experience. Recruits came to the Wesley brothers’ particular brand of popular religious culture through the widespread fascination with religious experimentation in eighteenth-century Britain and America. In the 1730s and 1740s, the years of the great revivals in Britain and the Great Awakening in America, colonists’ involvement in experimental religious communities ran high, and “emotional” or “enthusiastic” responses to evangelical preaching were increasingly accepted, indeed encouraged. Wesleyan revivalism, forged in these years and incorporating all varieties of oral culture, synthesized the central features of Anglican worship with a sonic ritual that gave shape and often tangible reality to otherwise abstruse theological doctrines.<sup>8</sup> Religious “seekers” with little initial knowledge of theological dispute or denominational history moved from denomination to denomination. In this climate, Wesleyan itinerants provided a discourse of religious affections and “heart-religion” that served as a guide to the new believer attempting to make sense of an often baffling personal transformation.

These new recruits were then incorporated into the fourth important ingredient of the movement: formal congregations known simply as the Methodist societies.

Starting as a cottage meeting or otherwise private gathering, the Methodist religious society was a fluid entity, not dissimilar to the clubs and committees that propagated many features of the American resistance to British rule. Even after the raising of chapel walls, Methodist prayer groups, called classes, regularly convened in private households. Most converts, furthermore, experienced the depths and heights of their religious crises within their own households or those of their masters and mistresses—rather than, as is commonly assumed, in the throes of the revival meeting. It is perhaps not surprising that many of the itinerants' chief supporters were women and many others were servants and slaves who often first came into contact with a Methodist preacher when he arrived at the front or back door. At the same time, the drive to raise chapel buildings was powerful, and in time Methodist chapels, constructed in meetinghouse plain style, provided the metaphorical scaffolding for community building among the new republic's young, mobile, and increasingly diverse population, as well as the setting for some of the movement's most telling schisms.<sup>9</sup>

The transformation of the Methodist movement itself, from offspring of John Wesley to the American phenomenon it was to become in the years after 1800, is the larger subject of this study. For much of the Revolutionary period, widespread acceptance of Methodism among Americans hardly seemed possible. Riven by disputes among preachers before and after the Revolutionary War, ridiculed by the major churches for their preachers' lack of academic training, and divided through the 1780s and 1790s by conflicts among the itinerants that challenged Francis Asbury's command of his missionary organization, the MEC seemed to survive *despite* rather than because of the break with Britain. Early American Methodists fought over the future of their church—providing compelling evidence of the roads not taken by Asbury and the other leading preachers. And like many other churches after the Revolutionary War, the Methodists were uncertain of the course ahead for religious institutions in the new republic. Christianity seemed assaulted on all sides, and republicanism, one itinerant bluntly stated, “eats [religion] out of many hearts.”<sup>10</sup>

Emerging at a critical juncture in American history, the Methodist movement was nevertheless to benefit enormously from the changes wrought by the Revolution, as John Wesley's Primitive Christianity supplied a popular evangelical alternative to traditional forms of religious community, patriarchal family relations, and the rough-and-tumble, largely masculine, world of Revolutionary-era politics. Focusing instead on the missionary call, a knee-bending, vocal revival ritual, and the formation of voluntary “societies” comprising numerous, multivariuous, and assertive rank and file, the Methodist movement reshaped the Revolution's republican legacy.

• • •

Regarding the geographical context of much of this narrative: Beyond its British origins, Methodism first came into American popularity in the greater Middle Atlantic, the region ranging from the Atlantic coastline on the east to the Appalachians on the edge of the western continental frontier, and from the Hudson River

Valley on the north to the Potomac River separating Maryland from Virginia on the south.<sup>11</sup> In addition to serving as Methodism's American birthplace, the greater Middle Atlantic was the new nation's most complex region and hence provides ideal conditions for coming to some understanding of the Methodists' tribulations and triumphs in their first generation of expansion.

Within its boundaries, the greater Middle Atlantic contained many of the significant social, economic, and cultural features of Revolutionary America. Rural and urban, distinguished by old and new settlements and a violent western frontier, the region was also home to the new republic's most heterogeneous population, including native-born and immigrant, slave and free, Protestant and Catholic, rich and poor, urban-dwelling and rural-dwelling, and the numerous categories in between: first generation Americans, free blacks, indentured servants, the unchurched, and the middling classes, among others.

For the Methodists, the area remained critical throughout their first generation of growth. The earliest Methodist immigrants arrived here in 1760, and a number pursued the Wesleyan mission well beyond Wesley's control. The first American Methodist societies were also established here. The traveling preachers found some of their most receptive audiences in Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore well into the nineteenth century, and promoted some of their first frontier revivals in western New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. The Middle Atlantic cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were communication centers for the Methodists, just as they were for the American patriots, as well as the location of several key Methodist chapels. Among these were the thousand-member-strong Baltimore City congregation—forming the core of Methodism's "capital city"—as well as the Strawberry Alley Chapel on Fell's Point in the same town, the John Street Chapel in New York, St. George's Chapel in Philadelphia, and Richard Allen's African Methodist society, also in Philadelphia.

The Middle Atlantic city societies, furthermore—the focus of close examination in Part II—provide rare insight into the composition and operation of eighteenth-century Methodist congregations. Most important, they reveal the extraordinary *mélange* of Americans who sought out Methodist preaching. Many were workingmen; others were part of a burgeoning mercantile and entrepreneurial elite reshaping the Middle Atlantic economy; still others were servants and slaves; and the majority were women breaking with family tradition to join the Methodists on their own or in the company of other women. The city societies were also links in a chain of Methodist meetings to which the first itinerants made frequent visits and where they established early classes: in Brooklyn and Newtown on Long Island, and New Rochelle on the Long Island Sound; in Elizabethtown, Newark, Trenton, and Burlington in New Jersey; in Wilmington, New Castle, and Dover in Delaware; in Annapolis on the northern Chesapeake Bay; and in Georgetown and Alexandria on the Potomac. By 1800, the thoroughfares connecting these towns and cities had been trodden by Methodist itinerants for close to forty years.

The number and array of Methodist adherents revealed by these cities' records calls into question the frequent assumption that Methodism was, as English schol-

ars have described it, an exclusively working-class event; or, as American historians are inclined to assume, a largely rural, western, or southern story.

This study will not dispute the primary geographical locus—South and West—of Methodism as it was to develop in the boom years of the early nineteenth century. Expansion into America’s hinterlands was indeed the major goal of American Methodism’s first leader, Francis Asbury. The bishop envisioned a church that would claim the allegiance of settlers throughout the largely agricultural states. He considered farming and frontiersmanship to be the ideal callings for the ideal Methodist, free of the many temptations of city life and the dangers of political controversy. Like many Americans then and now, Asbury subscribed to the often mistaken belief that city folk were richer than country folk and hence less likely to adhere to Christian piety. Despite the central role of urban leaders in his movement, Asbury lamented the ill effects of city living on his itinerants: “We have had few city preachers,” he wrote, “but what have been spoiled for a poor man’s preachers.”<sup>12</sup> The sizable revivals in Hanover County, Virginia, in the 1770s, sponsored by the indefatigable American preachers working their way through the Revolutionary landscape, confirmed Asbury’s hunch that American Methodism—in contrast to its English parent—was a religion well suited to an expansive agrarian nation.

I will argue, however, that Methodism’s social complexity defies typecasting. From one end of Revolutionary America to the other, this critical religious and social movement was transformed from European import into American original. Understanding how this change came about is the larger goal of this study.