

**THE RISE OF METHODISM AS A SYMBOL  
OF THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

**Introduction**

The Church of England has declined in strength every century since its founding in 1533. It began as a catholic, comprehensive church, but from its first decade faced challenges from radicals and reactionaries alike. Because it could neither resolve these challenges nor exterminate the challengers, the Church of England devolved from a catholic church to a denominational one. The rise of Methodism in the 1740s and the Church's failure to respond effectively to it illustrated the Church's inability to adjust to the changing religious needs of its flock.

The criteria this paper will use to measure decline relate solely to the public strength of the Church of England. The primary goals of a Christian society are religious unity, evangelization, and proselytization of non-Christians. Only in a society that holds other goals (such as material well-being) as paramount is religious tolerance or quiescence seen as acceptable, much less laudable. A loss of power and vigor by its established Church is a sign that a society is becoming less Christian.

The public power of the Church of England is measured by how central a place it occupied in English life. When the needs of the Church conflicted with the needs of other groups, who won, how often, and by how much? Was society structured primarily along religious lines or along secular lines? Did the Church have theological, administrative, and financial independence from the State? Were heresy and schism seen as a

serious enough matters for their proponents to be suppressed? By addressing these questions, we can see what status the Church had in English society.

Because the theologies of both the Methodists and the Church of England are so amorphous and difficult to distinguish, this paper will mention theological issues only in passing. The major differences between the Methodists and the Anglicans was ones of practice, not of belief.

### **Church of England, 1533-1688: The loss of catholicity**

When Henry VIII made his final break with Rome in 1533, he had no intention of creating a Protestant church. What he wanted was a Catholic church -- with traditional doctrine and liturgy -- centered on Canterbury rather than on Rome. This church was to be not just Catholic, but also catholic -- its membership would include the entire population of England, and no dissent would be allowed.

But the manner in which Henry broke with Rome made the long-term existence of such a church impossible. With Tudor stubbornness, Henry broke the independent power of the English church, severely limiting the powers of Convocation, extorting money from prelates on pain of imprisonment, and looting the monasteries. Having lost its autonomous base of power, the English church had no choice but to become an instrument of the English state, subject to its political needs.

After the religious turmoil caused by Edward VI's Protestant sympathies and Mary I's Roman sympathies, Elizabeth I sought in 1559 what would later be termed a *via media* -- a middle way between the competing claims of Calvinism and Romanism that would be acceptable to both sides and therefore make a unified national Church possible. To Elizabeth, having watched England racked by religious turmoil for a quarter-century, the

national peace was paramount, and her compromise succeeded in keeping that peace. Though there was considerable dissent by both Calvinist and Romanist extremes, the compromise held for more than 75 years.

The compromise held because it allowed for some local variation and was not enforced overly strictly. When William Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, he changed that policy, tightening both the liturgy and its enforcement. Four years later, the Scots revolted over the imposition of a new prayer book, and their invasion of England in 1640 forced Charles I to call the Parliament that led to his downfall and execution.

During the English Civil War (1642-49) and the ensuing Interregnum (1649-60), the Calvinists and their allies won and the Church of England was disestablished. Laud was executed in 1645, and many of his followers fled to the Continent. Oliver Cromwell allowed religious pluralism and freedom of conscience, and numerous Protestant sects flourished.

Two years after Cromwell's death in 1658, Charles II took his throne. Charles, who had strong Romanist leanings, was inclined toward religious toleration, but the Anglicans who returned with him would not stand for it. Several hundred Puritan ministers (and any other ordained man who would not accept the Revised Prayer Book of 1662) were deprived of their livings. Many became Dissenters or Presbyterians, penalized by law for refusing communion in the Church of England. This bitter split between "Church and Chapel" remained an important feature of English politics until the Victorian era, when other splits superceded it. There was no longer a catholic church in England, nor was there any immediate hope for one.

### **The Church of England, 1689-1760: The Whig ascendancy**

The deposition of Romanist James II in 1688 discredited the Tory faction within the Church of England, which had insisted on "divine right" and obedience to the lawful sovereign since the Restoration. When William III took the throne in 1689, about 400 Tory clergymen, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, refused to swear an oath of loyalty to him, and were deprived of their livings (thus creating yet another sect outside of the Church). Accordingly, William gave his patronage and support to the Whigs, who remained in power for 70 of the next 75 years.

The Whigs had received much of their political support from Non-Conformists, and therefore had favored religious toleration -- some even called for disestablishment. They could, however, see the political advantages to be gained by controlling the heretofore-Tory Church establishment, and they sought, through judicious episcopal appointments, to gain that control. Their success was so complete by the 1730s that on one key vote in 1733, the Whig government was supported by 24 of the 25 bishops sitting in the House of Lords.

In the process of taking over the Church establishment, the Whigs did not forget their previous commitment to religious toleration. One of William III's first acts as King was to promulgate the Toleration Act of 1689, which granted freedom of worship to most Protestant dissenters (freedom of worship was still denied to Roman Catholics, Jews, and Quakers). Dissenters were still forbidden, however, from holding public office, because public officers (especially Members of Parliament) had power over the Church.

The 18th century English ruling class saw Church and State as interdependent, a view whose best-known expression came in Abp. William

Warburton's 1736 book *Alliance of Church and State*. Warburton argued that the State would fall apart without the binding power that a common religion provides, and that the Church would fall into chaos without the public order maintained by the State. Therefore, it was the duty of the Church to exhort its communicants to obedience and submission to the State and it was the duty of the State to enforce adherence to the Church. Church and State were two halves of a whole, and needed to work together.

The Anglican bishops of the 18th century were quite diligent in working with the State. The typical member of the episcopal bench spent most of the year in London taking an active role in the debates of the House of Lords. When they did return to their dioceses, they used their pulpits, patronage, and connections to support Whig candidates, and directed a political machine composed of the lesser clergy. Bishops and other diocesan officials also served the Crown by keeping its ministers informed of any rioting or other expressions of unrest in the diocese.

Just as ecclesiastical officials took an active role in State affairs, royal officials and Members of Parliament took an active role in Church affairs. Changes in Anglican doctrine or in parochial boundaries could only take place by an Act of Parliament. The Crown had the power to appoint bishops, and members of the nobility and gentry usually had a decisive say in clerical appointments within their bailiwicks. The Church was firmly under secular control.

The Church was not only under secular control, but under Whig control as well. The Church hierarchy reflected that Whiggishness: Those bishops who had earned their positions through merit rather than birth were well-educated, erudite, and Latitudinarian. Bishops Berkeley and Butler skillfully and reasonably defended the Church against Deist attacks. The

lower clergy, most of whom had studied at Oxford and Cambridge, shared this rationalist temper and solid education. A disproportionate number of the clergy were drawn from the nobility and gentry, and these clergy had strong collegial relationships.

Beyond the world of the well-placed and well-educated, however, the Church was in trouble. At the parish level -- and especially in poor parishes -- pastoral duties lay neglected. The Erastian nature of the Church meant that most bishops spent only the summer in their dioceses, and the rest of the year attending to politics in London. Even bishops who were conscientious were often unable to adequately supervise their dioceses due to the vast territory and growing population of some dioceses. At the same time, bishops were unwilling to split dioceses, because this would reduce their wealth. At any given time, about half of the Church's 10,500 parishes were held by pluralists, which in practice usually meant that clerical duties were performed by a poorly paid curate or neighboring divine while most of the parochial revenue was paid to a non-resident clergyman. Few new churches were built during the 18th century, and many existing churches were allowed to fall into disrepair. The religious mission of the Church was being sacrificed so that the Church's wealth could be used for political purposes.

As we can see, the influential officials of the Church were usually isolated from all but its wealthiest parishioners, and therefore unable to comprehend or react to the demographic and economic forces that were changing the countryside. The strength of the Church was in prosperous rural areas (and London), where tradition called for adherence and parishioners could afford resident clergy, and the people in these areas saw no reason to alter the existing arrangements. The episcopal hierarchy,

then, was not prepared for or sympathetic to the changes that occurred in poor rural areas or urban areas, and it was precisely in these areas that the effects of the nascent capitalist economy, the growth in population, and the shift of that population from the countryside to the cities were first felt.

England was changing rapidly and dramatically, and if the Church of England could not meet the new needs of the English people, something else would have to arise to meet them.

### **John Wesley**

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man," and of few institutions is this more true than of the Methodist Church. Its existence, its theology, its organization, and its methods evolved almost entirely from the work of one man: John Wesley.

A key to understanding the path of Methodism during its first half-century is the fact that Wesley (1703-91) was a divine of the Church of England, and throughout his life saw Methodism as a movement within the Church rather than outside it. As late as 1787, when the split between Methodist and Anglican was obviously imminent, Wesley wrote "I still think that when the Methodists leave the Church, God will leave them."

Wesley was a clergyman, but he was not a Whig clergyman. Both of his grandfathers were Dissenter preachers, ejected from the Church of England in 1662 for not conforming to the new Prayer Book. His father was a High Church Tory, who took the oath of loyalty to William & Mary only with the greatest reluctance. Wesley himself was known in his student days at Oxford for having Jacobite sympathies. Both the Tory and the Dissenter influences

in Wesley's life -- each opposed to the Whig establishment -- would have an effect on the church Wesley founded.

Wesley spent 11 of the 15 years between 1720 and 1735 at Oxford, where his evident studiousness and piety made him an object of scorn -- an astonishing fact given that most of the students at Oxford were studying for ordination! One important similarity between the early Wesley and later Wesley was his use of Method. Personal discipline, self-examination, self-denial, regular prayer, regular fasting, and regular communion were as much a part of the lives of Wesley and his circle of friends as they were of the lives of the later Methodists.

In 1735, Wesley crossed the Atlantic as a missionary to the newly established debtor's colony at Savannah, Georgia. His austerity and High Church ideals were deeply unpopular with the bawdy residents, and his cloistered life as a scholar left him ill-suited to minister to commoners. Finally, after an obscure incident concerning a woman who had rejected Wesley as a suitor, he returned in England in disgrace in February 1738.

But Georgia was not a total disaster for Wesley -- it was on the trip to America when he first met the Moravians. Wesley was immediately impressed by their piety and personal knowledge of the blessings of God, and it was in a Moravian meeting house that John Wesley had his New Birth. On May 24, 1738, while listening to a recital of an essay by Martin Luther, Wesley felt a warmth of heart and peace of soul that he had not heretofore experienced. He later said that this was the first time he was ever a Christian, a believer. Soon after, his preaching began to take a new tone, one unwelcome to parishioners and the Anglican clergy. His passionate sermons on salvation through faith made him unwelcome in church after



church, and earned him the rebuke of the Anglican hierarchy. Its derisive name for Wesley's new teachings was "Methodism."

### **The challenge of Methodism**

It would be hard to overestimate how comprehensively the Methodists differed from the Anglicans. The strength of the Anglicans was in the landed establishment; the strength of the Methodists was among the artisans of the new commercial and industrial cities. The Anglican ecclesiastical structure was manned by ordained ministers and built around rigid parochial boundaries and the local church; the Methodist "connexions" used itinerant lay preachers and local meeting halls (or even open fields outside town) for its services. The Anglicans stressed adherence and obedience to the social order; the Methodists stressed moral behavior, spiritual devotion, and personal holiness. The Anglicans allowed only men into positions of power within the church; the Methodists included women in preaching and leadership posts. The Anglicans were relatively lenient and forgiving about human failings (as long as the crime was not rebellion); Methodists were quick to expel stray sheep from the flock.

The attitude of Methodists was also very different from the Anglican norm. The Church establishment still feared a return of the social upheaval and iconoclasm of the Civil War and the Interregnum, and so it sharply disapproved of any sign of "enthusiasm." Accordingly, the Anglican practice of religion was dignified and rational. Wesley also feared enthusiasm, but only when that enthusiasm was not directed toward a constructive goal. Hence, Methodism was built around a strictly enforced Method of personal conduct. The revival was used as the main tool of proselytization, then the

resultant religious passion was directed into activities of self-awareness and good works.

Had the Church of England in the 1740s been a powerful, independent catholic church, it might have been able to do what the medieval Church had done when faced with the challenge of the revived monasticism of the 12th century -- assimilate it (the Franciscans) or drive it into hiding (the Waldensians). But the Church of England did not have the power to suppress the Methodists and it did not have the independence to transform itself to absorb and synthesize the challengers, and so the Christian revival by the Methodists was to be not an infusion of life into the Church, but rather a milestone on the Church's road to denominational status.

#### **Methodism and the Church of England, 1738-95**

The nascent Methodist movement did not take long to tweak the established Church. George Whitefield, another evangelically minded preacher, had also returned in 1738 from a (considerably more successful) sojourn in Georgia, and shared Wesley's enthusiasm for salvation by faith and proselytization. After giving several sermons in London churches, he also shared Wesley's lack of welcome in Anglican pulpits.

After meeting a similar reaction in Bristol, Whitefield decided that if he would not be allowed to preach in the churches, then he would preach in the fields (which was illegal). The response was remarkable: within three weeks, Whitefield was preaching to crowds of 10,000. Overwhelmed by his success and wishing to carry it to other areas of England, Whitefield asked Wesley to organize those who he had awakened in Bristol. Wesley arrived in March 1739.

During the next several months, Wesley travelled between Bristol and London, preaching and organizing Methodist societies. After Whitefield returned to America in August 1739, Wesley was the unchallenged leader of the movement. Wesley, an Arminian, soon denounced the doctrines of both the Calvinists (leading to a parting with Whitefield) and the Moravians. In 1740, he began to appoint lay preachers to spread the Word across England; a move that was necessary (there were more unchurched souls than ordained ministers alone could save) but that also made inevitable an eventual split with the established Church, which would not accept lay leadership.

The Church of England reacted to the growth of Methodism with unmitigated horror. The Bishop of Bristol in 1739 was the great Joseph Butler, whose *Analogy of Religion* was the death blow to Deism in England. Butler was scandalized by the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley, seeing the wild antics of the Methodists as a discredit to Christianity and an encouragement to atheists. Methodist revivals seemed a form of madness to dignified Anglican divines, and they considered the Methodist appeals to the Holy Spirit and to supernatural intervention to be almost pagan.

If Methodism were not pagan, then perhaps it was something even worse. The enthusiasm of Methodist rallies (and the social standing of their attendees) seemed far too similar for Anglican tastes to Puritan enthusiasm. The tactics of Methodism, on the other hand, smacked of Popery: itinerant preachers, separate chapels, frequent appeals to mysticism, and an emphasis on missionary work. At a time when Jacobism was still a justifiable fear (Scottish Highlanders invaded deep into England in support of the 1745-46 Jacobite rebellion), any association with Popery was seen as potentially treasonous.

These fears, broadcast from Anglican pulpits, led to frequent mob violence against known Methodists, often led by Anglican clergymen themselves. From 1740 onward, lay preachers ran the risk of injury and even death -- the first Methodist martyr was bludgeoned to death in Wales in 1741. Because Methodism had few defenders in the upper classes before the 1760s, town officials often turned a blind eye when itinerant preachers were beaten or chapels burned down. Yet through all of the violence and attempts at repression, Methodism thrived.

Throughout his 53-year ministry, Wesley expressed his desire that the Methodists remain within the Church of England, and encouraged Methodists to attend and take communion at Anglican services. But the Church did not want the Methodists, and increasing numbers of Methodists did not want the Church, leaving Wesley with no choice but to slowly build a parallel organization. He began to appoint lay preachers in 1740, hold yearly Methodist Conferences in 1744, and commission presbyters for Scottish preaching in 1747. He delayed taking the big step -- ordaining new ministers -- until 1784. After that step was taken, allowing Methodist services to be held at the same time as Anglican services (1786) and setting up a circuit system as a substitute for the parish system (1791) followed naturally. The final break with the Church of England -- administering communion at Methodist services (1795) -- had been a foregone conclusion for more than 50 years, but had to wait until after Wesley's death.

### **The Failure of the Church of England**

By 1801, approximately 100,000 Englishmen had left the Church of England and declared themselves as Methodists, and historians estimate that

two to three times that many people remained in the Church but considered themselves to be Wesleyans.

Methodism had expanded because there was a need to be filled: The parishioners of poor or urban parishes lived spiritually empty lives. The Anglican hierarchy wanted to destroy Methodism, yet would do nothing to fill the need that brought Methodism into being. The Church was controlled by the nobility and the gentry, which did not want people of the lower classes to think of their social betters as equal brethren in Christ. The Duchess of Buckingham's objection to Methodism was to the point: "It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as *sinful* as the Common Wretches that crawl on the Earth." If the "Common Wretches" began to see themselves as equal in Christ, they might begin to see themselves as equal in other ways as well, a thought that made nobles and bishops shudder.

These factors help to explain why the only attempt within the Church to meet Methodism on its own ground failed. The Evangelical movement within the Church was unpopular with the hierarchy for the same reasons that the Methodists were -- its enthusiasm and its outreach to the poor. It also was constrained by the same lack of interest in evangelism among ordained clergy that forced Wesley to the expedient of lay preachers. The Evangelicals overcame these difficulties only in the early 19th century, by which time a large, independent Methodist Church was already in place.

The world was changing, and the Church of England was not prepared to change with it. The Church had a medieval organization, designed to cope with a stable, fixed population centered on farms and in small towns. The Church was divided into parishes whose churches were not built to be expandable and whose boundaries were meant to be set in place forever (the

industrial town of Leeds was not divided into multiple parishes until after the town population topped 150,000).

The inequality between parishes and between dioceses affected the clergy as much as it affected the people. Bishops were exhausted by the number of confirmations they had to perform during their diocesan inspections. The pastors of small, isolated rural parishes lacked both useful work to do and intellectual stimulation, and often sunk into sloth. On the other hand, the pastors of growing urban parishes were overwhelmed by the endless litany of births, marriages, and deaths they had to cope with. Increasing these difficulties even more was that the number of men seeking ordination was unusually low between 1740 and 1760, a critical time in the growth both of the English population and of Methodism.

Though the need for change was obvious to any interested observer, the obstacles to change were difficult to surmount. Large sections of the nobility and the gentry had vested interests in the existing structure, which gave them power over the selection of priests and sometimes a share of the tithe as well. In a time when the voting franchise was restricted to property owners, this meant that Parliament, the body that controlled the Church, was stacked with members who had a stake in keeping the status quo. The Anglican hierarchy did not begin to address the effects of the population changes of the 18th century until well into the 19th century; until then, other denominations filled the gap.

When people moved from the farms to the cities, they changed not only their physical location but their whole way of life. Generally speaking, English rural life of the 18th century was slow and rhythmic, centered around the harvest and the holy days. By some estimates, English farmers only worked about 150 days per year. They paid tithes, fed themselves from

their crops, and received help from the (paternalistic) local magnate and church in times of famine.

English urban life was a completely different matter. Life was fast and noisy, regulated by the factory bells. Except in time of economic distress, factory workers usually worked six days a week every week of the year. They worked for wages rather than for a share of crops. Their standard of living was higher on average than the rural standard, but if they were thrown out of work or maimed, then they were more or less on their own (Anglican charities did not begin their effective work until the early 19th century).

The Methodists addressed this new way of life as the Anglicans would not or could not. They tailored their meeting houses, sermons, and schools not to traditional ways but to the needs of their urban flock. They stressed the personal discipline required to get up early in the morning and show up at the factory on time. They preached about the submission to authority required to work effectively and safely for 12 hours a day. They demanded the sobriety and humility required to live in noisy, close quarters with thousands of other people.

Incredibly, the Church of England was evolving in exactly the opposite direction from the Methodists in the late 18th century. The Church hierarchy was using the proceeds of Queen Anne's Bounty (a fund set up during Anne's reign to augment the endowments of the poorer parishes) to add land to the Church's holdings. In other words, they were tying the Church even more firmly into the passing agricultural economy.

Related to this increased landholding in rural areas was an increase in clerical participation in local governance. In 18th century England, landowners had both the right to vote and the responsibility of enforcing

the King's peace. Local divines were already resented by many of their parishioners for collecting tithes; now they took on an additional animus for enforcing laws, collecting fines, and sitting in judgment of legal cases and other disputes. This factor might explain the success of Methodism in poor rural areas such as Cornwall.

It also helps to explain the failure of the Church of England to combat Methodism. The Anglican ideal for its clergy was that they be gentlemen; the Methodist ideal was that they be holy. In practice, the main mission of the Anglican church was to defend the traditional order of life; the main mission of the Methodists was to bring its adherents closer to Christ. The Anglicans were of this world; the Methodists were of the next world. The Church of England was simply temperamentally unable to address the spiritual needs that Methodism addressed, and that inability explains much about why the Church declined.

### **The Aftermath**

The French Revolution ended for a generation any attempts at reform within the Church of England. Aside from one brief exception, the Tories controlled the government from 1783 to 1830, stifling reform of all kinds. At the very end of the Tory regime, under political pressure from the resurgent Whigs, the Church was hit with a major blow: the Test Act and the Corporation Act were repealed, allowing Dissenters to hold public office and breaking the alliance of Church and State. The Anglican Church was now officially a denomination.

In the middle third of the 19th century, Anglican Evangelism became a major force within the Church. As the social standing and temporal power of the Church declined, a new breed of clergymen, one with evangelical zeal,



became prominent within it. With the founding of new urban parishes, a major program of church-building, and the formation of new charities and missionary societies, the Church harvested some of what John Wesley had sowed.

Methodism, however, continued to grow, more than tripling in membership between 1801 and 1841. After the death of Wesley, the Wesleyan Methodists lost several factions, making generalizations difficult. We can say that Methodist missions were sent out to America, Asia, and Africa with great frequency, and that the main group of Wesleyans became respectable by the middle of the 19th century, noted for their thrift, hard work, and charitable contributions.

### **Conclusion**

From its founding in 1533, the Church of England has devolved from being a catholic church to being a denomination. Without any independent power or authority, it had to rely on the English government to advance its designs, and in turn was forced to tailor its doctrines to suit the needs of State. The rise of Methodism is an excellent illustration of this process at work. Had the Church continued as an independent, catholic church, it might have been able to absorb Methodism as a means to revive its religious spirit; as a handmaiden of the State, however, it could only combat its ideas and alienate its adherents.

When we look at how Western societies have changed from the early 18th century through the present -- how Western life has evolved from being rural, agricultural, traditional, hierarchial, and paternal to being urban/suburban, industrial, self-consciously modern, and informal -- we can

only conclude that the failure of the Anglican church was that it was the past, and the Methodists were the future.

### **Afterword**

The hinge of the explanation offered in this paper is the paramount importance of catholicity. If we assume that, say, the percentage of adherents matters more in determining whether a society is Christian, then the thesis presented falls apart, because the Church rebounded quite strongly by that criterion during the 19th century. Therefore, it might be more accurate to look upon the period of 1740-90 as a temporary bottoming out rather than part of a steady decline.