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# **The Rise of the Common: Spiritual Revival and Political Revolution in the Wesleyan Movement<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This essay offers a reading of the thesis according to which the Methodist revival stifled the revolutionary fervor of the English working class, an argument first introduced by Elie Halévy and expanded by E.P. Thompson. Focusing its attention on field preaching, this essay reassesses Halévy's thesis by portraying the practice as a public performance that imbricates the Methodist revival in the labor political agitation of the period. The essay suggests that we consider the performative dimension of field preaching as a mode of occupying and reclaiming the common space. The occupation of the fields with the public proclamation of the gospel message constituted Methodism as a revival of the common.

## **Keywords**

Field preaching—Kingswood colliers—Revival—Elie Halévy—John Wesley

The coal mining town of Kingswood is known as one of the epicenters of Methodism, but in the first half of the eighteenth-century the city was most famous for its “ungovernable” atmosphere and for numerous labor uprisings.<sup>2</sup> On October 1738, for example, a price dispute broke out between mine owners who decided to cut the salaries of the colliers to offset their financial losses. The reaction from workers was swift and strong: local newspapers report that colliers performed a “general rampage through the neighbourhood which lasted for four days.”<sup>3</sup> Not long after this incident, the town would host a young preacher who gathered the colliers

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in Oxford, England, 2018. The author would like to thank the Institute's participants and the editors of this volume for their feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Malcolmson, “‘A Set of Ungovernable People’: The Kingswood Colliers in the Eighteenth Century,” in *An Ungovernable People: The English and Their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. John Brewer and John Styles (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Malcolmson, “‘A Set of Ungovernable People,’” 116.

in the open fields. George Whitefield, who had “long since yearned toward the poor colliers,” sees the crowd as “sheep having no shepherd” and stands upon a mount to address them.<sup>4</sup> Kingswood, so accustomed to the collier’s riots, becomes the center of a revival that grows out of the experience of field preaching.

It is customary in Methodist studies to present these two scenes—political riots and revival meetings—as running in opposite directions. The French historian Elie Halévy gave classic contours to the thesis when he defended that the Wesleyan movement precluded a violent revolution in England allowing, in its stead, for a peaceful transition to the industrial age. The consensus in studies gravitating around Halévy is that the “enthusiasm” of the Methodist revival interrupted a seemingly imminent social revolution.

This essay seeks to offer a different perspective into Halévy’s hypothesis by relating the political energy of protest movements in eighteenth-century England with the practice of public preaching. In other words, I want to investigate the possible continuity between the colliers’ riots and field preaching in Kingswood and beyond, while indicating that political agitation and religious revival form an intriguing and politically charged pair. My argument unfolds in three movements. First, I introduce and assess Halévy’s thesis along with E.P. Thompson’s similar suggestion that the Methodist movement had a counter-revolutionary effect in the English context. Second, I situate the practice of field preaching at the center of the Wesleyan revival and propose that we think of this category alongside—and not

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<sup>4</sup> George Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Journals: A New Edition Containing Fuller Material than Any Hitherto Published* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 216.

opposed to—the political agitation that marked the period of the Industrial Revolution. Finally, I offer some theo-political considerations about the force of assemblies of people as gatherings that ultimately reclaim access to the common space. I propose, in closing, that field preaching constituted Methodism as a revival of the common.

### **Opium for the Masses: the Methodist Movement**

Halévy offered the initial articulation of his thesis in the 1906 essay, “The Birth of Methodism in England,” where he engages the critical question: why didn’t the labor agitations of 1738 culminate in a political revolution? The argument bears a quick reprisal: in the context of the social displacement generated by the Industrial Revolution, the Methodist revival offered a new sense of community and of the self. Workers, dubious about how to exercise their autonomy as an emerging class, found comfort in deferring this authority to their “brethren in Christ.” Moreover, the Methodist system of governance and its supervision over people’s morality offered an open path for social conformity “making increasingly possible the relatively orderly social transformation to a modern, individualistic society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”<sup>5</sup> For Halévy, the social malaise of the 1730s heavily impacted the English working class and Methodism gained its force and content in this context. Workers’ “despair,” he concludes, “was the raw

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 171–72.

material which Methodist doctrine and discipline gave shape.”<sup>6</sup> Methodism turned despair into accommodation of a peaceful transition to a new model of society.

Throughout the twentieth century, Halévy’s hypothesis stirred historical studies of the Methodist revival.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most impressive contribution to this debate is E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, a classic in the history of the labor movement in England and a masterpiece in Marxist historiography. Standing in a somewhat ambiguous relation to Halévy’s thesis, Thompson points out that the Methodist movement historically coincides with the period wherein workers in England came to “feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers.”<sup>8</sup> Notably, Thompson suggests that the “minds” that became conscious of class relations had been “molded” by Methodism.<sup>9</sup>

For Thompson, this is a socially ambiguous process.<sup>10</sup> Religiously, Methodists resembled non-conformist movements, while officially being loyal to the Church of

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<sup>6</sup> Elie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, trans. Bernard Semmel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 70.

<sup>7</sup> See, Wellman Joel Warner, *The Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution* (London & New York: Longmans, 1930); Robert Featherstone Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working-Class Movements of England, 1800-1850* (London: The Epworth Press, 1937); Robert Featherstone Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Struggle of the Working Classes, 1850-1900* (Leicester: E. Backus, 1954); E.J. Hobsbawm, “Methodism and the Threat of Revolution in Britain,” in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (New York: Basic Books, 1964); W. Reginald Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (London: Batsford, 1972); Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*; David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996). For a summary of Halévy’s impact on the study of the history of Methodism, see: Bernard Semmel, “Introduction,” in Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*; Elissa S. Itzkin, “The Halévy Thesis: A Working Hypothesis? English Revivalism: Antidote for Revolution and Radicalism 1789-1815,” *Church History* 44, no. 1 (1975): 47–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3165098>.

<sup>8</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 194.

<sup>10</sup> For a compelling study on Thompson’s ambivalent relationship to Methodism and how it stems from his methodological commitment to dialectic, see Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 169.

England. Socially, Methodists generally did not endorse revolutionary politics, while being complete strangers to the establishment.<sup>11</sup> Thompson concludes that the revival served *simultaneously* as “the religion of the industrial bourgeoisie... and of the wide sections of the proletariat.”<sup>12</sup> If, on the one hand, the poverty of the Methodists makes them an anti-establishment movement, the revival’s religious tenets closed the path for a social revolution. Furthermore, the Wesleyan emphasis on a gradual dimension of the *via salutis* encouraged a submissive attitude that led workers to accept and adapt to the “industrial wilderness” they were thrown into.<sup>13</sup> With a nod to Max Weber, Thompson affirms that the Methodist discipline and work ethic is the bridge connecting religious revival and political assimilation.<sup>14</sup>

Despite different emphases and divergent ideologies, historians of Methodism seem to agree on this basic tenet: the morality engendered by the Methodist revival distanced England from political radicalism—revival and revolution move in different directions. Historian David Hempton has extensively tracked this debate and offers an important summary of this consensus:

According to Halévy, the evangelical movement imbued ‘the élite of the working class, the hard-working and capable bourgeois... with a spirit from which the established order had nothing to fear...’ To this, Thompson added the idea that Methodism served as a displacement of energy away from temporal objectives into the demands of the chapel community... Moreover, Methodism’s work discipline... was the perfect foundation for industrial capitalism. Any remaining chinks in the conservative armour of Wesleyanism were sealed by the indoctrination of children, Bunting’s preachers, and the expulsion of dissidents. Hence, any contribution Methodism may have made

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 351.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 355.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 353.

<sup>14</sup> See, Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 401.

to popular politics through education and organization was incidental to its main role in the experience of working people.<sup>15</sup>

Fairly disappointed by the terms of the debate, Hempton argues that discussion over the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary force of Methodism often obscure the attention to regional and local forms of Methodism and the vast diversity of the movement.<sup>16</sup> Hempton believes that modest claims about the impact of Methodism in industrial capitalism are closer to reality: “In this kind of environment, Methodism was at once a statement of lower middle-class independence from Anglican and gentry control, and the creator of an alternative synthesis of work, community and religious experience.”<sup>17</sup> Hempton correctly suggests that analysts of the Methodist movement too quickly fall into the Weberian hypothesis and its tendency to portray religion as a unilateral force that favors the status quo. The view is well-known: religion engenders a particular ethic and society succumbs to it even as it rejects the religious tenet that underlined it. In the case of Methodism, the focus is therefore on the “religious” dimension of the revival: its class meetings, its doctrine of gradual perfection, and so on.<sup>18</sup> To the contrary, Hempton shows several instances in which “popular evangelicalism had the capacity to act as a radical and unsettling force.”<sup>19</sup> Methodism, in particular, “may be seen

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<sup>15</sup> Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society*, 231.

<sup>16</sup> Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Hempton gives credit to Thompson for his capacity to investigate the Methodist *experience* and how it impacted labor dynamics in England, instead of paying exclusive attention to the Methodist work ethic. This puts some distance between Thompson and Weber, who “confined [himself] to explaining why puritanical forms of religion had appealed almost exclusively to the middling sort with economic aspirations[.]” Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 6–7.

more as an expression of social radicalism than a reinforcement of *ancien régime* control.”<sup>20</sup>

Hempton’s observations may not solve the century-old dispute over Halévy’s thesis, but it may offer a new perspective for considering the political impact of the Methodist movement, particularly as we consider the ties between revival and political agitation. Rather than presuming that religious movements function at the level of morality, this new perspective prioritizes the public performance of religion.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, let us now return to Halévy’s hypothesis by looking at an important concession made by Thompson:

Methodism... did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution some kind of community to replace the older community-patterns which were being displaced... Men and women felt themselves to have some *place* in an otherwise hostile world when within the Church.<sup>22</sup>

And so, what *place* is this? What space did Methodism offer to the uprooted workers of the British Industrial Revolution? The historians of Methodism seem to direct our attention to one place—the open fields. Halévy, offering what to him is the ultimate proof of the Methodist conservative bent, takes us there:

Even today, whenever a Methodist preacher brings a popular audience together at a street corner to read the Bible, sing hymns, and pray in common, whenever he induces a “revival” of mysticism and religious exaltation... the great movement of 1739 is being repeated... A force capable of expending itself in displays of violence or popular upheavals, assumes, under the influence of a century and a half of Methodism, the form least

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<sup>20</sup> Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> In Methodist theological studies, Joerg Rieger has challenged the assumption that the Christian faith is a matter of “religion” or “morality.” See, Joerg Rieger, *Grace under Pressure: Negotiating the Heart of the Methodist Traditions* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 379. Emphasis in the original.



capable of unsettling a social order founded upon inequality of rank and wealth.<sup>23</sup>

We must pay close attention to the connection Halévy is making: the scene of public preaching is for him a waste of revolutionary energy. A radical movement could not subsist in England because its forces were being depleted by the public gatherings of the Methodist crowds. This assembly could never unsettle the social order of inequality. Halévy's text, however, points to something else: "At the beginning of 1739, the crisis was raging in [Yorkshire]... and it was the generally prevailing poverty that enabled Ingham, a former Oxford Methodist..., to produce a revival."<sup>24</sup> Halévy is quick to say: Ingham "preached in the open air," again centering our attention at the public performance of the revival. But then came the winter food shortage: "Wheat being extremely expensive, the lower orders rose to seize the wheat which they were unable to buy."<sup>25</sup> Halévy's conclusion is that these "were favorable circumstances for the demonstration of extreme religious ardor."<sup>26</sup>

The reader is expected to assume that food shortage and famine are "favorable circumstances" for a religious revival, but Halévy omits how these are also the circumstances that generated the riots and pillaging he describes. Kingswood is the paradigmatic case for him: Methodism found there a "mass of workingmen as savage, as degraded... [and] at the same time accessible to explosions of collective enthusiasm."<sup>27</sup> The widespread social malaise is both the

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<sup>23</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 71.

cause for the riots and for the revival, but why does one mode of public gathering lead to social unrest while the other to accommodation?

Halévy has an answer: the masses that “huddled about industrial centers” were an “ignorant mass, not capable of foreseeing and, by themselves, deciding the direction in which their enthusiasm will go.”<sup>28</sup> These crowds of workers were no doubt restless, but their ignorance was maneuvered and took the content the bourgeoisie wanted to give it: “a religious and conservative form.”<sup>29</sup> At this point in his argument, Halévy seemingly neglects his own claim that the public display of religious enthusiasm haunted the bourgeoisie.<sup>30</sup> He has embraced the thesis that field preaching came to appease the masses while overlooking that the very crowds that gathered for the Methodist revival were rioting for food in 1739. Is the “violence” of “popular upheavals” generated by the revival that much different from the crowd rising up to “seize the wheat which they were unable to buy”?

Thompson too directs his attention to the scene of public preaching at his closing remarks about Methodism. In his case, the scene offers the most “interesting” reason as to why the working class was so attracted to Methodism:

Charles Kingley’s epithet, “the opium of the masses,” reminds us that many working people turned to religion as a “consolation,” even though the dreams inspired by Methodist doctrine were scarcely happy. The methods of the revivalist preachers were noted for their emotional violence... And the open-air crowds and early congregations of Methodism were also noted for the violence of their “enthusiasm”... Southey, indeed, suggested that revivalism was akin to Mesmerism: Wesley “had produced a new disease, and he accounted for it by a theological theory instead of a physical one.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 72–74.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 380.

Once again, the “violence” of the revival is contrasted with political radicalism. In a paragraph that speaks of opium and disease, an intriguing symptom in Thompson’s statement is the association between “violence” of the revival and social conservatism.<sup>32</sup> Like Halévy prior to him, Thompson thinks that enthusiasm is anemic compared to revolutionary fervor. Field preaching offers the most “interesting” explanation for the appeal that Methodism had for the English working class and yet the *violence* of the enthusiasm displayed therein is just another proof of the revival’s utmost *pacifying* force.

As historians of Methodism converge at the scene of field preaching, we encounter the moment of instability in Halévy’s thesis. This unsettling point in the argument may grant us the space to offer our own question, which holds its own hypothesis: Might the scene of field preaching help us see the Methodist revival not as the antidote for a social revolution but as the very public performance of revolutionary fervor?

### **“A Strange Way of Preaching”**

Let us now return to the scene of the riots in Kingswood. Historians of the period agree that government presence and law enforcement were scarce in several regions in England, particularly in and around forest areas. Kingswood was exemplary of this, a place with a reputation for “independence and rebelliousness,”

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<sup>32</sup> In fact, the images collected by Thompson seem to disagree: if revivalism was in fact opium (a pain killer), Wesley could not have produced a new disease, only helped spread its relief.

possibly the most riotous laboring group between the 1720s and the 1750s, according to historian Robert Malcolmson.<sup>33</sup> According to him, the town was decidedly ungovernable: “By the mid 1720s it seems that the colliers had already acquired a reputation for a strong sense of corporate identity and effective collective action,” which included the request of support from other protest movements in the area.<sup>34</sup> Since 1727, colliers organized several riots against two Parliament Acts that sought to establish a turnpike in the Bristol area that would authorize the charging of tolls on roads leading to and from the area. Colliers vehemently opposed the measures and brought mayhem by destroying the tolls and interrupting the supply of coal going into Bristol.<sup>35</sup> More than a sheer desire for destruction, what colliers rioted “against [was] the authority that had not fulfilled the people’s expectations of it.”<sup>36</sup> As Adrian Randall indicates, the struggle against tolls exposed the Kingswood colliers to the core of England’s political establishment: “Turnpikes... were seen to emanate from that political elite with access to Westminster who were thereby able to privatize a common asset and make money from it.”<sup>37</sup> For the Kingswood colliers, these first experiments in privatization had to be resisted. They did so by occupying and reclaiming Kingswood’s common areas.

As I indicated at the opening of this essay, a labor dispute emerged in Kingswood in the autumn of 1738. The owners of the town’s coal mines entered into

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<sup>33</sup> Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 89. For staggering numbers of the coal business operation in Kingswood, see pp. 90-91.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 93.

<sup>35</sup> Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 94.

<sup>36</sup> Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 97.

<sup>37</sup> Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 177.

a price war and as a result colliers' wages went down. "Many of the colliers... were determined to resist this reduction... [and] combined together and forced others to join them in a general stoppage of work." Authorities acted fast to fortify the city and collect incriminating evidence against the rioters. Results of the uprising are hard to gauge, Malcolmson points out, but it is certain that the repercussions of the strike lasted until April 1739.<sup>38</sup>

In the midst of all this controversy, George Whitefield arrives in Bristol in February 1739 and shortly afterwards preaches for the first time in the open fields of Kingswood. He reports in his journal: "Blessed be the Lord that I have now broken the ice! I believe I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields."<sup>39</sup> In the ensuing weeks, Whitefield preaches to several societies in the region, but whenever he is in Kingswood he is in the open fields. His journal from the period closes with the following statement: "I hope a reformation will be carried on amongst [the colliers]. For my own part, I had rather preach the Gospel to the unprejudiced, ignorant colliers, than to the bigoted, self-righteous, formal Christians. The colliers will enter into the Kingdom of God before them."<sup>40</sup>

Whitefield summoned John Wesley to join him in Kingswood, claiming that that a "glorious door opened among the colliers."<sup>41</sup> After some hesitation and only after casting lots, Wesley and his friends at the Fetter Lane society agreed about his

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<sup>38</sup> Malcolmson, "A Set of Ungovernable People," 114-16.

<sup>39</sup> Whitefield, *Journals*, 216.

<sup>40</sup> Whitefield, *Journals*, 243.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 190.

journey to Bristol.<sup>42</sup> His *Journal* prefaces the importance of this event by referencing a letter written to his father on the occasion of his decision to pursue a “university life” in Oxford as opposed to moving back to Epworth to take over the pastoral duties from father Samuel.<sup>43</sup> It seems that Wesley thought of his journey to Bristol as yet another decisive moment when he was cutting ties with his past and moving towards a new direction.

Wesley reached Bristol on 31 March in time to attend Whitefield’s preaching. His reaction is famous: “I could scarce reconcile myself to this *strange way* of preaching in the fields... having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls *almost a sin* if it had not been done *in a church*.”<sup>44</sup> That evening, Wesley preached on the Sermon on the Mount to the Nicholas Street society and was startled by the irony that Jesus’ sermon was, after all, a “remarkable precedent of *field preaching*.”<sup>45</sup> So, on 2 April, Wesley

submitted to ‘be more vile,’ and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The Scripture on which I spoke was this...: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> John Wesley, “Journal: March 8-15, 1739,” in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 19, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 37 Cf. n. 64.

<sup>43</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 19:38. See, also: Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 191.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley, *Works* 19:46.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 19:46.

<sup>46</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 19:46.

By the end of that month, Wesley had preached to an estimated crowd of 47,500 people in the Bristol area. His *Journal* gains intensity as he narrates the experiences of people falling to the ground and crying out to God. These “violent” demonstrations—to recall the expression from Halévy and Thompson—already raised mistrust and suspicion about the revival.<sup>47</sup>

Did the arrival of Methodist preachers signify the end of the revolts of the Kingswood colliers? In fact, as Malcolmson observes, their riotous nature seems to have waned in the second half of the eighteenth century. He suggests that “Methodism may have introduced into Kingswood a new form of authority,” which led to “Kingswood [being] tamed, and its eighteenth-century turbulence... succeeded by quiescence during the nineteenth century.”<sup>48</sup> Halévy’s thesis is thus vindicated: Methodism functioned in Kingswood to appease the crowds. Wesley apparently shared this vision as he declared, in 1768: “no Indians are more savage than were the colliers of Kingswood; many of whom are now humane, hospitable people full of love of God and man; quiet, diligent in business; in every state content; every way adoring the gospel of God their savior.”<sup>49</sup>

But Wesley may have overlooked how much *he* had been transformed by field preaching and how “savage” the practice was to so many of the critics of the revival. As Joerg Rieger has pointed out, Albert Outler’s suggestion that Wesley was a “folk theologian” tends to overlook the ways in which Wesley was made into the

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Wesley’s entry for 30 April, 1739, where he describes how many were “offended” by these signs, including a “physician, who was much afraid there might be fraud or imposture in the case.” Wesley, *Works*, 19:52.

<sup>48</sup> Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 127.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 125.

theologian he was by common folk.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, it bears noting that the decision to meet the colliers in the open fields proved transformative to Wesley. Richard P. Heitzenrater makes the intriguing, though brief, suggestion that it was the experience of field preaching that shifted Wesley's focus away from his personal anguish around assurance of faith to a "more public and evangelical sense of vocation."<sup>51</sup> On 4 April, 1739 Wesley writes in his journal what amounts to a theological defense of field preaching: "How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God?"<sup>52</sup> Heitzenrater's suggestion seems all the more valid in light of this: within days of his first contact with the open fields of Kingswood, Wesley was thinking of field preaching along the category of means of grace.

Wesley's shift towards a more "public" understanding of his ministry immediately placed him at the center of England's social tensions. Field preaching was not illegal in England, but it was irregular.<sup>53</sup> Whitefield was the first to face problems with the Chancellor of the diocese of Bristol, already in 1739.<sup>54</sup> Whitefield's response was somewhat standard for Methodism: field preaching was a way to appeal to a large sector of the populace that was excluded from the churches and that the fruits of the practice proved its divine nature.<sup>55</sup> Wesley used similar

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<sup>50</sup> Rieger, *Grace under Pressure: Negotiating the Heart of the Methodist Traditions*, 39; Joerg Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (Wesley's Foundry Books, 2018), 12.

<sup>51</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd rev. ed (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 102; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 133.

<sup>52</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 19:47.

<sup>53</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 109.

<sup>54</sup> Whitefield, *Journals*, 213–22.

<sup>55</sup> See, Whitefield, *Journals*, 222.



arguments in his engagement with Bishop Butler, also from Bristol, with whom he may have met on at least three occasions to discuss his case.<sup>56</sup> Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London between 1720 and 1748, was initially prone to favor the Methodist movement, but later on defended the thesis that field preaching was in fact illegal.<sup>57</sup>

As Hempton indicates, the Methodist revival “appeared to undermine traditional authority” through its critique of the clergy, but also because its endorsement of “itinerant, lay, and female preachers crossed traditional boundaries of hierarchy, law, sex, age, wealth, education and religious vocation.”<sup>58</sup> Field preaching, in particular, was met with direct resistance from the top ranks of society: “anti-Methodist rioting was seen from one perspective as an instrument of social control.”<sup>59</sup> The following from the Cork Baptist Church Book cements the notion that opposition to field preaching was a necessary mechanism for social control:

From their first appearance the novelty of preaching in the fields, their seeming zeal and disinterestedness gained them a multitude of hearers... The multitudes of all ranks of people that resorted to the fields to hear them gave range to the magistrates and 'tis not improbable but the mob were countenanced in disturbing their assemblies, 'tis certain that such kind of assemblies are subject to tumults..., yet the laws do not protect such wild promiscuous assemblies. Besides there was some reason to think that the working people were interrupted from their labour and while out of pretense religion they ran after such preachers their families at home were left destitute.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 208–9.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 147.

<sup>58</sup> Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 149.

<sup>59</sup> Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 149.

<sup>60</sup> The Cork Baptist Church Book, 1653-1875. Cited in Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 153–54.

In this blend of religious and social attack, it is noteworthy that field preaching was perceived as a threat to the work ethic and that gathering in the open fields was associated with idleness. While legal disputes were intense, much of the opposition to field preaching exposed class bias against Methodism.<sup>61</sup>

To audiences accustomed to seeing assemblies of the working-class people as a sign of rebellion, the crowds assembled by the Methodist revival seemed just another threat to established authorities. Historian John Walsh highlights that the “resentment of gentry and clergy [against Methodism] is not hard to explain... They feared it as a challenge to public order and to the authority of their class.”<sup>62</sup> Henry Rack reiterates Walsh’s observation: “Whatever the truth of... speculative Weberian notions about the effects on the capitalist spirit, contemporaries saw [Methodists’] social disruptiveness.”<sup>63</sup> Historian Nicholas Rogers confirms that “crowd interventions were a constituent element in the rich and ramified demotic political culture of the Georgian era [c. 1714-1830],” and that these interventions occupied a “contested terrain in which power, ideology, and class interest intersected.”<sup>64</sup> This must be clear: field preaching placed the Methodist revival right at the center of this terrain and helped expose class tensions in English society.

Field preaching indelibly links the Wesleyan revival to the political agitation of the Industrial Revolution. Crowds of riotous workers and crowds of enthusiast

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<sup>61</sup> See, Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 149.

<sup>62</sup> John Walsh, “Methodism and the Mob in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Popular Belief and Practice: Papers Read at the Ninth Summer Meeting and the Tenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Studies in Church History, 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 218.

<sup>63</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 280.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press & Oxford University Press, 1998), 17–18.

believers performed the same act of *placement* for a *displaced* population. To recall Thompson's thesis: "Methodism... did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution... some *place* in an otherwise hostile world."<sup>65</sup> Yet, it is not just that workers found their place in the Methodist revival, but fundamentally that the Methodist revival found its place in the common space already opened up by the political riots of the emerging working class.

Kingswood had a place for the Methodist preachers because the open fields had been the place of the colliers. What many perceive as the sign of the colliers' accommodation to the status quo may well have been their ongoing resistance to the establishment as they continued to claim the open fields as their field of action. What some see as the success of Methodism in taming the colliers might have been the success of the colliers in making Wesleyan theology a true form of *political* theology of the commons—a theology of the open fields.

### **A Theology of the Commons**

The perspective on the political impact of the Methodist revival afforded by the scene of public preaching gains force when one considers crowds as political agents and not mere spectators. Theorist Judith Butler insists that politics is not only the bureaucratic distribution of political functions, but it is fundamentally about the performance of political acts.<sup>66</sup> To assess the political impact of the Methodist revival one must consider the political force of such acts. The practice of

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<sup>65</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 379.

<sup>66</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

field preaching imparted a radical edge to the Methodist revival. This rise of the commons offers an entryway into the political theology of the Wesleyan movement and—its own form of theology of the crowds.

The Methodist experience is entangled in the movement of the crowds. Though he claimed that the Kingswood colliers had been appeased by the Methodist revival, Wesley was constantly having to handle the tensions created by field preaching, tensions that the Methodist movement only intensified. In his essay, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley takes on a critic of Methodism who is especially concerned about the tumult generated by field preaching. Wesley rejects the legal argument against the practice, but his adversary presses on suggesting that field preaching is not only illegal—it is also dangerous. The charge is openly political: “[Field preaching] may be attended with mischievous consequences. It may give advantages to the enemies of the established government. It is big with mischief.”<sup>67</sup> Even if “Methodists themselves are a harmless and loyal people,” field preaching remains a useful site for “disloyal and seditious persons.”<sup>68</sup>

The argument is compelling and Wesley must concede that crowds might become tumultuous. He is, however, willing to say that the revival may in fact be an agent of public disruption. Wesley, the leader who professed to be so “tenacious of every point relating to decency and order,” ultimately grants that field preaching is a disturbance of public order much like the apostles disturbed the peace of the Roman

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<sup>67</sup> John Wesley, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 115.

<sup>68</sup> Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), VIII:115.

Empire—an intriguing correlation established by Wesley.<sup>69</sup> One may glimpse at Wesley’s theological understanding of the political force of crowds of people: “Although what we preach is the gospel of peace, yet if you will violently and illegally hinder our preaching, must this not create disturbance?”<sup>70</sup> The crowds gathered in the open fields are helping Wesley turn the table: the disturbance generated by field preaching is a fruit of his adversaries’ own incapacity to witness the public appearance of the gospel. Field preaching will indeed be a disturbance as long as the order of society is unjust.

Wesley goes on to insist that field preaching was not part of his own design: “Field-preaching was therefore a sudden expedient, a thing submitted to, rather than chosen; and therefore submitted to, because I thought preaching even thus, better than not preaching at all.”<sup>71</sup> The constant reference to the spontaneous nature of field preaching is important for Wesley as he seems to guard himself against the claim that causing a public scene was his intention all along. To address criticisms against the “manner of our preaching,” Wesley uses all sorts of explanations, from doctrinal issues to climatic factors.<sup>72</sup> But Wesley’s meticulous reasoning comes to a halt when he introduces his adversary to the “awful sight” of a multitude gathering in the open fields of Kingswood. The prose of the *Farther Appeal* breaks up to give room to hymnody: “[The crowds] were waiting upon God, while

They stood, under an open air adored

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<sup>69</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 19:46.

<sup>70</sup> Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), VIII:121.

<sup>71</sup> Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), VIII:113.

<sup>72</sup> Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), VIII:112.

The God who made both air, earth, heaven, and sky.”<sup>73</sup>

A dreaded Wesley says in his heart: “This... is no other than the house of God! This is the gate of heaven!”<sup>74</sup> Wesley, who once cautioned his preachers against excessive field preaching, is shown here appreciating the fact that the open fields are indeed the house of God.<sup>75</sup> Wesley’s awe before the crowds bespeaks his realization that the revival was politically disrupting and that this disruption was significant to the revival’s understanding of the work of God.

In her recent book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler suggests that the gathering of bodies—the *assembly*—is politically meaningful. They signify something, even when nothing is said: “acting in concert can be the embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political.”<sup>76</sup> For Butler, there’s something transgressive—*sedition*, to recall Wesley’s opponent’s term—about the apparition of these bodily assemblies in the public scene, particularly when the bodies that show up are those that often *disappear* before the public eye:

[W]hen bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space... they are exercising the right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which... delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), VIII:112.

<sup>74</sup> Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), VIII:112.

<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of Wesley’s advice to limit field preaching, see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 165–66.

<sup>76</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 11.

For Butler, the apparition of precarious bodies in the assembled crowd exposes the injustices of the system. These spontaneous gatherings constitute a political irruption of a power that has been repressed. The act is *creative* insofar as it generates conditions for the possibility of life in an environment that is stifling. Might this offer a new perspective into the assembled crowds in the open fields of Kingswood and beyond? Might the Methodist revival be another instantiation of the right to appear, performed by those living under precarious conditions?

Butler's analysis stems from the contemporary scene, an atmosphere that has been impacted by political movements occupying the public space. These movements expose and confront the injustices of our own time. Reflecting on this context, theologians Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan affirm the theological depth of the concept of the multitude and its affinity with the biblical categories of *laos* and *ochlos*, both Greek terms used by New Testament writers to designate the common people that constituted Jesus' movement.<sup>78</sup> According to Rieger and Kwok, one does not simply join a multitude, but rather one *makes* the multitude.<sup>79</sup> As Butler argues, the common space is not a given, but rather constituted as public space as people assemble. The assembly of people *makes* the space into a common space; it "reconfigure[s] the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 32.

<sup>79</sup> Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 32.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 71.

The consideration of the political force of crowds puts in check the traditional position that masses of people are often “blind,” as Halévy insisted, or reactionary, as Thompson implied. With Butler’s analysis of the performative power of the assembly, it is possible to suggest that political transformation and revolutionary fervor are not engendered by the morality espoused by a movement nor by its bureaucratic organization. More than simply shaping a discipline favorable to the creation of a submissive worker, the Methodist revival helped to create a common space that offered home to those who had been displaced. The occupation of the commons by the crowds of Methodists “create[ed] psychical and imaginary spaces so that an alternative world can be thought and experienced.”<sup>81</sup> Before any Methodist ethic or doctrine was preached, the crowds of colliers, coal miners, artisans, women, and children spoke through their collective presence occupying the commons.

In radical grassroots movements, the commons name open spaces, public squares, common fields, and forests that escape the logic of private ownership and top-down power hierarchies. Through its practice of field preaching, the Methodist revival took place in the already politically charged site—the open fields. This imbued the movement with a radical edge by aligning it with the movements of the dispossessed masses of English workers. Field preaching constituted the Methodist movement as a movement of the commons, for the commons.

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<sup>81</sup> Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 5.



Rieger and Kwok justly say: “God will not be found... where God can be controlled.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the Methodist revival found its way to God in the uncontrollable crowds gathered in the open fields. Along with other movements, the Methodist revival reclaimed, occupied, and ultimately *revived* the commons. Field preaching, one could say with a nod to David Harvey, “delineate[d] liminal social spaces of possibility where ‘something different’ is not only possible, but foundational for the defining of revolutionary trajectories.”<sup>83</sup> The fields of Kingswood became this liminal social space of possibility for the revival. The Methodist revival was constituted in the occupation of the commons. In Wesley’s terms, it became the house of God for the people called Methodist. The space that the colliers found in Methodism was this common space—a space already known to them through decades of political agitation. What Methodism did was not so much to appease these crowds but to occupy a space they had known and to perceive in those open fields the house of God. Methodism occupied the public sphere with its proclamation of the gospel and, in this process, allowed for the poor and working classes to perceive that indeed there was room for them in the city. The crowds that gathered to witness to the event of preaching did not simply *join* the Methodist movement, but rather constituted Methodism as a movement of the multitudes. In a foreign territory where there is no room for public life, Methodism offered a glimpse of life in the commons and, there, it found its God.

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<sup>82</sup> Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 108.

<sup>83</sup> David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013), xvii.

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