Religion and the industrial revolution: an analysis of E P Thompson's interpretation of Methodism

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Abstract
The fiery religion of John Wesley has inflamed passionate opposition almost from its inception in 1738, when, at a meeting of a religious society in London, he felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’. Eighteen Century critics fastened on two aspects of the movement: its indecorous ‘enthusiasm’ (irrational zeal verging on fanaticism) and its capacity to undermine lawfully established authorities in the Church and long-sanctioned privileges in Society. The Duchess of Buckingham’s reaction to Methodist preachers now finds its way into most studies of Methodism: ‘... their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinctured with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and to do away with all distinctions ... It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth.'
RELIGION AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION:

An Analysis of L.F. Thompson's Interpretation of Methodism

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The fiery religion of John Wesley has inflamed passionate opposition almost from its inception in 1738, when, at a meeting of a religious society in London, he felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. Eighteenth-century critics fastened on two aspects of the movement: its indecorous 'enthusiasm' (irrational zeal verging on fanaticism) and its capacity to undermine lawfully established authorities in the Church and long-sanctioned privileges in Society. The Duchess of Buckingham's reaction to Methodist preachers now finds its way into most studies of Methodism: '... their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinctured with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and to do away with all distinctions ... It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth'.

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The self-appointed leader of the opposition to Wesleyanism in the 1770s was the Calvinist Vicar of Broadhembury, Augustus Montague Toplady. Criticised for his theological opinions by Thomas Olivers, Wesley's shoemaker preacher, Toplady penned the following doggerel in which Wesley is made to say:

I've Thomas Olivers, the cobbler,
No stall in England holds a nobler;
A wight of talents universal,
Whereof I'll give a brief rehearsal:
He wields, beyond most other men,
His awl, his razor, and his pen;
With equal ease, when' er there's need
Can darn my stockings or my creed,
And then, when he philosophises,
No son of Crispin half so wise is;
Of all my ragged regiment,
No cobbler gives me more content.

Toplady thought Olivers' views contemptuous: he was a mere cobbler who was clearly over-reaching himself. Another critic, the Whig cleric, Sydney Smith, condemned Evangelical Dissenters because they were inciting the poor to step 'out of their province' and become 'teachers of the land'.

Major subsequent assaults on Methodism include the works of R. Southey, W.E.H. Lecky, R. Knox, and G.R. Taylor. However, the most provocative modern critical assessment of Methodism was published in 1963: E.P. Thompson's great study, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson turned on their heads the charges of eighteenth-century critics. First, Methodism lacked the intellectual force of either the Old Dissent or Bunyan's truest heir, Tom Paine; hence it lacked that rationality which would have constrained the working class to the conclusion that only revolution could meet their needs.
Whereas eighteenth-century Whigs despised the irrationality of the Methodists because it threatened the fabric of a society which in the previous century had been torn asunder at the behest of religious fanatics, adherents of the New Left point to the same irrationality and see it as a prop of the ancien régime. This is just one example of the way in which throughout history 'reason' has been abused in the service of political and ideological systems. Secondly, whereas aristocratic and clerical opponents feared that Methodism was undermining the social order, Thompson sees it as an essentially conservative influence. It was 'a component in the psychic processes of counter-revolution.'

Thompson's sledge-hammer blows were directed at the most cherished of Methodist traditions. In place of the traditional view that Methodists were kind and helpful to the poor, Thompson maintained that they 'weakened the poor from within, by adding the active ingredient of submission.'

Every Methodist minister has been drilled in Notes on the New Testament, Wesley's chief theological work, but Thompson considers that Wesleyan theology was a horrifying compound of Luther's authoritarianism, Calvinistic joylessness, almost-Manichaean guilt, eighteenth-century necrophily, and unpleasant Moravian womb-regressive imagery. Methodism was born in song, Wesley boasted in his preface to the Methodist Hymn Book of which he was very proud, but Thompson sees Methodist hymnody as riddled with 'perverted eroticism'.

Jesus is praised in imagery which is 'maternal, Oedipal, sexual and sado-masochistic. Methodist places of worship, where God was praised far more convincingly than in the parish Church, were dismissed by Thompson as 'box-like,
blackening chapels', which were 'great traps for the human psyche'. The inimitable Methodist service of worship was described by Thompson as 'a ritualised form of psychic masturbation'. No wonder the Methodist historian, John Kent, was so unnerved by this onslaught that he made two errors in the mere act of transcribing the title of Thompson's book.

Left-wing reviewers, while not uncritical of other aspects of his book, were delighted by Thompson's treatment of Methodism. Other historians were not so sure, and it is worth emphasising that Thompson himself thought of this section of his work as tentative and provisional. In view of the pronounced bias of the work and its tendency at times to degenerate into polemic, it seems only reasonable to suspect it also of one-sidedness and of being based on unexplored assumptions. Sufficient research on the role of Methodism as a social phenomenon in the Industrial Revolution in England has been published recently to justify a review of Thompson's assumptions and arguments. This research has a bearing on three major questions. First, was Methodism a religion which especially appealed to the industrial proletariat, an appeal demonstrated by their becoming Methodists in higher proportions than other social classes in the Society? Second, was the overwhelming dynamic of the Methodist movement in the early industrial revolution counter-revolutionary and conservative? Third, is the mechanism of 'psychic masturbation', of sabbath orgies, and other manifestations of emotional religion, sufficient to explain how the working class could resign itself to the harsh discipline of the factory system?
The major theme of Thompson's book - this 'masterly vindication of creative Marxism' - is the development of one working class between 1780 and 1832, a working class whose members were united by common interest and who possessed a 'collective self consciousness' which was 'the great spiritual gain of the industrial revolution'. It was this working class which was transformed by Methodism and by political radicalism, the former more than undoing the good work of the latter. He draws attention to the divisions within his one working class and confessed that the artisans were a special élite, but he does not allow this to invalidate his thesis. It is not surprising that Currie and Hartwell express doubts about the very existence of this one working class and conclude that it 'remains, even after 850 pages, a myth, a construct of determined imagination and theoretical presuppositions'. Geoffrey Best questions Thompson's assumption that Methodism was so co-extensive with industrialisation that it was capable of transforming the proletariat into uncomplaining factory fodder. These two criticisms of the unity of the working class and of the identification of Methodism with the industrial proletariat will now be examined.

The present writer's feeling that the working class was far from united arose from a study of the economic status and social aspirations of seventy-nine artisans and labourers who were to become missionaries in India with English evangelical missionary societies during the period 1792 to 1832. This is a tiny sample but its bias in favour of the more religiously-inclined of the working class should confirm any theories Thompson might have on
the nature of the impact of the Evangelical Revival on the working class. The great majority of this sample were 'artisans' and they were not without ambition nor expectation of 'improvement' in their social status. Eleven of them had already become teachers at the time of their application for missionary service; in the period under review teaching was an occupation frequently exploited as a means of bridging the gap between the working and middle classes and, in particular, it was a popular way of supporting oneself while training for the decidedly middle-class occupation of the ministry. This same sample hints at a good deal of mobility between occupations, a sign of social ambition and the thirst for security created by the vicissitudes of the trade cycle. An interesting example of one who responded to these twin compulsions was the Baptist, Joshua Rowe, whose father was a woolcomber who could not keep his wife and three children out of the Workhouse. Joshua's first appointment was as a servant to a Quaker draper. He was then a bound apprentice in the 'weaving trade' and became an usher in an evening school. From here he went to sea, where as was so common with sailors, numerous flirtations with death did wonders for his religious belief. Following this he became a clerk to a Newfoundland merchant but he grew uneasy because he had learnt no trade except that of a weaver for which he did not care. So he became a woolcomber, like his father, and, on the side, did some teaching of the 3R's. The 'deadness of trade' forced him to leave this industry and, at the date of his application, he was a clerk in a warehouse in Bristol. 35

Apart from mobility, artisans were noted for their enterprise and thirst for education. A good example is
William Ward, a printer, who became a missionary to India in 1799. On rising to the position of 'corrector of the press' he had the opportunity of 'storing his mind with various and useful knowledge', and it was said of him, as could be said of many artisans in the period prior to 1850, that he had a 'mind naturally aspiring, which could not altogether brook the plodding course of common business...'' Similarly, shoemakers, who made up the second largest artisan trade, were a surprisingly enterprising and independent race of autodidacts, and they had the opportunity of attaining middle-class status. One such was William Addis who had reached the top of his craft; he had served his time in the Boot and Shoe trade in 'all its branches' and was a wholesale and retail leather seller 'on a respectable scale'. The largest employer of artisans, the textile industry, offered avenues of advancement for the skilled as well as scope for the exploitation of the unskilled. The amount of capital needed to establish oneself as an employer was not exorbitant in the early Industrial Revolution, and matrimony might secure what savings could not. Charles Farrar, for example, considered that, upon marrying the sister of the owner of a woollen mill in Rochester, his future was ensured, 'deriving from the business a comfortable maintenance, having leisure and respectability; with the permitted anticipation of being in the firm hereafter'.

It is possible, however, to find in this small sample some evidence of Thompson's thesis of group self-consciousness and a sympathy with the unskilled labouring poor, particularly amongst the earliest Baptist missionaries:

'The distress is tenfold to what it used to be', wrote Hannah Marshaman to her husband in 1820. 'The machines
are the ruin of the Country/hundreds on the parish/hundreds more out of work and much (sic) turn thieves. O that God would arise for the help of the poor and distress (sic).''

If this sympathy had been sustained throughout the period 1790 to 1832 it would be feasible to postulate one working class. But the weight of the evidence favours the view that artisans were so 'respectable' and sanguine of 'improvement' that most would have been more like John Smith who became a missionary in 1828 and who, although the son of a nurseryman, had no sympathy with the labouring class since he was convinced his wife had died after witnessing the 'mob' smash her brother's looms in the machinery riots at Blackburn in 1826.

Not only did the upper working class tend to embrace the values of the commercial middle-class, but there were close affinities between the skilled artisan trades and the new professional occupations which were emerging as the Industrial Revolution progressed. The education acquired by both groups was often surprisingly high, although this is not to deny that their acquirements owed more to their common thirst for knowledge, than to the system's capacity to impart it. There is an important link between the specialised training of the apprenticed artisan and the vocational training of the new professional man. The training of the teacher in the model school and of the surgeon by the apprenticeship system and in the medical school were methods 'inherited ... from below - from the skilled trades - rather than from above, from the world of "liberal education"'. Furthermore, there is a self-confidence about the artisan and the new professional man which the emerging factory proletariat never had; the cult of respectability was strong in both groups. Finally,
both had similar social ambitions and grievances - both were 'upwardly mobile men with high need for achievement but with subordinate positions'.

Because of these affinities it makes more sense to group artisans with the professional classes than with the lower working class and to employ R.S. Neale's concept of a 'middling class' in which he includes 'petit bourgeois, aspiring professional men, other literates and artisans'. This was the 'uneasy' class, the 'unstable' class, the class characterised by considerable mobility between occupations and within them, and its members tended to be 'individuated' and 'non-deferential'. Rather than Thompson's one working class united by common experience it therefore does less violence to the evidence to maintain a divided working class in 1830. Apart from the divisions resulting from the rich amalgam of inherited customs, changes over time, variations between regions, and differences in earnings, there was the major and distinct cleavage between the skilled artisan and the 'poor labourer' which was far sharper than the division between the skilled worker and the 'lower middle class'.

Having divided the working class into two and implied the very different deprivations and expectations of each part, it is necessary to ask if Methodism appealed predominantly to the upper working class or to the lower working class. If it can be demonstrated that only a small proportion of the lower working class were Methodists it would throw serious doubt on Thompson's thesis that Methodism produced the submissive and self-regulated operative which the capitalist mode of production necessitated. Such a demonstration is now possible thanks to a very useful sociological study, based on quantitative
methods, by A.D. Gilbert due for release in June, 1976. It is the most systematic explication yet to appear of the function of Methodism in the Industrial Revolution, and, although like Thompson, Gilbert views Methodism as a social phenomenon, he dissociates himself from the highly thematic approach which inspires Thompson's work and which is predetermined by his Marxist philosophy. For purposes of analysis Gilbert considers Methodism with the denominations of the 'New Dissent': the Congregationalists, the Particular Baptists (Moderate Calvinists) and the General Baptists of the New Connexion (which, like the Wesleyans, were Evangelical Arminians). These Evangelical Nonconformist denominations enjoyed similar rates of growth in the century 1750-1850 and their growth involved 'a downward shift in the social basis of recruiting'. But how far down did the shift descend? On the basis of a study of the occupational data found in Non-Parochial Registers Gilbert concludes that in the period 1800-37, 59.4% of Evangelical Nonconformists were drawn from the artisan classes whereas only 10.8% were drawn from the labouring classes. This may be contrasted with the occupational distribution for the society as a whole, wherein only 23.5% were artisans and 17% were labourers.

If these statistics approximate to the truth they are a graphic demonstration that Evangelical Nonconformity had great appeal to the upwardly-mobile, aspiring class, and far less appeal to Thompson's human fodder of the Industrial Revolution, the helpless, exploited factory operatives for whom he sees Methodism as a 'consolation' and for whom he designed his mechanism of 'psychic masturbation'. Gilbert, far more clearly than Thompson, sees Methodism as itself a protest movement, an alternative society, 'a symbolic
rejection of the mores and values of the old order by a class more conscious of social discrimination than of economic deprivation. In rebuttal of Thompson, Gilbert argues: '... to account for the success of the popular evangelicalism of the early industrial age as "the chiliasm of despair" is to beg the question why it was not the most "defeated" and "hopeless" sections of the society which were mobilised by the movement, and to minimise its obvious and widespread appeal among individuals and social groups whose economic and social positions were not only adequate, but were actually improving'.

Gilbert does more than locate the strength of Methodism in the upper working class. He also demonstrates that 'thoughout the eighteenth century artisans had been over-represented in movements of popular economic and social protest, as had miners'. These were the occupational groups which managed to liberate themselves from the paternalistic control of the squire-parson combine, an effective instrument of social control exacting revenge wherever possible on those who did not show due deference. In the new large cities such control was no longer possible, but it was not over the city-dwelling industrial proletariat that Methodism exercised its special sway, but over the workers who lived in industrial villages and who worked in those domestic industries which were the bridging mode of industrial organisation as capitalism relentlessly converted England from a pre-industrial to a mature industrial state. Since domestic industry and the industrial village were transient features of an industrialising society we should expect to find that any social movement which found such an atmosphere especially congenial would lose its impetus over time. Such was the
experience of Methodism after 1840 when the expanding industrial population started to be absorbed more in large towns and cities than in industrial villages.  

II

Thompson's writing on Methodism, like Shakespeare's in King Lear, is most powerful when describing the destructive and the negative. This is well seen in a fine passage which purports to be a balanced summary of the contribution of Methodism to social life in the period under review.

...the cult of 'love' was brought to a point of poise between the affirmations of a 'social religion' and the pathological aberrations of frustrated social and sexual impulses. On the one hand, genuine compassion for 'harlots, and publicans, and thieves': on the other hand, morbid preoccupation with sin and with the sinner's confessional. On one hand, real remorse for real wrong-doing: on the other, luxuriating refinements of introspective guilt. On one hand, the genuine fellowship of some early Methodist societies: on the other, social energies denied outlet in public life which were released in sanctified emotional onanism. On one hand, a religion which found a place for humble men, as local preachers and class leaders, which taught them to read and gave them self-respect and experience in speaking and in organisation: on the other hand, a religion hostile to intellectual enquiry and to artistic values which sadly abused their intellectual trust.

Thompson is aware that Methodism's thrust in history was ambiguous but he prefers not to stress this ambiguity so much as its counter-revolutionary aspects, and so, while he concedes that Methodism may have made some men revolutionaries, he dwells on his insistence that it made the majority either counter-revolutionary or else uncomplaining
servants of the capitalist system. Geoffrey Best's observation seems opposite: '... at the end of all the balancing and pondering, the faith that is in him brings him down as usual on the side of his single, simple theme'.

The dependence of Thompson's conclusions on his preconceptions is best seen when his account is contrasted with that of a historian of a different faith - one who sees some virtue in enterprise and liberal democracy - Bernard Semmel, whose work The Methodist Revolution was published in 1973. Far from agreeing with Thompson who, as we have seen, paints Methodism in the sombre colours of a sadly-degenerate, psychically-destructive Puritanism, a politically-emasculated counter-revolutionary prophylactic, Semmel's picture is more vibrant both with the warm colours depicting positive elements in Methodism and with contrast, for he dwells more than Thompson on the fascinating ambivalence of Methodism. Semmel's warm colours delineate a movement which was itself a revolution - a popular, progressive, modernising, and liberal (all the adjectives are his) revolution which preempted that violent, bloody revolution of French proportions which Thompson finds infinitely more pleasing to the eye. Moreover, the Methodist revolution was based on a rational, enlightened theology (Evangelical Arminianism) according to which all men (not just the elect) could become 'new men' - men who could achieve perfection in this life (not just in heaven). Thus Wesleyan theology dealt the dispiriting determinism of Calvinism two hard blows and laid the foundation for a 'spiritual egalitarianism' which always threatened to spill over into social, political, and economic movements.

Semmel sees Wesley's theology as not only releasing English thought from the straight-jacket of High Calvinism
but also as reinforcing that 'pragmatic, individualistic English liberalism' which safeguarded England from absolutist and totalitarian solutions to its socio-political problems. Eschewing all other summary labels of Wesleyan theology, including Thompson's 'passionate Lutheranism', Semmel locates Wesley within the via media tradition of Anglican theology, and the 'liberal method' on which it was founded, 'a method in theology based upon reason and scriptural tradition which Hooker set forth and which the Cambridge Platonists and the Latitudinarians had developed'. In making this claim Semmel modifies two commonly-held views on Methodism: that it was itself, the embodiment of irrational 'enthusiasm' and that it was a reaction to Latitudinarianism. He accepts Wesley's own insistence that he was no enemy of 'reason' and reinforces this by attempting to prove that Wesley had certain 'substantial' affinities with the Enlightenment, a demonstration for which Wesley would not have cared.

Yet Methodism was not cool rationality but 'enthusiastic' rationality - it retained the Arminianism of the Latitudinarians, but breathed such fire into it that it was capable of igniting the hitherto unkindled passions of the 'lower orders':

Enthusiasm - whether Rousseauian or evangelical - was, however, dangerous. What made Methodism seem particularly revolutionary ... was that Wesley had converted the passive Arminianism of a Church which had turned skeptical and was neglectful of its spiritual changes into an active Arminianism, preaching spiritual equality and launching a campaign against clerical indifference by the undoubted levelling methods of lay preaching. While the Church's Arminianism in the eighteenth century ... ran little risk of a meaningful political translation, Wesley's
Evangelical Arminianism, tapping strong emotions, had genuinely incendiary possibilities.\textsuperscript{63}

Enthusiastic rationality - Methodism was indeed a contradictory movement, and as Semmel proceeds with his painting, he puts aside the bright colours depicting a preemptive revolution and increasingly dwells on the ambivalence of Methodism. While they upheld liberty, equality, and fraternity - 'in religious doctrines and organization at any rate',\textsuperscript{64} - Methodists championed, 'not from policy, but for conscience sake',\textsuperscript{65} the established social order, class structure and hierarchical government, and the emerging industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{66} There was therefore a tension in Methodism which resolved itself (although the ongoing schisms in Methodism suggest this tension was more chronic than Semmel implies) into the 'Methodist synthesis':

The Methodist synthesis, with its combination of the modern and the traditional and its peculiar resolution of the forces making for liberty and order, for revolution and counter-revolution, may be said to be at the heart of the success of Wesley and his connection as the mediator between the traditional England of the ancien régime and that of the modern, industrial nation-state.\textsuperscript{67}

If this is true, Wesley emerges not as a reactionary, counter-revolutionary as Thompson characterised him, but as a mediator between the old order and the new. Did the working class benefit from their mediator, or did he force his converts to internalise the means of their own exploitation as Thompson maintains? Semmel does not answer that question specifically, but he incidentally both corrects and reinforces Thompson. He corrects Thompson's emphasis by
arguing that Methodism helped its working-class adherents to internalise 'autonomous conscience and liberal ideals'; by making them 'new men' Methodism rendered them capable of 'rational control over their lives' and it also mitigated the harsh realities of industrialisation.  

However, a major difference of approach leads Semmel ironically to reinforce an aspect of Thompson's thesis. Semmel concentrates on the ideology and structure of Methodism, whereas Thompson is primarily interested in its social milieu. Thompson speaks of the revolutionary fervour produced by social conditions and how Methodist leaders sought to countermand it. Semmel dwells on the potentially-revolutionary enthusiasm which Methodism itself generated, and how its leaders strove to direct this enthusiasm into socially-acceptable channels. But whether these energies were externally or internally generated, both Thompson and Semmel agree that they were deliberately frustrated before they could find political expression. Thompson advances the old 'pie in the sky' prophylactic theory, plus his new 'psychic masturbation' thesis. Semmel suggests an alternative and very interesting explanation which must now be examined in detail by other historians, namely, that, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the leaders of Wesleyan Methodism, deliberately rechanneled the evangelising and levelling zeal generated by practical Arminianism into foreign missions. Like a Napoleon or a Soekarno countering the threat of civil war by declaring a war overseas, so Jabez Bunting and his 'mission party', now preferring to discipline the converts they had in Britain, rather than adding to them, redirected the Connexion's resources and energies into the safe and enervating task of converting the rest of the
Semel set out to redress the balance of Thompson and his 'liberal, secular-minded' ilk who have dismissed Methodism as a reactionary movement, and he has done it by viewing Methodism from within - by studying its theology - as historians of the seventeenth century have studied the theology of the Puritans. This study leads him to reject Thompson's conclusion that 'Wesley appears to have dispensed with the best and selected unhesitatingly the worst elements of Puritanism'.  

### III

Thompson saw the 'transforming power of the cross' as the 'psychic ordeal in which the character-structure of the rebellious pre-industrial labourer or artisan was violently recast into that of the submissive industrial worker'. He refers here to the paroxisms, the emotional hysteria, and the impaired sexuality manifest in the 'characteristic' Methodist conversion experience. This view is based on the conversion account of a sailor, Joshua Marsden, in the 1790s. Several historians have been unhappy with Thompson's historical method at this point. Geoffrey Best endorses the view of the Methodist historian, John Kent, that Thompson has proceeded on the questionable assumption 'that all "methodists" had been "converted" and that "conversion" transformed in so extreme and peculiar a style all Methodists who experienced it'. Gertrude Himmelfarb writes of 'the questionableness of psycho-historical dicta that are at best generalisations from extreme situations'. While not disagreeing with these criticisms, the
present writer would want to concede, on the basis of his own studies, that accounts like Marsden's are by no means rare, and that Thompson may be pardoned for not further extending his already over-long book by filling it with sufficient examples to convince us that extremism lay with the Methodists and not with himself. However, the force of Kent's and Himmelfarb's criticism is seen when it is realised that the emotional paroxysms to which Thompson attached so much importance occurred far more frequently in the early years of the Evangelical Revival in the 1740s than in the period 1790-1832. In this latter period when the leaders of the Connexion were, in Thompson's mind, bent on counter-revolution, they were also opposed to the very revivalist techniques which Thompson sees as inducing a counter-revolutionary mentality. Surely, if revivalism was such a successful instrument for maintaining the status quo it would have been encouraged, rather than discouraged, by the conservative Methodist leadership. For the period 1730-1750 a large number of conversion accounts were written and, it is here suggested, these accounts became normative for the experience through which a Methodist convert should pass. Students of religious behaviour have frequently observed that people's conversions approximate a modal type for their denominational background. It is therefore conceivable that a Methodist in the 1790s would write of his conversion experience in language as dramatic as his co-religionists in the 1740s and yet, psychologically, have passed through a far less traumatic experience. There is evidence that Evangelical converts in the later period had difficulty in feeling the sort of emotions called for by the current emphasis on 'experimental' religion. Some complained of feeling insufficiently penitent because they
could not weep over their sins, and prospective missionaries, forced to examine their motives for offering to become missionaries, sometimes confessed to a difficulty in understanding the Evangelical concept of a divine 'calling'. Thinking of it in terms of a direct intimation of the divine will, none felt 'called' in the sorts of dreams and visions which reveal to Thompson so much of the Methodist's sexual impairment. 78

In explaining the conversion of the sailor, Marsden, Thompson is influenced by G.R. Taylor who is convinced that he has answered what he conceives to be a great historical problem, namely, to account for 'the excessive burden of Puritan guilt'. 79 Accordingly, Thompson postulates that the religious 'terrorism' of the revivalists played upon intense guilt-feelings arising from the secret sin of masturbation or the unconscious obsessional anxiety resulting from sexual frustration. 80 There can be little doubt that revivalists relied on the 'terrors of the Lord' in their preaching, but the nature of the guilt might be misunderstood. Might it not be that the sailor, Marsden, was simply experiencing conversion as he had been taught to experience it? To repeat, Wesleyans and members of other conversionist Evangelical denominations have emotional conversions often with deep feelings of guilt largely because that is how they expect to experience conversion.

Few post-conversion accounts of religious experience are plain statements of what actually happened, but a re-interpretation of the past in the light of newly-acquired attitudes. And this reinterpretation is generally not a product of neurotic guilt - it is more appropriately described as 'theological'. There are three very common elements in religious conversion accounts which provide
evidence for interpreting them primarily in theological, rather than in emotional or moral, terms. First, most such accounts are stylised and stereotyped, laden with Biblical imagery, and the references to sin and guilt are formal and unspecific. The seemingly-exaggerated accounts of pre-conversion sinfulness, which have led Thompson and Taylor to postulate an excessive burden of guilt, are explicable partly in terms of this biblical imagery. Sometimes this imagery is so strong that it revolts us, as when a backslider confesses: 'I did return like a dog to his vomit: and like a sow that was washed to her wallowing (sic) in the mire.' The vomit and mire in this case consisted of swearing and cursing. This involved taking the name of the Lord in vain and even risking the unforgivable sin - the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit - and caused such anxiety, as we see in the case of the archetypal Puritan, John Bunyan, whose besetting sin was also cursing.

This brings us to the second common element in these accounts. When the convert does recount his sins they are usually religious: sabbath-breaking, neglecting church or chapel, ignoring the means of grace, blasphemy, swearing or cursing, and most heinous of all, ridiculing the Scriptures. The Wesleyans added another which recalls the pain felt by St. Paul when he remembered his persecution of Christians - namely, their early opposition to, and persecution of, Methodists. To Evangelicals these sins could never be dismissed as mere peccadilloes - they led to that conviction which arises from the guilt induced by a comparison of oneself with God in his holiness - hardly the guilt that may have come from masturbation. All this calls to mind the terrible conviction of sin and the agonising conversion experience of Martin Luther who always insisted
that he was troubled not 'by women, but by the real knotty problems' - the theological impasse which arises when a righteous God demands total righteousness of those who are to be saved. Thompson misinterprets Luther, too, when he speaks of Luther's 'almost-Manichaean sense of guilt'.

He underestimates the religiosity of the eighteenth-century Englishman, just as (Mansfield claims) historians have underestimated the religiosity of the sixteenth-century German.

Thirdly, converts very frequently say something like: 'I was prevented from open acts of wickedness and I am grateful to God for that'. The question of outward morality was important to them and they were glad that they had observed society's standards in this respect. Neither were they in any doubt that they had observed them, but they did not make the theological error that outward morality rendered them acceptable to a holy God. Acceptance of the Pauline doctrines of the inherent sinfulness of man also partly accounts for the uncompromising assessment of their pre-conversion sinfulness, but it is an assessment which could fairly be described as 'psychologically almost uninteresting', the words G.R. Elton uses when discussing the conversion of John Calvin.

Thompson has been ahistorical in not allowing for the stereotyped nature, the conventionality, of Methodist conversion accounts, a characteristic which suggests that they owed more to the expectations of their fellow believers than to the traumas of adjusting to a social revolution. He, and his mentor, G.R. Taylor, have underestimated the power of religious belief to generate guilt without any dependence on repressed sexuality. It is probably more satisfactory to see these guilt-feelings and the heightened
sense of sinfulness as conscious and rational responses to Protestant theology. The stereotyped Biblical language in which they described their conversions is a far better index of their theological opinions, than of their emotions - that is to say, exotic claims about personal sinfulness originate in Biblical metaphor, rather than in neurotic guilt. So, even if all members of the industrial proletariat had experienced the classic Methodist-type conversion described by Joshua Marsden, it would still not follow that Thompson has described the 'psychic ordeal' by which they were 'violently recast' from rebellious pre-industrial labourers into submissive industrial workers. When we take into account the already-demonstrated fact that only a small minority of the industrial proletariat belonged to any Evangelical religion, Thompson's hypothesis may be fairly thought of as more than unlikely.

Thompson's work is one of the finest examples of social history written in the English language. Its markedly sociological component has been praised by reviewers and Thompson, himself, saw clearly what was required when refuting the anti-cataclysmic school of historians of the Industrial Revolution: 'Any evaluation of the quality of life must entail an assessment of the total life-experience the manifold satisfactions or deprivations, cultural as well as material, of the people concerned'. Thompson's understanding of the sociology of religion appears however, to be seriously deficient, and has left him wide open to criticism in the three areas discussed in this article. First, he has failed in his account of those 'deprivations' - religious, social, cultural, educational, economic, and recreational - for which, in new industrial areas, Methodism was sometimes the only movement which offered any solution,
and many historians have had no difficulty in emphasising the many positive 'satisfactions' provided by Methodism. Furthermore, Thompson begs the question when he writes that through Methodism the energies of working-class people 'were not so much inhibited as displaced from expression in personal and in social life, and confiscated for the service of the Church', for the Church did not exist only for its own sake, and the many thousands of people who joined Methodist societies \(\textit{voluntarily be it emphasised}\) believed that they were being well served by the Methodist movement. Neither can we agree with Thompson that Methodism can be held responsible for imbuing the working class with 'the work-discipline of industrialism' for the conclusive reason that it failed so conspicuously to win the allegiance of 'the apathetic Babylon of the factory System'. Instead of viewing Methodism as 'a reflex' of the 'despair' of the labouring class it should be thought of as an expression of hope, of the aspirations of the upper working class.

Secondly, by considering Methodist thought in the context of historical theology, Semmel sees no need to agree with Thompson that Methodist theology was 'otiose' and 'anti-intellectual'; rather he praises Methodism for the part it played in making England a liberal democracy, a country in which people could enjoy their freedom because of their discipline. Finally, it has been suggested that Thompson has misunderstood the genre of conversion accounts - that reports of emotional paroxysms and awful sinfulness cannot be taken as indicative of psychic repression, but of the rational and conscious acceptance of the theology of Evangelical Protestantism.
NOTES


10. op.cit., p. 381.

11. Ibid., pp. 354f.

12. Ibid., pp. 369f.

13. Ibid., p. 370.


15. Ibid., p. 368.

16. Ibid.


20. Thompson has reservations about one of his chief authorities, G.R. Taylor, *The Angel Makers* (pp. 372; 377); he admits that the question of the sexual significance of Wesleyan hymnody 'is due for renewed and more expert attention' (p. 372); and he offers only as 'an hypothesis', demanding closer investigation, his view that Methodists were disappointed revolutionaries (p. 388).


25. Ibid., p.830.
26. Ibid., p.294.
27. Ibid., p.716.
28. Ibid., pp.193f.
30. Ibid.
32. 'The Social Background, Motivation, and Training of British Protestant Missionaries to India, 1789-1858', University of London, Ph.D., 1974, Ch. I and Appendix I.


17. Church Missionary Society Archives, G/AC3, C.P. Farrar to E. Bickersteth, 6 June, 1823.


22. Ibid., p.30.

23. Ibid., pp.23, 30, 32.


26. Ibid., p.23.

27. Ibid., p.61.
48. Ibid., p.63.
49. Ibid., p.68.
50. Ibid., p.84.
51. Ibid., p.85
59. Thompson does not disagree with this potential in Methodism, *op. cit.*, p.399.
61. Ibid., pp.185f., 189.
62. Ibid., pp.87-96.
63. Ibid., p.112.
64. Ibid., p.170.
65. Ibid., pp.149, 174.
66. Ibid., p.113.
67. Ibid., p.171.
68. Ibid., p.198.
69. Ibid., pp. 5, 117, 125, 137, 144-8, 153, 171, 177, 189.
70. Ibid., pp. 3-5.
72. Ibid., p.366.
73. Ibid., pp.366f.
75. Victorian Minds, p.294.
76. See pp. 922f. of Thompson's important postscript to the Pelican edition, 1968.
80. op.cit., pp. 366-368.
81. Baptist Missionary Society Archives, Joshua Rowe, 'An Account...', IN/23, 14 September, 1803. The reference is to Proverbs 26.11 and II Peter 2.22.
82. M. Furlong, Puritan's Progress, London, 1975, Ch.2.
83. I Corinthians 15.9
84. op. cit., pp.369f.
87. L.J. Hobsbawm, New Statesman, 29 November, 1963, p.78;
Currie & Hartwell, op.cit., p.643; J.D. Chambers,

88. op. cit., p.444.

89. G. Best, op.cit., p.278; D.N. Thompson, Nonconformity
in the Nineteenth Century, p.15; P.R. Davies & F.C.
Kupp, A History of the Methodist Church in Great
Britain, p.510; J.D. Chambers, op.cit., pp.183, 4,
187; A. Armstrong, op.cit., pp.95f; B. Semmel, The
Methodist Revolution, pp.139, 183f; A.D. Gilbert, op.
cit., pp.72ff.

90. op. cit., p.368.

91. A.D. Gilbert, op.cit., p.87.


93. Ibid., p.39.