



VIOLENT STABILITY

METHODISM, MODERATE POLITICS, AND PERSECUTION IN GREAT AWAKENING ENGLAND

As the First Great Awakening swept across eighteenth-century Britain, English religious leaders began grappling with the challenges of an increasingly sectarian society. After the religious and social upheavals of the previous century, England now faced the rise of Protestant Methodism, whose religious rituals and evangelical enthusiasm ran aground of the nation's mainline Anglican traditions. In this essay, Gabriel Groz, JE '19, examines three prominent Anglican opponents of Methodism to illustrate how England's existing religious order sought to maintain social and religious stability through a campaign of sectarian persecutions. According to Groz, elite figures, English legal arrangements, and mass violence together provided the operational foundations of Methodist and Catholic persecutions in the eighteenth-century.

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On August 25th, 1748, John Wesley was almost murdered. The Methodist preacher had entered the village of Roughlee, an isolated hamlet in the Pendle district of Lancashire, and was preaching to a small group of villagers when a mob laid siege to the building in which he was conducting the sermon. The mob was armed with clubs and staves and, in Wesley's judgment, had spent the entirety of the morning drinking. After they had broken down the door and forced their way into the meetinghouse, Wesley was startled to learn that their ringleader was no ordinary ruffian but rather a law enforcement officer: the organizer of the would-be lynching was none other than the village's "deputy constable," Richard Boccock.¹ Constable Boccock ordered Wesley to follow him outside, and, after some deliberation, the preacher decided to comply.

That was when the real abuse began. "A man of Boccock's company struck me with his fist in the face with all his might," the preacher would later recall in his journal, "and another threw his stick at my head." But Wesley managed to endure these blows and was eventually led more or less intact to an abandoned house in nearby Barrowford. There, over the course of several tense hours, Boccock and the others demanded that Wesley cease all missionary activities in the area. Under heavy duress, the preacher reluctantly agreed to stop preaching in the parish, fearful that any resistance would only bring more persecution on him and Roughlee's beleaguered Methodist community. Methodism had lost in Roughlee. But the threats did not prevent Wesley from writing a strongly worded letter to James Hargrave, the village's chief constable and Boccock's superior, chastising him for allowing an atmosphere of violence to exist in the village and threatening him with legal action. The letter went unanswered.²

While the incident at Roughlee stands out for the brutality with which Wesley was treated, Methodists in the eighteenth century could expect to suffer mob violence wherever they went. Mob violence is a constant theme in Wesley's personal journals, which together constitute an excellent repository of information about early Methodism. These incidents of persecution were, as Henry Rack has written, "some of the most spectacular and heroic episodes" in early Methodism.³ But John Wesley and his colleagues would encounter another kind of opposition, one that would pose a much more substantial threat to the Methodist project than any single incident of mob violence or provincial preaching ban. Here the antagonists were elite members of the powerful English establishment, ecclesiastical and political figures alarmed at the astounding growth of the Methodist preaching circuits and suspicious of the new sect's influence on English religious life. Among the more famous of these adversaries was William Warburton, a moderate Anglican who detested the theatrics of Methodism's experience-based rituals and religious services and decried the enthusiasm of Methodist camp meetings and conversion practices. Warburton perceived the threat Methodism posed to society as urgent and unparalleled, even going so far as to devote a section of his magnum opus, the *Divine Legation of Moses Defended*, to an outright refuta-

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tion of Methodist principles.⁴ John Wesley responded with a lengthy public letter, and a legendary feud was born; much has been written about the Wesley-Warburton dispute, an ugly public controversy that damaged the reputations of both men and proved a major distraction to their careers.⁵

For all the energy he devoted to criticizing the new religion, however, Warburton was far from the most vociferous or vitriolic public opponent of Methodism. That title belonged to George Lavington, a mainline Anglican cleric who served as Bishop of Exeter between 1746 and 1762. In his capacity as Bishop, Lavington published several anti-Methodist and anti-Moravian pamphlets. By far the most notorious of these defamatory essays was "The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared," published in 1750. While it sought in part to demonstrate to the public Lavington's personal aversion to Methodist revivalism, the express purpose of the essay was to warn mainline Protestants about the dangers of evangelical enthusiasm by "drawing a comparison between the wild and pernicious enthusiasms of some of the most eminent saints in the Popish communion and those of the Methodists in our own country."⁶ The work elicited immediate responses from John Wesley and his colleague, the charismatic preacher George Whitefield, and galvanized prominent members of the Methodist laity to denounce Lavington as an illogical and wrongheaded bigot.

After the Methodists joined the debate, Lavington drafted a second pamphlet, this time turning the focus of his attacks on John Wesley's moral character. A battle of pamphlets ensued; Lavington and Wesley traded barbs over the course of two years, with Lavington alleging lasciviousness and inappropriate contact with a lay member and Wesley responding. The public feud soon petered out, however. Lavington would die in 1762, retaining his position as Bishop of Exeter until the day of his passing. Wesley would go on to see Methodism overcome its critics and persecutors and succeed beyond any of the founders' wildest expectations, attracting devoted converts from across the English-speaking world.⁷

And yet several questions emerge from this relatively straightforward story. Why were Lavington and his peers so concerned about the Methodists? What were the theological starting points and stakes of their dispute? What are the broader historical and cultural contexts behind this religious conflict?

A closer look at the documents coming from the Wesley-Whitefield-Lavington controversy reveals that this religious dispute had very little to do with religion. Instead, the conflict is emblematic of the basic fragility of eighteenth-century English political life, where difference of opinion was viewed as a social evil. Enthusiasm—popular religious feeling—was perceived by those in power to be a threat to cultural and political stability. Using the Lavington-Wesley dispute over Methodism as a starting point, this essay seeks to explore the underside of the eighteenth-century English politics of moderation and stability. It intends to paint a picture of a political ideology in which the maintenance of the status

quo was the paramount political good, and of a frame of mind terrified of sectarianism and interdenominational religious strife. As will ultimately be shown, stability during the Great Awakening was not antithetical to violence or disputation; on the contrary, it was a combination of elite reproach and popular attack that enforced the moderate status quo.

The first section of this essay engages with the substance of the original controversy and balances Lavington's attack with what I hope is a more nuanced discussion of religious enthusiasm. The essay then moves forward twenty years to examine the letters of the social activist Jonas Hanway, a prototypical man of the Enlightenment who read the Enthusiasm and, in response, published his own attacks against Methodism. Here I will discuss the Enlightenment's complicated relationship with enthusiasm, noting the allure of intolerance for anti-rationalist religious groups to otherwise liberal and enlightened audiences, before launching into an exploration of the history behind this attitude. In doing so, I shift the focus of the essay to the broader historical and cultural contexts of the dispute, tying the cultural memory of the Civil War and the Jacobite rebellions to the middle-way politics of stability and persecution of peripheral religious groups. In this section of the essay, I also provide the legal background for the state-sponsored persecution that Methodists faced, outlining a third, crucial dimension to stability politics: persecution enshrined in law. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of William Warburton's *Alliance Between Church and State*, a text that explicates the cultural and historical background to the persecution of Methodists and describes the communitarianism that informed arguments for stability politics and religious uniformity.

PRELUDE TO CONFLICT: GEORGE LAVINGTON AND JOHN WESLEY

1748 was not a good year for George Lavington. Only recently consecrated as the Bishop of Exeter, Lavington immediately found his ascending career jeopardized by the appearance of pro-Methodist papers with his name on them; whether Lavington wrote them or not we do not know. He responded with a full denial, and, with Exeter's religious elite supporting him, was eventually able to rebuild his reputation as a defender of the faith. But Lavington knew that his image would be forever tarnished in the eyes of his congregation if he left things with a mere denial. He resolved to take revenge on the Methodists, and to do so promptly and effectively.⁸ Never one to pick the low-hanging fruit, Lavington set his sights on Methodism's founder himself: John Wesley.

Lavington's background was patrician and his educational record exceptional. His father Joseph was a wealthy, staunchly anti-Jacobite Anglican cleric. George would follow in his father's footsteps towards becoming a theologian, attending Winchester College before matriculating at New College in Oxford for advanced theological study. At New College, at that point a Jacobite stronghold, Lavington was a devoted supporter of the Ha-

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noverian line, no small feat given the heightened political tensions that beset the school.⁹ But Lavington held his ground, and his loyalty would pay off. After graduating in 1713, Lavington was approached with a job offer by Thomas Coningsby, a well-connected Member of Parliament who was held in high esteem by George I. Coningsby had taken notice of Lavington's political positions and recommended him to the king as a potential candidate for the office of chaplain. Lavington went on to serve with George I for several years before accepting George's nomination for a curate position. With his career in the Church off to a remarkably positive beginning, Lavington must have thought he was a made man. Methodist interlopers had now dared to threaten that success. Now, as the clouds of controversy finally began to recede, Lavington leveraged his rhetorical skills and access to the channels of power to issue a public denunciation of the Methodists and their founder, John Wesley.

No playwright could have fashioned a better foil for George Lavington than John Wesley. Born in 1703, almost two decades after Lavington, Wesley was, like Lavington, a minister's son who attended Oxford, graduating from Christ Church in 1724. But the similarities between the two men ended there. While at Oxford, Wesley had not curried favor with Anglican elites but had instead begun a very different sort of journey, one of self-discovery and intellectual risk-taking. As an undergraduate, Wesley took to keeping journals and reading the devotional works of Thomas à Kempis and Jeremy Tayler. After receiving a fellowship from Lincoln College, he was able to stay on in Oxford for several more years as a lecturer and priest. At that time, his brother Charles had just begun his study at Christ Church, and the two brothers quickly founded the "Holy Club," an experimental religious fellowship that can be described as the earliest rendition of Wesleyan Methodism.¹⁰

What was the Holy Club? In John Wesley's words, it was little more than a "company" – a nonelitist euphemism for "club" – that, as he wrote, was intended "to read over the classics, which we had before read in private, on common nights, and on Sunday some books in divinity."¹¹ But despite its seemingly noncontroversial goals, Wesley's company immediately attracted the derision and scorn of the larger Oxford student body. The pejoratives "Enthusiasts," "Supererogation Men," "The Reforming Club," and, of course, "Methodists" were hurled at Wesley, in no small part because of his club's reputation for seriousness and emphasis on a methodical, stringent form of personal devotion.¹² Theologically, Wesley's motley group of Oxford students and recent alumni was not in any sense radical. But by the early 1730s, the Holy Club had commenced a prison ministry and, with the approval of the local bishop, visited the sick on a regular basis. This was a departure from the general modus operandi of collegiate religious societies, and the Holy Club developed a reputation as an organization committed to charitable works as well as the theological discourse that had been its erstwhile center.¹³

Something about Wesley had changed, though it would take him several years to realize it; much like those of the men and women whose religious fervor started

the worldwide Protestant revival that would later be called the First Great Awakening, Wesley's journey of spiritual self-recognition was an ongoing one. The next phase of his career would be overseas, in the American colony of Georgia, where he established schools and ministered both to white settlers and the beleaguered native population. Crucially, he made the voyage with several German missionaries who would teach him the rudiments of the German language – a valuable skill that would propel Wesley's evangelical projects forward. Returning to London after his Georgia endeavor petered out, Wesley began preaching with a circle of Moravian Christians and, taking his message out to the most remote corners of the country, had by 1748 achieved a significant level of fame and, more importantly, attracted to the Methodist cause tens of thousands of converts. Wesley was endowed with a personal charisma well suited to preaching and taught a captivating theology of grace that appealed to a population at once disenchanted with dour Calvinism and frustrated with what they perceived to be the waning religious passions of a secularizing age. Methodism's special appeal came in part from its prolific use of the conversion narrative in its religious discourse, a characteristic that shaped the religion's texts, worship practices and institutional structures.¹⁴

Watching Wesley's rise from the ornate bishop's throne of Exeter Cathedral, Lavington had cause to be anxious beyond the immediate threat to his reputation. Methodism had made inroads in the most religiously conservative areas of England and was building a base among the country's most disaffected and marginalized communities. Now, Lavington thought, was the moment for the establishment to strike. Strike it did. Lavington set about writing, and produced one of the most famous pieces of anti-Methodist literature ever to be published. Titled "The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared," Lavington's 1748 pamphlet would precipitate an intense public controversy, drawing John Wesley and George Whitefield into the fray. The next section of this essay analyzes the substance of the initial controversy before engaging with the broader topic of religious enthusiasm.

THE CONTROVERSY: COMPARING METHODISTS AND PAPISTS

Reading "The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared" is a profoundly disorienting experience. Lavington's prose is ornate, accusatory and polemical, and the internal logic of the essay is at times difficult to follow. But, when taken as a whole, the pamphlet is a powerful work of anti-Methodist rhetoric.

Lavington's thesis – if such a work can be said to have a thesis – is simple enough. "It is my principle design," he writes in his preface, "as a caution to all Protestants, to draw a comparison between some of the most wild and pernicious enthusiasms of some of the most eminent saints in the Popish communion and those of the Methodists in our coun-

try.”¹⁵

Before moving on to the substance of Lavington’s argument and Wesley’s subsequent rebuttal, we must take up the onus of defining the term “enthusiasm,” a critical piece of Lavington’s argument. A word that Lavington uses almost interchangeably with enthusiasm is fanaticism;¹⁶ that is an acceptable definition for the casual reader. But we want something sharper. Writing almost two centuries after the Lavington-Wesley controversy, the English theologian and historian R.A. Knox gives his own definition:

If I could have been certain of the reader’s goodwill, I would have called my tendency ‘ultrasupernaturalism.’ For that is the real character of the enthusiast; he expects more evident results from the grace of God than we others. He sees what effects religion can have, does sometimes have, in transforming a man’s whole life and outlook; these exceptional cases are for him the average standard of religious achievement. He will have no ‘almost-Christians,’ no weaker brethren who plod or stumble, who would like to have a foot in either world, whose ambition is to qualify, not to excel. He has before his eyes a picture of the early Church, visibly penetrated with supernatural influences; and nothing else will serve him for a model.¹⁷

One could say – very fairly – that Knox’s words are prejudicial, and indeed an entirely separate essay could be written about historical responses to evangelicalism. But Knox’s essential points are strong. Enthusiastic movements – revivalist, emotive, excitable – stress the immense spiritual power of the (chosen, pious) individual’s personal relationship with the divine. Knox’s description of the enthusiast’s contempt for “almost-Christians” brings to mind the exclusivity of Wesley’s righteous Holy Club, and his focus on the early or primitive Church as an organizational and spiritual model is visible in much Great Awakening thought, with Wesleyan Methodism being no exception.¹⁸

Bearing Knox’s framework in mind, we will now examine the thrust of Lavington’s argument. Lavington begins with an account of the Montanus heresy, an episode from the history of Early Christianity that historians, including Knox, traditionally categorize as the first instance of an enthusiastic movement within the Christian world. Knox, no defender of enthusiasm himself, calls Montanism “less worthy of respect than most of the enthusiastic sects that followed its example and borrowed its language.”¹⁹ So it is no accident Lavington begins here; his initial section serves to provide the reader with a sense of the deeply troubling historical origins of enthusiasm, origins that disqualify any movement that would draw inspiration from enthusiastic sources.

But this digression does not take long, and Lavington quickly settles comfortably in the meat and potatoes of his accusation: a side-by-side comparison of John Wesley’s writing with scenes from the lives of Catholic saints. One example, selected for its vividness, gives a sufficient idea.

But oh! How good, and saint-like it is, to go dirty, ragged, and slovenly? And how proudly did Mr. “Whitefield therefore take care of the outward man? My apparel was mean—thought it unbecoming a penitent to have powdered hair: —I wore woollen gloves a patched gown, and dirty shoes.” Thus his predecessor in sainthood Ignatius loved to appear with old dirty shoes, used no comb, let his hair clot, and would never paint his nails. —A certain Jesuit was so holy that he has above 150 patches upon his breeches, and proportionably on his other garments. Another had almost 300 patches: and his garments after his death were hung up in public view, as an incentive to imitation.²⁰

Lavington continues in this vein for several chapters. Wesley and Whitefield are compared to St. Francis for their “profession of poverty,” to St. Anthony for their propensity to endure hardships over the course of proselytizing, and to Magdalen of Pazzi for their “delight in contempt and confusion.”²¹

The anecdotes are rhetorically effective, and do much to mock the outward piety that Wesley and Whitefield so prided themselves on having. Driving the point home, Lavington uses direct quotes from John Wesley’s own journals; much like a contemporary journalist might compose an exposé, Lavington combines sarcastic commentary (“How good and saint-like ...”) with direct quotations, a juxtaposition which both implicates and derogates.

But something is striking about Lavington’s charges against the Methodists. Yes, Lavington spends the majority of his time comparing John Wesley and his colleagues to Catholic extremists, but—crucially—never on theological terms; “The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared” is categorically not a theological text. Rather, it is fundamentally political. Each one of the comparisons Lavington draws between Methodists and Catholics has to do with the social implications of their actions rather than the religious ones. St. Ignatius is not problematic for Lavington because of his theological outlook; instead, Lavington is afraid that his example of poverty will be “imitated” by the ignorant masses, threatening the fabric of basic decency that underpins civic life. Indeed, each of the subsequent saints to whom Wesley is compared is not criticized for having strange or deviant theological beliefs; the threat they pose is to social stability. Over the course of the pamphlet it becomes clear that Lavington’s objection to the Methodist movement does not originate from simple religious prejudice but from a fear of the social instability he believed would inevitably come as a consequence of religious enthusiasm.

This fear of social instability—Lavington’s paramount concern about the Methodists—comes out most explicitly in the second chapter of Lavington’s pamphlet. At the climax of the argument, Lavington turns to the subject of conversion, in which the Method-

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ists “triumph beyond measure” by preying on the whims of the vulgar masses.

For considering how inconsiderate and injudicious, how unlearned and unstable, a large portion of mankind is, together with their various infirmities and diseases of the body; it must be allowed that the ostentation of a sanctified look, specious address, fantastical oddities, innovations in doctrine and places of teaching, zealous professions of piety, affectation of godly and scripture phrases, and high pretensions to inspiration, will hardly fail of drawing and deceiving the multitude.²²

Here, Lavington’s true fears about the Methodist cause are brought out into the open. The danger Methodists pose to society comes from their ability to stir up the passions of others – to inculcate social instability. If left unchecked, Lavington argues, they will deceive the multitude into adopting a religious lifestyle that encourages the injudicious elements of society to hold themselves up as saints endowed with preternatural abilities and unalterable virtue. The doctrinal specifics themselves are not Lavington’s concern; in its theology, Methodism is as different from Catholicism as any other non-Protestant Christian denomination. Methodism’s effects on societal stability – its ability to disrupt conventional social norms and precipitate a kind of mass hysteria – are the chief targets of Lavington’s pamphlet.

Wesley responded with a full refutation of Lavington’s pamphlet. In a scathing open letter, he dissects Lavington’s argument page by page, denying each of Lavington’s charges as they come up. Wesley’s prose is lively, and his tone mocking and caustic: “And first, you say, I ‘represent conversions as sudden and instantaneous.’ Soft and fair! Do you know what a conversion is?”²³ The text abounds in such direct attacks on Lavington’s intelligence and theological knowledge, and, more often, attacks on his very ability to cite Wesley’s work. But towards the end of the essay a more deliberate Wesley addresses the heart of Lavington’s criticism, defending his cause, the “New Dispensation,” against charges of immorality and of instigation. Lavington was “hindering” the movement by affixing to it “indignifying names”; his writing would only serve to “prevent the spreading of this serious, sober religion,”²⁴ running contrary to God’s work. Thus, according to Wesley, Lavington was wrong on two counts: his fears were rooted in ignorance and poor scholarship, and his opposition was merely the illogical prejudice of a man intent on preventing the growth of a respectable and moral religion.

But Lavington’s fears of social instability did not arise in a vacuum. Instead, they were formed by a specific cultural and historical context. After a century of civil war and political upheaval, order had only recently been restored to Great Britain. Enthusiasm did not only belong to the Catholic saints of the distant past; it had,

in the minds of many moderate Protestants, been the deciding factor leading up to Cromwell's disastrous Commonwealth and the civil wars that accompanied it. To further understand the politics of stability and cultural fear of instability, in this next section I will examine a contemporary response to Lavington's pamphlet.

LAVINGTON'S AUDIENCE: JONAS HANWAY

Lavington's works found their way to audiences across England. Even as Wesley was preparing his own written responses to "The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared," he saw the effects of Lavington's pamphlet firsthand. Over the course of his travels, Wesley encountered mainline Anglican congregations whose pastors had received copies of the *Enthusiasm* from their bishops with the instruction to use portions for the Sunday sermon.²⁵ But the *Enthusiasm* did not only appeal to conservative rural Anglican clerics, and seems to have had significant staying power. As we shall soon see, Lavington's pamphlets had reached elite, cosmopolitan audiences, and were still in circulation in the 1760s.

Jonas Hanway had been a merchant, pamphleteer and philanthropist, and was committed to the kind of well-rounded intellectual inquiry that characterized the enlightening upper-middle class culture of his day. On a trading trip in the Middle East, he had been captured by—and negotiated his own release from—Turkish pirates, become extremely wealthy as a result of those same trading activities and, in his life's second act, engaged with a diverse array of social issues affecting the London of his day, ranging from prostitution to the rights of chimney sweeps.²⁶ But Lavington's *Enthusiasm* caught his eye and, interested by Lavington's strong prose and force of argument, Hanway turned his attentions to Methodism. In a series of blistering public letters addressed to an anonymous correspondent, Hanway picked up where Lavington left off, embarking on a critique of Methodism at once more substantive and more strident than Lavington's.²⁷ The letters help fill in the gaps of the original Wesley-Lavington controversy, and indicate the appeal of Lavington's work; broadly conceived, anti-Methodism could appeal to a host of different constituencies, ranging from provincial English villagers to cosmopolitan liberals like Hanway.

Hanway's argument goes a long way towards demonstrating how conservatism and reverence for order permeated the English political consciousness. Aside from his concerns about the specifics of the Wesleyan theological program—Hanway was a devout mainline Anglican whose letters contain hymns of his own composition—Hanway believed that Methodist enthusiasm was profoundly dangerous for civil society. The Methodist project, in Hanway's view, rejected all forms of argumentation and rhetorical appeal other than those that claimed legitimacy from direct divine inspiration, or "illumination." The gravest effect of this new kind of logic was to sweep aside the authority of reason and with it the

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authority of rational institutions. “Talk to them (the Methodists) of order and subordination as essential to good government and the peace of society,” he writes, “and the answer to this is: ‘We must obey God and not man.’”²⁸

Here, one can see the integration of Lavington’s initial claims regarding the dangers of enthusiasm within a broader and perhaps more subtle political context. Methodism was not simply dangerous because it was heterodox. Hanway notes aptly that “if it can with truth be said anywhere that every man has a religion of his own, it is in this nation,” and “sects” were bound to come into being as a natural byproduct of such diversity.²⁹ This diversity in religious preference did not worry Hanway. But the Methodists had crossed the proverbial line by taking their heterodoxy into the public sphere. The dangers that public religious disputation posed to social order in Hanway’s mind could not be greater or more vivid. He was terrified that Methodist enthusiasm would bring about a new era of chaos, much like the civil war that had nearly destroyed England only a century earlier. Hanway believed that Cromwell’s Commonwealth was the result of years of enthusiasm running amok, unchecked by reason and permitted to overcome civic institutions. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 eventually restored social order and promoted balance in religious life, a balance that Hanway valued above all else. “After this religious frenzy, or mad hypocrisy, had its play, we returned to the primitive plan of true reformation,” Hanway writes. The present religious crisis of the Great Awakening, he goes on, was a product of “overshooting the mark” and going “quite in the opposite direction.”³⁰ Thus the threat religions like Methodism posed to civil society was an existential one; its enthusiasm threatened to upend the social order and do away with the newfound stability England enjoyed.

Of all of Hanway’s many passages describing Methodism in harsh and unequivocal terms, none is so vivid as is a fascinating tableau comparing Methodist services to witchcraft. The passage captures the contemporary fear of social disorder, and adds nuance to Hanway’s previous claims that Methodism’s chief danger lay in its aversion to rational discourse. Hanway writes:

I must inform you that opposite to this celebrated preacher sat a dozen or more of old women, of that class, who within this half century might easily have been persuaded by threats or premises that they rode in the air on broomsticks, and confessing it might have been put to death by people as much bewitched by themselves.³¹

Here Hanway’s critique becomes still more complicated. The passage reveals Hanway’s anxiety about the prominent role women played in Methodist services; the trope of the old crone is instantly recognizable, and one doesn’t need to read between the lines to see the presence, in full force, of the chauvinistic and classist attitudes towards uneducated female worshippers that prevailed in Hanway’s day. The depiction, however sexist, responds to a real demographic trend; Wesley gave a license to preach to the Methodist

organization's first female circuit rider in 1761, and Wesley's Journals contain numerous references to women taking active roles as facilitators, preachers and lay participants in Methodist services at a time when female piety, lay or otherwise, was very much at the margins of religious life.³² Hanway's antipathy towards female piety can be conceived of in the context of stability politics, as well; Methodism's danger to the nation might bleed into that last bastion of Christian virtue, the home, threatening to disrupt conventional hierarchies and giving women significant power in an area in which they previously had none.

But the passage contains a second criticism of Methodist practice, one that has important implications for our understanding of eighteenth-century moderation politics and its relationship with intolerance. The Methodist "witches," in Hanway's view, were a threat to the collective morality of the community; this aspect of his critique is apparent. But the danger the witches posed was not confined to the mainstream community; in a more barbaric age, the women Hanway describes "might have been put to death by people as much bewitched," bringing as much if not more harm onto their own heads. In Hanway's conception, then, the threat Methodists posed to society at large was multiplied by their ability to incite violence against their own movement. Much like the conflict between Puritan and Catholic extremists that occurred in the civil war, enthusiasm of one kind begot enthusiasm of another. Hanway insists that the nonconformist be punished – or at least publicly chastised – because people might want to kill her! Coercion is, for Hanway, the means of preventing further violence.

Here one can see the dark side of the communitarian ethic of moderation that informed Hanway's thinking. Instead of pursuing social reforms or legislation to protect the rights of persecuted minorities like Methodists, Hanway – like Lavington, Warburton and the rest of the English establishment – was intent on restricting their growth through aggressive public opposition. Social order was too important for public religious controversies to be allowed, and the intervention of enlightened activists like Hanway bolstered this order. But this intervention did not always come from the sphere of letters; government action was the galvanizing force behind much anti-Methodist violence. I will return to the incident at Roughlee to help illustrate this broader political context. Crucial to this context will be the eighteenth-century legal regime, which endorsed violence against dissenting religious groups in an attempt to secure social harmony.

THE LEGAL BACKGROUND

John Wesley would never return to Roughlee. His complaints to a local magistrate demanding the prosecution of the offenders and an end to the persecution of Methodists would go ignored. Much about the events that occurred at Roughlee is surprising to the modern audience. But the most shocking aspect of the near-massacre at Roughlee was its

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legality; the would-be lynch mob was acting well within the confines of contemporary English law. And George Lavington, writing in his palatial study in far-away Exeter Cathedral, was one of its chief enablers.

To understand this connection between elite reproach and popular attack, one must begin with the contemporary legal regime that enabled religious persecution. When Wesley writes in his journals about “national persecution” he is not only raising a rhetorical flourish; he is referencing actionable policy. Throughout the eighteenth century, state persecution of religious minorities – a remarkably diverse group that ran the full theological spectrum, from Catholics to nonconformist and evangelical Protestants³³ – was codified as English law. The penalties for participating in Catholic rituals and preaching nonconformist sermons were referred to as disabilities, a term which evolved into the modern legal term “civil disability,” meaning a withdrawal of civil rights as a penalty for a crime. The disabilities imposed on Catholics and dissenters were, as this section will show, stringent and significant.

In an article exploring the political culture of religious intolerance in seventeenth-century England, the historian Mark Goldie asserts, “Restoration England was a persecuting society.”³⁴ The claim is a convincing one; Goldie describes the collaboration between the Anglican Church and the English state to crack down on religious dissenters, as well as the ideological rationale behind the state-sponsored persecution. Goldie’s essay makes a compelling argument for how a political culture that insisted on absolute religious conformity justified extensive repression, in some cases endorsing open physical violence against nonconforming Protestants and Catholics.

The same claim of a “persecuting society” could be made, perhaps with the same accuracy, of eighteenth-century England as well. Over the course of the century Parliament would not only uphold existing persecutory laws; it actively pursued a legislative agenda that included dozens of regulations on religious freedom and expression. In 1714, Parliament sent the Schism Act to the Queen Anne’s desk, a bill that introduced and codified a number of new disabilities for nonconforming Protestants. Chief among them was a religion-based restriction on eligibility for teaching. Section III of the statute, dealing with religious affiliation and education, stipulates that any person who, while teaching at a “public or private school or seminary, or instructing any youth as tutor or schoolmaster,” takes part in religious rites different from the “liturgy and practice of the Church of England... [shall] thenceforth be incapable of keeping any public or private school or seminary, or instructing any youth as tutor or schoolmaster.”³⁵ The potentially disastrous consequences of the law for religious minorities cannot be overstated; England’s religious elites had realized that maintaining control over the country’s growing educational system was key to maintaining political hegemony, and the law would have been a devastating blow for religious minori-

ties attempting to secure institutional continuity through education.

Also on display here is the English elite's attention to the connection between religious practice and social class; difference of religious opinion seems to have been far more tolerable among elites than among the middle classes and the poor. The same statute that threatens to shut down all dissenting schools adds a provision that the "act shall not extend to any tutor teaching or instructing youth in any college or hall within either of the universities of England, [i.e., Oxford and Cambridge] nor to any tutor who shall be employed by any nobleman or noblewoman to teach his or her own children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren only."³⁶ This rings true with the notion that religious difference was, in the eyes of the elites, more a threat to social stability than to some idealized conception of public virtue or morality. It mattered who the worshippers were.

In a truly bizarre turn of events, however, the bill never went into effect. Queen Anne died the morning of the first day of the Schism Act's enforcement, and the Whig government that would come to power in the wake of her passing had little interest in upholding the law. Still, the question of actual enforcement aside, the very fact of the bill's passage speaks volumes for the political-religious culture that produced it; the lax enforcement of the Schism Act and its eventual repeal, on the other hand, were matters of political contingency. The reverse scenario – one of wide-scale enforcement and forced school closures – could just as easily have occurred had the Whigs not trounced the Tories in the 1715 general election, thereby removing hardline Anglicans from power for the foreseeable future.³⁷

The failure of the Anglican party to enforce the Schism Act, however, should not convince the reader that all similar efforts failed. To serve our purpose of understanding the legal restrictions specifically imposed on Methodists, we will now examine a second law, equally harsh in its attitude towards religious minorities but with a different target: England's Catholic minority.

The turn of the eighteenth century bore witness to Parliament's adoption of one of the last truly stringent pieces of anti-Catholic legislation. The Popery Act of 1698-1699, also referred to by its more evocative subtitle "An act for further preventing the growth of popery," stands out for its potential to incite violence – and its potential to harm other religious minorities besides its nominal Catholic targets. The law would also last, remaining on the books for over a century until its eventual repeal by the Religious Disabilities Act of 1846.³⁸ Anti-Catholic legislation constitutes its own legal milieu, replete with its own rhetorical tropes and trademark means of disenfranchisement. But the Popery Act goes well beyond the standard combination of policy (namely, the religious test-law) and rhetoric (the characterization of the pope as a foreign agent). The law explicitly promised cash rewards for physical violence against Catholic practitioners.

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One of the central provisions of the act—one that truly sets the Popery Act apart from similar anti-Catholic legislation in its potentially violent consequences—was an offer of a monetary reward to individuals who apprehended Catholic priests and turned them over to local authorities for punishment. The law states:

Be it enacted that all and every Person and Persons who shall apprehend and take One or more Popish Bishop, Priest or Jesuit and prosecute him or them so apprehended and taken until he or they be convicted of saying Mass or of exercising any other Part of the Office of Function of a Popish Bishop or Priest within these realms shall receive from the Sheriff or Sheriffs of the County where such Conviction shall be made (without paying any Fee for the same) for every such Offender so convicted the sum of 100 pounds.³⁹

To rephrase: in order to preserve religious conformity, the English government was, as late as 1700, actively encouraging its citizens to summarily arrest suspected Catholics and to bring them to local authorities for punishment.

Now at last it becomes clear that George Lavington's repetitive characterization of the Methodists as Catholics was much more than flashy rhetoric or simple bigotry. It was a carefully constructed argument that brought with it the danger of physical violence against the Methodists—a violence endorsed and encouraged by the law. The accusation of being a "Papist" or Catholic recusant in eighteenth-century England could, as this statute amply shows, bring about summary detention and citizen's arrest. If one could connect Methodists to Catholics, even rhetorically, the logic follows that one might find a legal justification for their repression.

What follows is a model outlining how elites such as Lavington might well have manipulated the Popery Act to serve their agenda of religious uniformity and anti-Methodism. As mentioned earlier in the essay, Wesley encountered numerous Anglican congregations that had received advance copies of Lavington's *Enthusiasm* from their bishops. The congregations would have heard excerpts from the pamphlets read aloud as part of standard Sunday sermons, and, in doing so, would have come to associate the Methodists with a defined group, one that they had been legally encouraged to persecute: Roman Catholics. If this did not provide incentive enough to persecute, the economic reality might have. Roughlee was an impoverished rural district, and the financial boon of collecting a "Catholic" might have been encouragement enough for local men to harass Methodists. Even if one takes the financial incentive out of the picture, state-sponsored arrests of "Papists" had been commonplace enough in the past that provincial and village leaders could, with little difficulty, encourage their subjects to take action against a new quasi-Catholic threat.

Conceived of in the broadest possible terms, then, it would seem that the enforcement of religious stability—that is, the total domination of a non-enthusiastic and centrist

Anglican theology—was sustained by three distinct pillars. The first was the elite power base—people like George Lavington, Jonas Hanway and William Warburton—who, for all their evident political clout, remained mostly in what might be called the “public sphere.” Their power came from reputation and public standing; it was this kind of power that allowed Lavington, for example, to spread his words to a mass audience through pamphlets, or for Hanway to campaign against Methodism in London’s world of letters.

The second pillar was the law, which legalized persecution. A cynic might object to the separation of these two categories. She or he might say that the law is inextricably connected to the public elites who in practice had the lion’s share of political power and the ear of Parliament. The existence of this relationship is undisputable. But they are not one and the same; there is a subtler dynamic at work here. While the laws might be dangerous enough for Catholics, they do not say anything explicitly about Methodism. One requires the persuasion of a cultural or religious authority figure, like Lavington or even Jonas Hanway, to make the logical leap of faith from persecuting Catholics to persecuting Methodists. “The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared” accomplishes this task; its equation of Catholic and Methodist was the persuasive element needed to galvanize support for persecution.

But the actual enforcers of stability—moderation’s shock troops—were not clerics or jurists. George Lavington never laid eyes on John Wesley until a full decade after the assault at Roughlee, and never personally ordered his parishioners to attack Methodist laity. The attackers—the third pillar of moderation—were, by and large, ordinary people, exhorted to violence by parish priests and propaganda pamphlets. The legal system provided amnesty for them, and, at least in theory, a reward. In this way dissent was crushed by equal parts pamphlet, proclamation and pogrom.

To understand the historical underpinnings of stability politics, I conclude by examining the work of William Warburton, an active opponent of Methodism and promoter of religious conformity.

WILLIAM WARBURTON, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND STABILITY

William Warburton has hung over the entirety of this essay like a specter, and it only seems fitting that we conclude with him. A vociferous and prominent opponent of Methodism and a leading Anglican moderate, Warburton occupied numerous high church offices throughout his illustrious career as a theologian and public intellectual, culminating with his tenure as the bishop of Gloucester. Much like Lavington and Hanway, Warburton saw the Methodists as posing a grave danger to the English state; in his magnum opus *The Divine Legation of Moses*, Warburton employed the com-

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mon trope of associating Methodists with the excesses of Cromwell's Commonwealth and the violence of the civil war to criticize Wesley and his followers; Methodism was "a new species of Puritanism, or rather the old one revived under the same name," founded by "enthusiasts."⁴⁰ It is important to consider that even though Warburton calls Methodists "Puritans," the argument should not be construed as substantially different from Lavington's allegations of papism; at the time Puritan and Papist were terms of equivalent rhetorical power and, in the context of the politics of stability, had equivalent resonance. Much as Catholics were a threat to social stability by virtue of their alleged foreign loyalties, the Puritan was a threat to the social order because of his enthusiasm and wild utopianism.

In this disparaging remark, Warburton's attitude toward the Methodists seems to fit into the standard mold of anti-Methodist propaganda. But his writings do much to illustrate the cultural and political rationale behind stability politics writ large, arguing the case for government-enforced religious hierarchy with more subtlety and depth than any of the anti-Methodist writers profiled thus far. Examining Warburton in this final section may render the monomania for stability which is evident in Lavington's writing in a more nuanced light, and will help provide firmer context for the dispute itself.

We will now consider Warburton's second great work, *The Alliance Between Church and State*, in the context of its time, attempting to understand the historical rationale behind the ideology of stability. Warburton wrote the Alliance in 1736, only ten years before the Lavington-Wesley controversy, in the politically uncertain aftermath of the English Civil War; although the Glorious Revolution had restored a kind of normality to England, Jacobite rebellions and the Great Awakening were posing new threats to the social order, threats that Warburton was quick to link to the civil wars and conflicts of the past. The effects of the civil war and its aftermath on the eighteenth-century English political consciousness cannot be overstated. Warburton's Alliance Between Church and State displays the consequences of such a social catastrophe on one man's political thought, and, by extension, that of his country. It also explains, in part, the obsession with stability evidenced even by enlightened English writers such as Jonas Hanway.

The religious test law, the focus of Warburton's Alliance, was a legal measure intended to promote good social order and to avert chaos. This chaos—that had nearly destroyed England in the previous century—for Warburton had its origins in sectarianism. "Wherever there is diversity of religions, each sect, believing its own the truest, strives to advance itself on the ruins of the rest," Warburton contends. Upon failing to achieve this supremacy through reasoned argumentation, Warburton continues, these "partisans ... are apt to have recourse to the coercive power of the state." The effects of these attempts are "well known to those acquainted with the history of mankind."⁴¹ This is clearly in

reference to the English Civil War, the aftermath of which Warburton and his generation were still forced to contend with. Thus a test law is necessary; by preventing religious non-conformists from entering public office, a sectarian battle for control over the government might be averted.

But Warburton's argument is subtler, and deserves further consideration as a less extreme representative of stability politics. Unlike Lavington, who throughout the Enthusiasm is unwavering in his opposition towards the Methodists and bears no sympathy for Wesley and his ilk, Warburton makes a deliberate effort to acknowledge the inevitable unpopularity of religious uniformity among the nonconformists, going so far as to concede that it will be a "pain" for those affected. But by establishing a test law, Warburton argues in a response to critics, the character of the state will actually become less repressive; in its attempt to "repel an evil," the state will employ "restraint only,"⁴² as opposed to punishment. The test law, then, is a proactive measure intended to disarm opponents before they bring harm upon themselves. Warburton makes a great effort to emphasize this point, stating that the law is by no means akin to reactive, oppressive measures that attempt to punish nonconformists. He does so by comparing the test law to religious laws from previous ages that "extend pains and penalties to the burning the Atheist; to the banishing the Papist" and similar excesses of state violence. The test law, he argues, circumvents these backwards punishments by preemptively disabling problematic religious minorities. Warburton's logic here is strikingly similar to that of Jonas Hanway; much as Hanway insists that the Methodists be suppressed before they instigate even worse punishments for themselves, Warburton proposes the test law as a means of ensuring a double stability: one that counters both state excesses and sectarian religious conflict.

In the end, however, this concession is not the crux of Warburton's argument. Boiled down to its essence, Warburton's main justification of the test law employs a fundamentally communitarian logic: "if opinions ... obstruct the effects of civil society, it follows, that they must be restrained."⁴³

Here, in Warburton, we at last find a political theory of moderation and stability outlined in its clearest and most condensed form yet. This communitarian ethic of social preservation, so perfectly encapsulated by Warburton's declaration, can be seen as the subtext behind Lavington's polemic against Methodist enthusiasm. It was this same ideology, one that prioritized the durability of normal society, which informed Hanway's letters against the Methodists as well. Methodism had the potential to "obstruct" the functioning of English society – to transform its religious institutions, its cultural and economic values, and its spiritual identity itself. It was this potential that justified persecution.

Despite the best efforts of the Anglican aristocracy, however, the Methodists would persist, eventually entering into the religious mainstream. Sometimes truth is stranger

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than fiction; late in his life, Lavington would meet Wesley at a church-sponsored dinner held in Wesley's honor, and the two men would reconcile. Methodism was no longer a threat. As had occurred with other evangelical Christian movements, Methodism had become middle-class; its adherents' newfound material success shut the door on the ecstatic enthusiasm of their forebears.

This essay set out to understand the nature of moderate religious politics in eighteenth-century England. What it found was that moderation insisted on a stability that was not alienated from disputation or violence. The enforcement of moderation regarding religious matters required the establishment of a political order based on three mutually supporting pillars: the stipulations of the law, the advocacy of the church and of sympathetic intellectuals, and the violence of the mob. But there is a broader, more important point to be observed here: Moderation was anything but moderate. The preservation of banality – of the status quo, the normal order – required the constant attention and robust political commitment of the preservers. Stability depended on violence.

NOTES

1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: Volume III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 243.
2. Wesley, *Works: Volume III*, 249.
3. Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*. (Nashville: Epworth, 2002), 270.
4. William Warburton, *Divine Legation of Moses*. (London: Thomas Tebbs, 1737), 47.
5. For an excellent summary of the Wesley-Warburton controversy, see *The Works of John Wesley: The Appeals*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 459.
6. George Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1749), accessed April 15th, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/enthusiasmofmet00lavi>
7. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
8. Colin Haydon *Oxford Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. “George Lavington.” Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
9. The Jacobites were a loosely organized Catholic militant faction that advocated for the return of the British crown to the House of Stuart. The movement had its origins in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, in which the pro-Catholic monarch James II had been deposed and replaced by the more moderate William and Mary. After James died in exile at the court of Louis XIV, the Jacobites continued to advocate for a Catholic restoration to the throne, taking up arms on three separate occasions: 1699, 1715 and 1745. They were soundly defeated on each occasion, but their influence on the course of English political history cannot be overstated. The last section of this essay engages with the relationship between the Jacobite insurrections and stability politics.
10. Henry D. Rack, *John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 69-72.
11. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 84.
12. Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary entry for the term gives a Warburton quote as a usage example, and the entry underscores the pejorative origins of the word: “They, who are now called Methodists, in the days of our forefathers called precisians.”
13. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 84.
14. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Chapter 3, “The Medium and the Message,” discusses the role played by the conversion narrative in Methodist religious practice.
15. George Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1749), accessed April 15th, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/enthusiasmofmet00lavi>
16. c.f. “The most wild fanaticisms of the most abominable communion,” Lavington, *Enthusiasm*, 3.
17. R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 2.
18. For a discussion of Wesley’s conception of the ‘primitive church,’ see Geordan Hammond, “Versions of Primitive Christianity: John Wesley’s Relations with the Moravians in Georgia, 1735-1737” in *The Journal of Moravian History* 6 (2009): 31.
19. Knox, *Enthusiasm*, 49.
20. Lavington, *Enthusiasm*, I 21. Note that the quotation marks in this excerpted passage signify that the text is taken from John Wesley’s journal entries – which he had published in Methodist circulars or pamphlets – or his other public writings.
21. Lavington, *Enthusiasm* I 25, 27, 29.
22. Lavington, *Enthusiasm*, II 2.
23. John Wesley, *A Letter to the Author of The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London: H. Cock, 1750), 25.
24. Wesley, Letter, 43.
25. “On Sunday 25, I heard at church, by way of sermon, part of Papists and Methodists Compared.” John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley Volume III* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1991), 399.
26. Details about Hanway’s life, including his family history and career path, can be found in the

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Dictionary of National Biography, which contains the only modern biographical sketch of the man's life. For the entry on Hanway see Haydon, Colin. *Oxford Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. "Jonas Hanway." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

27. Jonas Hanway, *Thoughts on the Methodists: The Absurd Doctrines and Manner of Preaching in Use Among Them* (London: John Rivington, Publisher).

28. It is also worth noting that Hanway wrote this series of letters in 1761, a full decade after the *Enthusiasm* was published.

29. Hanway, *Thoughts*, 541.

30. *Ibid.*, 537.

31. *Ibid.*, 554.

32. *Ibid.*, 548.

32. Margaret Jones, "Women and Methodism" in the *Ashgate Research Companion to Methodism*, ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

33. Religious demographics from eighteenth-century England are spurious and hard to come by. An article recently published in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* by Clive Field makes a new attempt at a headcount, and discusses the diversity of religious affinity practice among the group labeled nonconformists. The group included the "Old Dissenters," separatist Protestants who traced their history back to the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century, as well as the swelling Methodist and other evangelical communities, including Moravians, Inghamites, Swedenborgians, Sandemanians and dozens of smaller sects. For a full demographic survey see "Counting Religion in England and Wales: The Long Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63 (2012): 710.

34. Mark Goldie, "The Theory of Religious Intolerance in Restoration England," in *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, ed. Jonathan Israel et al. (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1991).

35. E. Neville Williams, *The Eighteenth Century Constitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 338.

36. Williams, *The Eighteenth Century Constitution*, 339.

37. 1715 marked the beginning of the so-called "Whig Supremacy," a period in English political history in which the Tories, discredited for their involvement in the Jacobite rebellions, remained shut out of government for nearly fifty years.

38. *The Law & Working of the Constitution: Documents 1660-1914*, ed. W. C. Costin & J. Steven Watson. (A&C Black, 1952) Vol. I (1660-1783), 90-1.

39. Williams, *The Eighteenth Century Constitution*, 332. It is also worth noting that 100 pounds sterling in 1700 converts to approximately \$19,000 in 2016; it is a hefty reward by any metric.

40. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1737), 47.

41. William Warburton, *The Alliance Between Church and State* (London: Fletcher Gyles, 1736), 116.

42. *Ibid.*, 121.

43. *Ibid.*, 123.

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