

# JOHN WESLEY AND HIS EVANGELICAL PAST

W. REGINALD WARD

How best to appraise John Wesley? Early Methodists were very apt to assess what he and they were doing by whether judgment was wrought upon sinners who opposed them, and, preferably, wrought quickly. Modern Methodists preserve something of this frame of mind in insisting upon instant relevance; we can be sure that in this tercentenary year Wesley will be milked for every cause, from systematics to social policy, from feminism to foreign affairs. But if the mills of God grind slowly, the judgments of historians had better not be too hasty. I have argued elsewhere that Wesley's *Journal* belonged to an antique genre, and will be misunderstood if it is expected to contain the kind of self-revelations which Goethe and the more progressive biographers among his contemporaries purported to offer.<sup>1</sup> The extreme conservatism with which the Wesleys after him maintained the format of the *Arminian Magazine* and other publications which he began is, however, a warning against expecting the future to cast its shadows before too readily in Wesley's own case. The same is true in the case of Wesley's politics. Born to a Jacobite mother, and a father who he claimed had written speeches for the defence in the Sacheverell trial, Wesley was the younger brother of a protégé of the Jacobite Bishop Atterbury<sup>2</sup>; he himself sought preferment through the Jacobite Bolingbroke, and was received into a whole nest of Jacobites in Georgia. Compelled for the sake of his movement to take a loyalist stance in 1745, Wesley had already taken the only option to defeated Jacobites, that of taking the country line of patriot opposition, though hoping that the patriot programme of reform in church and state could be achieved through the reversionary interest centred on Frederick, Prince of Wales. Frederick's premature death—he was killed by a blow from a tennis ball—ended any real possibility of this and ensured that Methodism would remain a movement in

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*Reginald Ward is a Emeritus Professor of Modern History at the University of Durham, in Durham, England. This paper was presented at the first plenary session.*

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the country. Like most of members of the country party, Wesley discovered that there were worse things in a wicked world than the government, and encouraged first by Pitt's triumphs in the Seven Years War and the accession of the young George III, and the threats to empire in Ireland and America, he gradually came back into the government orbit. As Charles Wesley was generally stiffer in his churchmanship than John, so his political evolution seems to have been more violent. At any rate, in apparent ignorance of the family connection with Sacheverell he was writing in 1755:

And justly might our christen'd heathens claim,  
Thieves drunkards, whoremongers, the sacred name;  
Or rabble rout succeed in their endeavour,  
With High Church and Sacheverell for ever!

And in the great crisis of the Seven Years War he hymned not only the king and the Prince of Wales, the fleet, the army and the universities, but (three times) Frederick the Great as God's 'champion'.<sup>3</sup> And whereas in the early stages of the revival, when evangelical dissenters like Doddridge had finally turned against Walpole they were welcome in the Methodist coalition under the Countess of Huntingdon, in later life when the dissenters came out for the resistance in America, the Wesleys denounced them bitterly as still the paid lackeys of Walpole, now turned fractious because a patriot king had withdrawn their sweeteners.<sup>4</sup> This reversal of roles in which part of the 'country' returns to the court when it can, and a defeated part of the court resumes the country 'line' of insisting on reform as a means of redressing the balance of the constitution against the government was a standard and rational form of eighteenth-century politics; but it is not a quick route to twenty-first-century relevance.

What of Wesley as a man of faith? The context here is a very broad one. The evangelical movement in its early stages extended from Central Europe to the American colonies and beyond; yet although the pioneers differed endlessly in theology and public opportunities, there was a surprising degree of mutual respect and affection among them. Wesley himself was, if the truth be told a rather tetchy character, but he took endless trouble to make the works of Jonathan Edwards available to his flock, made up his quarrels with Whitefield and the Moravians before the end, and helped to establish the doctrine that Francke was the father of the revival. The world was perhaps Wesley's parish rather less than it was that of Whitefield, Francke or Zinzendorf, but between traveling, personal contacts, letter-writing, reading, and a common perception of what the needs of the Protestant world were, an evangelical mind had formed, a mix of attitudes to which all contributed and from which all drew in personal measures.

All regarded the heartland of the Protestant world as the central Europe where Protestantism had begun and all knew that it was this area which had borne the brunt both of Catholic reconquest and the failure of Protestant morale. The message conveyed by Arndt as Lutheranism entered its 'crisis of piety' was indeed common to the Catholic world too. The trouble with popular Christianity, its failure to get Christian practice out of the sermon, tract and treatise and into the hearts of the flock, was its lack of meditation; move meditation out of the monastic cell and into the private chamber and things would

take a turn for the better. The Lutheran legend was that Arndt himself had exemplified his doctrine, his face in prayer being bathed in a brilliant light like that of Moses and the saints. Certainly in his *Little Paradise Garden* (1612) he sought to establish a school of prayer, and in his best-selling *Four* (later *Six*) *Books of True Christianity* he bequeathed a great compendium of medieval mysticism subject to a Lutheran editing. Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that in the 1730s, the decade of the commencement of the Anglo-American revivals there were more Arndt editions than in any other time. Arndt was not himself a Pietist or evangelical—in every country those parties were the battered remnant of much later battles—but he imparted to them all two other messages which went very deep. The old Protestant Orthodoxies had pinned their faith to dogmatic systems guaranteed against defeat; the lesson taught by Arndt was that the great enemy was system, and that the name of system was Aristotle. If there was one thing on which all the later evangelicals were at one it was anti-Aristotelianism, and hostility to the systematic Orthodoxies out of which they had sprung. But Aristotle had more to answer for than taking the heart out of Christian doctrine. To those preoccupied by the search for religious vitality, Aristotle now appeared to have blinded men to the vitalism which characterized nature. The first three books of Arndt's *True Christianity* corresponded to the classical stages of the mystical way, the *via purgativa*, the *via illuminativa*, and the *via unitiva*. Book Four, however, was entirely different. Arndt commences: 'Moses, the Prince of Prophets, in his book of Genesis, produces two very strong proofs of the Being of a God. The first is taken from the Macrocosm, or great world. The second from the Microcosm, or lesser world, which is man. And because by these the Maker and Preserver of all things is manifested, and in lively characters engraved upon our hearts; therefore the Holy Scriptures do frequently appeal to them both. I also ...endeavour to show that the creatures are as it were the Hands and Messengers of God, in a sound and Christian sense, leading us to the knowledge of God and Christ'.<sup>5</sup> Arndt then confesses himself to the doctrines of Paracelsus, perceives that the light which is in everyman signifies the art of magic, and considers the Kabbala, the Jewish medieval mysticism to be a great effort to recover the hidden mysteries under the letter of Scripture. 'Where magic ceases [proclaims Arndt], the Kabbala begins, and where the Kabbala ceases, there true theology and the prophetic spirit begins'.

So far as the first of these points is concerned not much comment is needed from Wesley's standpoint; the second needs more explanation. Over and over again Wesley insisted that systematic 'orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all'.<sup>6</sup> This was Wesley's protest against system, against Aristotle, and it was perhaps not his fault if its abiding legacy among the Methodist people was a distaste for theology of any kind, and a preference for what was called 'experience'. The addiction of the early evangelical world to Paracelsianism and magic has never been taken very seriously in England, but it was clearly attractive to men who were seeking to recover religious vitality, and it also had scientific virtues which appealed to men like Newton. It seemed to work at the points where alternative, materialist doctrines did not. Atoms in constant motion might influence each other like billiard balls, but could hardly cohere, or combine to form the immense variety of living forms, or the apparently spontaneous processes of fermentation, putrefaction, generation and so



forth. Since the late 15<sup>th</sup> century a great Platonic amalgam of Christianity and Hermetic traditions had been built up from which Paracelsus claimed to have learned his alchemy. In this the Kabbala played a major role and seemed able to make the doctrine of the Trinity an interpretive tool even in natural science. The most famous example of the mutual illumination of Christianity and the Kabbala and science was the celebrated *Lehrtafel* or pictorial display (with notes) of the Princess Antonia of Württemberg erected in the Trinity Church at Teinach, and Spener belonged to the cabbalistic circle which produced it. The result of all this labour has been to earn the derision of modern Jewish scholarship. Gershom Sholem maintains that cabbalism became a sort of flag under which, with no control from real Jewish scholarship, anything could be sold to the public, from Christian meditations to the latest annual market-products of geomancy and sooth-saying with cards.<sup>7</sup> Even the natural sciences of the day so far as they were in any sense occult, like astrology, alchemy and nature magic, became 'kabbala', and Paracelsus was believed when he claimed to have learned alchemy from cabbalistic sources, though in Jewish cabbalistic circles alchemy was never practiced. The worst enemies of this whole frame of mind were Calvinists and liberal Catholics in the Erasmusian tradition who wanted to get the magic out of Christianity. But the decline of this standpoint in the West ought not to blind us to its durability. Francke possessed copies of old and rare Paracelsus manuscripts, moved mountains to secure the help of a laboratory chemist from London who understood the manufacture of English secret medicaments, and trumpeted the miraculous cures worked by the secret tincture, the *essentia dulcis*, the formula of which was known only to the Orphan House dispensary.<sup>8</sup> This frame of mind was still dominant in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and, in its Arndtian shape reached its peak in Sweden only fifty years later. Wesley, like most of the western evangelicals, was mainly free from all this—he had once as a young fellow of Lincoln borrowed the translation of a French satirical attack on it from the college library.<sup>9</sup> And his really rather unthinking contempt for those who continued to work in this tradition, like Oetinger<sup>10</sup> and Swedenborg,<sup>11</sup> is notorious. Nevertheless he was as concerned as any of the Paracelsians that modern materialism might blot God out of the universe<sup>12</sup>; he had moreover to deal frequently with people who believed in witchcraft, and was very apt to put his own belief in witches on a par with his belief in the Bible, so convinced was he of the operation of spiritual forces in the world. There was a gulf between the Wesley who thought that Newton had put the argument from design on a new basis, and needed the psychology of Locke to say what he wanted to say, and the Central Europeans, but their fears for the universe were no strangers to him.

Spener's two great modifications to the tradition in which he was raised were his championship of small group religion in a Lutheran world very hostile to it, as a device for securing the exercise of the general priesthood. The members of the *collegium pietatis* should encourage, warn, convert each other. Spener's experience with his class meeting was not very happy,<sup>13</sup> and he wearied of it. But it remained indelibly written into the evangelical tradition. There is no need to enlarge on the way Wesley built the class-meeting into the structure of his movement; what is slightly odd that although as far as I can see Spener was not known in eighteenth-century England, some of Wesley's language about the class-meeting is very like his. Moreover, Spener turned to the *collegium pietatis* to

see what could be accomplished by a religious élite when reform in the traditional Lutheran style by corporate regulation through the Frankfurt town council failed; indeed his programme generally became one of seeking reform without waiting for state action. And that, of course, after the death of Frederick, Prince of Wales in 1751 is what Wesley was reduced to.

Spener's eschatology was of major importance and again marked the whole history of the evangelical movement. What mocked the Protestant syncretistic dabbling in the Kabbala, was the general conviction of the establishments that the Last Days were at hand, and that one of the signs of the end would be a promise, thought to be given in Romans 11, of the conversion of the Jews. Being on the look-out for collateral evidence for this, they found it in the way that, as so often, Jewish history was mirroring that of Christendom. In 1648 there were terrible pogroms in Poland in which 200,000 Jews lost their lives. This experience convinced many Jews that the return of the Messiah was imminent, and that the Kabbala offered a means of calculating it. According to a Jew from Smyrna, Sabbatai Zwi, the date was 1666. These glowing hopes were disappointed, and Sabbatai Zwi went over to Islam. But other messianists followed, including a Lithuanian Rabbi, Zadok of Wilna, who recalculated the end to 1695, and there were others down to the middle of the eighteenth century. These upheavals wrought havoc in the Jewish community. Some became secularized and made ready for the reception of Enlightenment; some went back to rabbinic Judaism; some followed Zwi into Islam; but over 20,000 converted to Catholicism. Perhaps in a perverse way the promises of Romans 11 were being fulfilled.

To Spener, this was a matter of importance since Frankfurt had the biggest ghetto in the Empire. He read the evidence differently, and brought about his second great breach with Lutheran Orthodoxy with his doctrine of 'the hope of better times', the view that the end, which had so preoccupied the Orthodox would not come until all God's promises to the church had been fulfilled. This displacement also heralded a radical change in pastoral and evangelistic strategy. For the Lutheran Orthodox the imminence of the end provided the crucial leverage upon conscience; mankind must repent now for tomorrow might be too late. For Spener the crucial leverage was provided by the assurance that honest effort could produce a genuine improvement, could indeed contribute to the supreme blessing, the return of the Lord himself.

There was no question of putting off the Last Days for ever; they were deferred simply into the middle distance, near enough for hope, a distance given chronological precision by Bengel. This displacement served Spener in two ways. It allowed time for his reform programme to work, and it allowed him a coherent approach to the Jewish problem. He could argue that the reason why the Jews were slow to fulfil their millennial role was the decayed state of the church. Renew the church and they would come in. This was a piece of optimism but in the long run it provided a psychological device by which the evangelical movement could quietly shed its obsession with Jewish questions and give its mind to mission in general. But it was a slow business. Wesley could write about the Jews in almost the old style,<sup>14</sup> notwithstanding that there were not enough Jews in England or America to make their conversion as significant a signpost as that of the American Indians. But he constructed for himself a three-stage historical scheme in which the

Kingdom of God was first established by the apostles in Palestine; it then developed into Christendom; and was now entering its final stage 'when Christianity would prevail over all, and cover the earth'.<sup>15</sup> And in middle and later life when he became excited about the progress of the revival, he would use the conventional post-millennial language about the latter-day glory with all the optimism of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>16</sup> And one is bound to wonder whether Wesley's apparent eccentricity in topping off the fourth volume of his abridgement of Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History*<sup>17</sup> with a *Short History of the People Called Methodists* was not due to a feeling that if Methodism was not actually the latter-day glory then it was perhaps not far off.<sup>18</sup> In all this Wesley was representative of the evangelical movement at large. Zinzendorf put far more energy into the conversion of Jews than the results ever warranted, and in millenarian terms believed that the time of the heathen was not yet come.<sup>19</sup> But the famous picture in the settlement at Zeist, depicting Christ surrounded by the converts of the Moravian mission field, is entitled (after Revelation 14:4) 'The First Fruits'.<sup>20</sup> In his general attitude towards the Last Things Zinzendorf was characterized by a life-long feud with Bengel and by an optimistic caginess. He did not accept the eternity of the pains of hell; he did not reject the restoration of all things, but thought it on the whole none of his business; and since the technical millenarian questions formed no part of the original apostolic preaching, he thought that Moravian preaching should follow suit.<sup>21</sup> Thus Zinzendorf too in his own convoluted way escaped from the constrictions which the certainties of the Orthodox eschatologies had placed upon both space and time, and released new energies into mission. He was also the beneficiary of a new factor introduced into the situation by his enemies at Halle. August Hermann Francke was in one sense old-fashioned; he was the last of the great Christian utopia-mongers with a plan for universal regeneration. But while his mentor Spener was seeking the renewal of the church establishment, Francke did the work of the Kingdom of God through the institutions at Halle which were institutions of neither church nor state, and which had in the end to be self-financing. He showed in fact that it was possible to apply the principle of contract to the kingdom of God, and without it his own missions to both Jews and Gentiles, let alone those launched later from Hermhut, Basel and London, would never have issued forth at all. I do not need to remind you that this was also what Wesley did, and that ever since his death his followers have been crucifying themselves by pretensions to be a church, Wesley's societal contract being much too authoritarian for instant conversion to the new purpose.

All this bears directly upon the capacity of the whole evangelical world, Methodism included, to shoulder the missionary burden at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Of course, the endless delay in all this was partly due to political circumstances, for Britain did not gain really free access to the outside world till after the Seven Years War.<sup>22</sup> But what I have been arguing towards is that before the political opportunities to overseas missions of the later eighteenth century could be taken, changes in the evangelical frame of mind needed to take place; the apocalypse needed to be put off, the obsession with Jewish questions circumvented, the propensity to Paracelsianism and theosophy displaced by an intensified empiricism. One of the troubles had always been that most Protestants had only the spectacles of the Bible and the ancient classics with which to contemplate history, so it is not surprising that the Quakers



regarded the Delaware Indians as the Lost Tribe of Israel; that sixty years later Zinzendorf took much the same view, nor that in between Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards took the even more pejorative stance that the Indians were not Jews but Canaanites, or that they had been brought over from Europe by the Devil himself to be his peculiar people untouched by Christian influence. Clearly any conversions resulting from addressing Indians as Jews or Canaanites would be by grace and not by works. Equally clearly these discussions are in a different world from the pamphlets of William Carey at the end of the century, in which the populations of each continent are set out, and the resources needed to make an impression on each are soberly calculated in the light of practical commercial experience. It is no wonder that it took Wesley and the others so long to get round to the idea of systematic missionary effort. Without a large dose of empiricism missionaries would never have got in any numbers to the ends of the earth; yet the harrowing paradox remains that, when they got there, the Paracelsianism of their forbears would have been more useful for understanding the people they had gone to meet than the empiricism which had made their mission possible.

There is one more huge change in the evangelical mix, the evangelical frame of mind, in which Wesley participated, and which his context is in some ways more important than he himself, and crucial in that it went to the heart of evangelicalism as a religious movement. This was its relation to the European traditions of mysticism. This is the more difficult since the history of mysticism in the eighteenth century remains to be written. Nevertheless a bold fist must be made at this because the involvement of the original evangelicals with mysticism, though neglected in the literature, is very striking. There had always been an undercurrent of mysticism in the Christian world, and now, when existing currents of belief and thought began to look fragile, it generated a sudden and extraordinary outpouring of influence.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen the whole Pietist enterprise had been rooted in the 'movement for piety' at the fountain-head of which stood Arndt's *True Christianity*, which was a great compendium of excerpts from medieval mystics subject to Lutheran editing. Every Pietist leader wrote prefaces to part of the Arndt corpus, Spener's *Pia Desideria*, originally being the most celebrated programmatic writing of the whole movement. Like Wesley later, he always had an eye to the sources of religious vitality, and his sympathetic view of what was known in the Protestant tradition as 'the mystical theology' did him no good at all with the Lutheran Orthodox.<sup>24</sup> Francke translated Molinos into Latin for academic purposes, and Molinos and Arndt between them played a significant part in his conversion.<sup>25</sup> Makarius the Egyptian was not just one of the more implausible pieces of baggage taken by Wesley to Georgia, but was as great a cliché of spirituality right through the evangelical world as being converted 'while one was reading Luther's Preface to the Romans'; it was a major item in the Protestant rediscovery of mysticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Much the same could be said of the Lives of M. de Renty<sup>27</sup> and Gregory Lopez, versions of which Wesley published, and to which he was deeply indebted. Of course a comprehensive pool of mystical materials had been assembled by Pierre Poiret, the émigré pastor from the Palatinate, later skillfully exploited by Tersteegen, but an asset on which others could draw.<sup>28</sup> And had nothing else availed the clashes with church authority in which Antoinette Bourignon and Mme. Guyon became involved would have guaranteed the attention of the whole Pietist world

upon the Quietists. Wesley could never quite swallow the mystic way whole, but he could never spit it out, violently as he periodically tried, and from the beginning needed something of this kind to support his heavy stress on sanctification. In the early 1730s Wesley went through a sort of mystical crisis, and was sustained by John Byrom who was seeking to propagate Poret's editions of the mystics, and put him on to Bourignon and Guyon.<sup>29</sup> At this early stage in their careers both the Wesley brothers (and Whitefield too) were deeply influenced by William Law and his ideal of Christian Perfection.<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Edwards is a different case, since his main effort was to harmonize the Bible with a doctrinal scheme; all the more striking then is his mystical devotion to beauty. Edwards's saint, like that of every other Reformed theologian, is a pilgrim, but not a 'pilgrim through this barren land'. The saints, he declared, 'do not first see that God loves them, and then see that he is lovely, and that Christ is excellent and glorious; but their hearts are first captivated with this view'; indeed the great difference between gracious affections and those which are false and untrue, is that they have 'beautiful symmetry and proportion'.<sup>31</sup> This was what he found embodied in David Brainerd, and this was what he impressed on Americans as the nature of the New Birth.<sup>32</sup>

This was the final end-product in evangelical Protestantism of an extraordinary congruence of clerical opinion, Catholic and Protestant, as to what was the matter with Christianity in the sixteenth century, the failure to implant meditation in the flock. This conviction resulted in an extraordinary exchange of devotional texts across otherwise hostile confessional divides. But since the Protestant churches never produced enough literature of this kind to satisfy the demand, it meant that the Protestant faithful were stayed during terrible trials on a diet of medieval mysticism, received sometimes direct through writers like Thomas à Kempis, sometimes indirect through Arndt or the much translated Puritan writers. The evangelical peddlers of Catholic spirituality were not, as is so often claimed, acting as a middle term between Catholic and Protestant—they were here behaving like everyone else—but they were middlemen between the Catholic writers and an unsatisfied Protestant market. By the same token the long-term future of Protestant mysticism could not be severed from its fate in the Roman Catholic church. This history has never been written, but in a nutshell its story seems to be this.

By the end of the Middle Ages the school of *Devotio Moderna* had developed a method for mental prayer which carried that practice into lay circles, and by that very fact created a presumption that among professionals something more was required. Xavier was suspected of illuminism because he instructed laymen in his exercises; but the desire to further, and in particular to explore the processes of contemplation and meditation, led to an extraordinary flowering of mysticism in the sixteenth century. In this work women, less corseted by scholastic education than the men, took the lead. St. Theresa of Avila who was able to analyse her personal experience with remarkable lucidity, if with imperfect consistency, set the pattern with her description of the seven steps of the soul to ultimate spiritual marriage with God. The other pattern, that mystical creativity moved south was also sustained, and the hold of the northern mystics was mostly supported by burgeoning reprints of their works. Only in the seventeenth century did mysticism in a creative sense return to France, and that was when the French invented the word 'mysticism' as distinct from 'mystical theology' to describe it. The great flowering of French mysticism



was, however, cut short by a catastrophe from the outside and a development from within. One of the great revolutions of recent scholarship has been Dale van Kley's demonstration of how radically the unholy alliance between Louis XIV and the Papacy to put down Jansenism undermined the whole system of the Ancien Régime in France. There is no doubt I think that the same combination which produced the papal condemnations of Molinos and Fénelon, and put Mme. Guyon and the Quietists through the mill, was equally ruinous to the mystical tradition in its Catholic heartlands. It was notable that the word *mystique* disappeared from the titles of works which ventured upon this field, to be replaced by the more general notion of *oraison*. And after the Seven Years War, when admittedly all the religious establishments, Catholic and Protestant, went badly down the hill, the quantity of this sort of spiritual literature diminished greatly. It was not for nothing that the historian of the early stages of this process entitled his study, the *Twilight of the Mystics*, and spoke of passive prayer falling into discredit for two centuries.<sup>33</sup> The Second Vatican Council affirmed the call of all Christians to sanctity without reference to the mystical life, identifying sanctity with the perfection of charity.

This downward slope was exemplified by the kind of literature produced in quantity by a movement past its best years. There were no longer durable accounts of religious experience, but encyclopaedias, treatises, manuals, précis and directories given a scientific character by appearing in latin; there were 'vocabularies' of mystical theology; a declining field was propped up by the creation of chairs in Carmelite colleges, and the chairs generated an output of summas; and in the eighteenth century Maurists and Bollandists applied an historical critique. But mystical literature went into a decline from which even intense scholarly application in the twentieth century has hardly rescued it.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, barred from university and church, this movement like other critical movements began to take refuge in informal gatherings of its own, class meetings, lodges, Temples of Wisdom. Up to the time of the prohibition of French masonic lodges in 1737, they were said to be 'assemblies of Quietists and Molinists', and certainly their chancellor, the Chevalier Ramsay, had been a confidant of Fénelon and Mme. Guyon. Thus the evangelicals especially the Western ones, who drew heavily on the more recent and especially the Quietist literature, were deriving nourishment from a movement in decay, a movement which was being subjected to so thorough a process of textbookisation, as to lose its earlier appeal as a refuge from the constrictions of scholastic theology, systematic rationalism in the style of Descartes, mechanistic views of the universe, or even male domination. The Western evangelicals continued to be wooed by the siren advocates of Jakob Böhme from Law to Coleridge, but were enabled to put up a better resistance than their fellows in Central Europe by the much larger dose of empiricism in the general make-up.

But there were two other factors at work. If Jonathan Edwards came to insist that holiness 'consists not only in contemplation, and a mere passive enjoyment, but very much in action',<sup>35</sup> so did they all. But they were bound to recognize that professional mysticism was a product of the leisure industry, and that a post-conversion diet of endless 'dark nights of the soul' did no one any good. Yet the penny was slow to drop. Wesley could go clean over the top in polemic against Swedenborg or Böhme, but right to the end of his life he was recommending the Quietist writers (especially to ladies) in almost the same breath.<sup>36</sup> One of the curious images of the eighteenth century is the spectacle of Wesley

at the end of his life purging 'mysticism' from his brother's hymns.<sup>37</sup> Mystical union with God, even the dialectical relation envisaged by Böhme, was all very well, but there was a lurking evangelical feeling that it distracted attention from the need for atonement. No man was more deeply indebted to the Behmenist William Law than the young Henry Venn, and 'he read till he came to a passage wherein Mr. Law seemed to represent the blood of Christ as of no more avail than the excellence of his moral character. 'What', he exclaimed, does Mr. Law thus degrade the death of Christ which the Apostles represent as a sacrifice for sins, and to which *they* ascribe the highest efficacy in procuring our salvation! Then farewell such a guide. Henceforth I will call no man master'.<sup>38</sup> Here is perfectly expressed the disappointment that Behmenite mysticism had liberated men from the systematic orthodoxies only at an unacceptable price. It was Wesley's good fortune that he did not quite survive into the period when his own empiricism began to create difficulties with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

I think it is hard not to say that in the course of Wesley's lifetime the original 'mix' of evangelical religion disintegrated, and to have to confront the paradox that the Anglo-Saxon evangelicals entered on their period of greatest public influence as all the main pillars of their original world except the Western empiricism were crumbling. It is very noticeable that the original ability of the movement to cope with considerable differences of opinion without loss of mutual respect among the leaders was already much less than it had been. Oetinger had tried to apply the bond of a system built on Bengelian history and Paracelsian science; but he had no successors and fell out with Swedenborg whose spokesman in Germany he at one stage he hoped to be.<sup>39</sup> Swedenborg's visionary exploration of the spirit world evoked a few secessions in English Methodism among men who thought it rationalized their relations with the Church of England; when Lavater appealed to him to communicate with a deceased friend<sup>40</sup> in the interests of a knock-down argument in favour of Providence he got no response and went on to supply the need with animal magnetism<sup>41</sup> and physiognomy. In the nature of the case the evangelicals never had the Last Things within their grasp, and the revival of the belief that they had among many, though not in the main among English Methodists, during the French Revolution, led to sad results. Whether it was Jung-Stilling going over board in this direction and seeing salvation coming from a Czar of Russia, or the Albury group looking in equally implausible directions, the old hope was gone. Within the Methodist tradition the Wesleyans pushed Wesley's personal authority, and others pushed perfection for more than they would stand. All venerated the Bible but the intrusion of a group of bitter Scots evangelicals into England in the eighteen-twenties made a hanging issue out of how many books were canonical. It was no wonder that in England a group of ex-evangelicals began to hanker after ecclesiastical, even pontifical, authority to make good what evangelicalism now lacked, and that everywhere there were political alliances between evangelicals and conservatives they would formerly have shunned.

Wesley, of course, was not free of nostrums of his own. But he was notably free of the whinings of our contemporary post-modernists that their world is uniquely in collapse, though he had every justification for so doing. But by tempering his loyalty to the church institutions by a sufficient degree of empiricism, and by following the light he had with exemplary fidelity, he set a pattern which has enabled an evangelical movement which

seemed to be in full decay just after his death to reinvent itself several times in the two centuries since his death, and to outlast many of those who have come to bury it. In this circuitous way we may perhaps glimpse the relevance of John Wesley.

#### NOTES

1. Works of John Wesley. Bicentennial edn. [Cited henceforth as Wesley Works] vol. xviii. Journals and Diaries 1. 61.
2. John Hampson, *Memoirs of the late John Wesley* (Sunderland, 1791) 1. 42-5.
3. The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley ed. George Osborn (London, 1868-72) 6. 56, 120-123, 128-32.
4. *Ibid.* 8. 447.
5. John Arndt, *Of True Christianity* (2nd ed. London, 1720) 2: para. 1. This translation is of special interest for the theme of this paper as it was prepared by the Hallensian A. W. Boehm, chaplain to Prince George of Denmark, consort of Queen Anne, for presentation to the Queen herself in 1712.
6. A Plain Account of the People called Methodists in a Letter to Mr. Perronet (1748) in Wesley, Works (ed. London, 1872) 8. 249.
7. Gershom Scholem, *Alchemie und Kabbala*. Ein Kapitel aus der Geschichte der Mystik (n. pl. or d. Berlin, 1927); Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbala and its Symbolism* (London, 1965; orig. Germ. ed. Zurich, 1958); Ernst Benz, *Die Christliche Kabbala*. Ein Stiefkind der Theologie (Zurich, 1958); Otto Betz, 'Kabbala Baptizata. Die jüdisch christliche Kabbala und der Pietismus in Württemberg', *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 24 (1998) 130-159 (includes a reproduction of the Lehrscheffel).
8. Erich Beyreuther, *August Hermann Francke, 1663-1727. Zeuge des lebendigen Gottes* (Marburg an der Lahn, 1956) 169.
9. *The Count of Gablis, or the Extravagant Mysteries of the Cablists*. Tr. P. Ayres (London, 1680).
10. Cf. Works 21; *Journal* 4. 176-7. Oetinger attempted to make a Christian map of knowledge out of Bengelian history and Paracelsian science. Wesley was aware of his relationship with Bengel whom he greatly respected, but dismissed him with the (just) comment that he was obscure.
11. Wesley was tempted fleetingly by the evidence of spiritual vitality in Swedenborg, but his contemptuous dismissal (Works 22: *Journal* 5. 216-7, 301-2; Works 23: *Journal* 6. 126-8 should be compared with the estimate of the late Ernst Benz, *Emanuel Swedenborg. Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason*. Westchester Pa., 2002).
12. As late as 1784 Adam Clarke had an intimate friend in East Cornwall who was 'deep in the study of alchemy'. J. W. Etheridge, *Life of the Rev. Adam Clarke* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1858) 81.
13. On Schütz's role in the creation and disruption of the *collegium* see Andreas Deppermann, *Jakob Schütz und die Anfänge des Pietismus* (Tübingen, 2002).
14. John Wesley, *Sermons* Ino.631 (London, 1872) 2.325-6. In Georgia JW had been on friendly terms with Dr. Nunez, a Jew of Portuguese descent, from whom he took Spanish lessons. John C. English, 'John Wesley and his Jewish Parishioners', *Methodist History* 36 (1998) 220-227.
15. *Ibid.* [Sermon no.41] 1.40-58.
16. *Letters of John Wesley* ed. J.Telford (London, 1931) 8.199, 204; *Sermons* vol. 2 esp nos. 58 and 66. Perhaps not surprisingly Fletcher, Wesley's Swiss side-kick and expected successor, gave much more attention to continental prophecies of an imminent catastrophic end. P. P. Streiff, *Jean Guillaume de la Fléchère. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Methodismus* (Frankfurt a. M., 1984) 108-119. Part of this passage appears in Eng. Tr. *Reluctant Saint? A Theological Biography of Fletcher of Madeley* (Peterborough, 2001) 44-6.
17. *A Concise Ecclesiastical History, from the Birth of Christ to the Beginning of the Present Century* (London, 1781).



18. Certainly Wesley ended with a low opinion of the prophets of doom. *Works* 24. *Journal* 7. 117. Dec.31, 1788.
19. J. C. S. Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800* (Woodbridge, 2001) 95.
20. Reproduced in M. Brecht (ed.), *Geschichte des Pietismus* vol. 2 (Göttingen, 1995) 72.
21. A. G. Spangenberg, *Apologetische Schluss-Script* (1752) repr. in *Zinzendorf Werke: Ergänzungsband 3* (Hildesheim, 1964) 167-8, 554-7.
22. I have discussed this question in 'Missions in their global context in the Eighteenth Century' in *A Global Faith* ed. M. Hutchinson & O. Kalu (Sydney, 1998) 108-121.
23. Ernst Schering, 'Mystik als Erkenntnis. Motive und Aspekte der mystischen Theologie Fénelons' *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 5 (1979) 164-183.
24. Brecht, *Geschichte des Pietismus* I. 314, 372.
25. Erhard Peschke, 'Die Bedeutung der Mystik für die Bekehrung August Hermann Franckes' *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 91 (1966) Sp. 881-82. Repr. in *Zur neueren Pietismusforschung* ed. M. Greschat (Darmstadt, 1977) 294-316.
26. Ernst Benz, *Die protestantische Thebais...Zur Nachwirkung Makarius des Ägypters im Protestantismus des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 1963); cf. Gottfried Arnold, *Historie und Beschreibung der mystischen Theologie oder geheimen Gottes Gelehrtheit wie auch derer alten und neuen Mysticorum* (Frankfurt, 1703) 157, and his *Vertheidigung der mystischen Theologie* (n.d.) paras.16-17.
27. On the general diffusion of which see Martin Schmidt, 'Die Biographie des französischen Grafen Gaston Jean-Baptiste de Renty (1611-1649)' in his *Wiedergeburt und neuer Mensch* (Witten, 1969) 390-439.
28. W. R. Ward, 'Mysticism and revival: the Case of Gerhard Tersteegen' in *Revival and Religion since 1700* ed. Jane Garnett and Colin Matthew (London, 1993) 41-58.
29. On this theme see Robert C. Tuttle Jr., *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, 1989).
30. J. Brazier Green, *John Wesley and William Law* (London, 1945); Eric W. Baker, *A Herald of the Evangelical Revival* (London, 1948).
31. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* ed. S. E. Dwight & E. Hickman (Repr. Edinburgh, 1974) 1. 276, 309.
32. A. Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass., 1968) 42-3.
33. L. Cognet, *Crépuscule des Mystiques* (Tournai, 1958) 6.
34. For a swashbuckling compendium of information on all this see the article 'Mystique' in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* ed. M. Villier (in progress) 10 pt. 2 1889-1984.
35. Edwards, *Works* 2. 31.
36. Wesley, *Letters* 7. 66, 126-7: 5. 313: 6. 39, 43-4, 115. The tenor of his advice is very similar to that on novels (also given to a lady): 'I would recommend very few novels to young persons for fear they should be too desirous of more'. *Letters* 7. 228.
37. *Ibid.* 8. 122. He missed at least one, 'Happy the man that finds the grace', clearly a hymn to the Divine Sophia, still in the current hymnbook, *Hymns and Psalms* no. 674.
38. John Venn, *The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the Late Henry Venn* ed. H. Venn (London, 1834) 18. Venn also turned against Swedenborg, 43.
39. Ernst Benz, *Swedenborg in Deutschland* (Frankfurt, 1947); Michael Heinrichs, *Emanuel Swedenborg in Deutschland* (Frankfurt, 1979).
40. E. Benz, 'Swedenborg und Lavater. Über die religiösen Grundlagen der Physiognomik', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 57 3s. 8 (1938) 153-216; Horst Weigelt, *J. K. Lavater* (Göttingen, 1991).
41. Which Wesley, though not all his preachers, considered 'diabolical from the beginning to the end'. *Letters* 8. 208, 214, 261.