

John Wesley and the Spirit of Capitalism

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The life work of John Wesley, and the subsequent role of the Methodist churches in the rise of organised labour, present an incoherence in the famous Weber thesis linking Protestant religion to the spirit of capitalism (1985). Weber construed capitalism as “identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever **renewed** profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise.” A capitalistic economic action is defined “as one which rests on the expectation of profit by the utilisation of opportunities for exchange...” (Weber, 1985: 17). Acquisition, which allows re-investment for continual enterprise, is essential to the process.

That Wesley should scarcely feature in Weber’s argument is understandable. Weber finds the closest affinity between religion and capitalism in Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, which Wesley rejected utterly. According to this belief, “salvation is spontaneously offered to some, while others have no access to it ...” (Calvin, 1989: 2.202). As Weber says of this doctrine, “The interest of it is solely in God, not in man; God does not exist for men, but men for the sake of God” (Weber, 1985: 102-3). Salvation is gratuitous; there is nothing a human can do to merit favours of God, so far is he above the human condition (Hancock, 1989: 25-34). Upon the “elect” his grace will flow freely, regardless of desert. Yet, paradoxically, there will be signs of that grace among those predestined for salvation. They will recognise themselves to be hammers in the hand of God, “executors of His providential will” (Weber, 1985: 125). The elect human has no choice in the matter but to be God’s implement. Clearly part of God’s purpose is to have helpers working assiduously for the betterment of fellow humans. To be among the elect is to have a “calling”, what Weber discerns to be a distinctly “religious conception”, and a peculiarly Protestant one (Weber, 1985: 79). It implied “the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume” (Weber, 1985: 80). Luther had taught that “labour in a calling appears ... as the outward expression of brotherly love”. Ultimately “the fulfilment of all worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptable to God” (Weber, 1985: 81).

For the Calvinist, the consequence was to live by an iron law. No one could be certain that he or she was truly among the elect of God, but for faithful church members the only option was to live as though you were assured of salvation. Inward spirituality was an uncertain guide; one’s sainthood was observed objectively, in the outward righteousness of a life lived in good works. The devil of it was that no

extent of good works or righteous living could buy salvation for one who was not among the elect. On the other hand, it was taken as a sign of election that one had an unswerving self-confidence in having been earmarked for blessedness. One assured of election would live a life of energetic devotion to the service of God and the world. This included creating work for others and providing for their necessities by the construction of sound businesses. Success in business was not pursued for its own sake, but for its contribution to God's purposes for humankind. To be prosperous in business was to have a clear token of God's grace.

Under a doctrine of election it was not possible for there to be a universal "Protestant ethic". This doctrine had its bitter enemies among Protestants, many of them associated with the name of Arminius (Jacob Harmensz 1560-1609). His challenges to predestination caused a major split in the Dutch Reformed Church. In the year after his death his followers signed a Remonstrance affirming his views, acquiring the name "Remonstrants" as a consequence (Bangs, 1971: 318-9). The gospel, they averred, was for all who would receive it. Predestination turned God into a monster if he could in his glory make human creatures who were automatically assigned to eternal damnation, no matter what efforts they made to live a good life. In his middle life John Wesley declared himself an Arminian, and underlined the point by founding the "Arminian Magazine" in 1780 (Southey, 1925, 2: 231-2).

The evangelical revolution begun in England by Wesley and George Whitefield towards the middle of the eighteenth century produced a movement riven with faction. While Whitefield was Calvinist, Wesley absolutely repudiated the idea of election (Williams, 1960: 72-3). God's grace was given freely for all who would choose to be faithful to him. Wesley's religion was both universalist and pietist, and he was sometimes accused of papism because he taught that Christians must assiduously expend themselves in the service of others. Although he was Lutheran enough to believe that people could not *merit* God's grace through good works, being in a state of grace meant that they would have to live according to the will of God. Wesley is reduced to the margins of Weber's thesis probably because the voluntarism of his teaching did not promote exhibition of the signs of election. Weber treats of Wesley sympathetically, then very deliberately sets him aside: "As a late product we can, in the following discussion, generally neglect Methodism, as it added nothing new to the development of the idea of calling" (Weber, 1985: 143). Astonishingly, Weber's English interpreter, and himself an avowed "Christian socialist", R.H. Tawney, barely notices Wesley and then, misleadingly, as one acquiescent "in the conventional ethics" (Tawney, 1938: 194). Wesley's Methodist followers rate no mention at all in Tawney's treatise.

Whether Tawney was affected by the apparent contradictions of Methodism we may not know, but his neglect of its contribution to the very Christian socialism to which Tawney subscribed is surprising at the least. In some ways it is equally surprising that Wesley's work should at length have produced a socialist politics. Wesley himself was conscious of his Puritan and Dissenting forebears, and a constant

ambivalence about and caution towards these origins produced in him a reaction against all political radicalism. He remained a high churchman of the Church of England all his life, and never went back on his equally high Tory political ideals. In 1790 he wrote in his "Arminian Magazine" "I never had any design of separating from the Church. I have no such design now" (quoted Southey, 1925: 1.xviii). He was loyalist, monarchist, explicitly anti-republican and anti-democratic: "The Methodists are no republicans, and never intend to be" (quoted Green, 1964: 143).

At the same time, his gospel Christianity led him into deep confrontation with the social evils of his day. Of his whole era there was no more ferocious campaigner against slavery than Wesley. Unfashionably for his day, he denounced the slave-traders and slave owners:

You therefore are guilty, yea principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies and murders. ...The blood of all these wretches who die before their time, whether in their country or elsewhere, lies upon your head. "The blood of thy brother" (for whether thou wilt believe it or no, such is he in the sight of him that made him) "crieth against thee from the earth," from the ship, and from the waters. O whatever it costs, put a stop to its cry before it is too late: instantly, at any price, were it the half of your goods, deliver thyself from blood-guiltiness! Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy lands, are at present stained with blood. Surely it is enough; accumulate no more guilt; spill no more the blood of the innocent (Wesley, 1774: 105).

Already we encounter Wesley in confrontation with the notion of **accumulation**. In this passage he has been contending with the universal justification of slavery. It had to be seen by its apologists as a capital investment, of which no merchant or slaveholder could divest himself. For Wesley, the response was evil on both counts: slave owning was in itself "execrable villainy", and the accumulation of such capital was none other than an accumulation of guilt.

Throughout his life he was an assiduous champion of the poor, bitterly opposing all current arguments that poverty was the product of failings among the poor themselves. He thoroughly rejected the "English paradox" that luxurious consumption on the part of the rich was of benefit for the poorer classes among whom luxury provided jobs for their artisans, that "secret concatenation" linking the fortunes of rich and poor ... (Johnson, quoted Winch, 1996: 57-89, at 57). On the contrary Wesley believed that it was the greed of the rich which squandered society's resources and left little for the poor. Here again he confronts the common opinion that the poor are responsible for their own condition. He constantly met them face-to-face:

I found some in their cells underground, half-starved with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain. But I found not one of them unemployed who was able to crawl about the room. So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, "They are poor only because they are idle" (Wesley, n.d.:2 246).

Wesley found the simplicity of the poor more lovable than the pretensions of

the rich. In the poor is to be found “pure genuine grace, unmixed with paint, folly and affectation” (quoted Semmel, 1973: 72). Generally he himself spurned the company of the rich, and he instructed his preachers also to avoid wasting time on them.

Wesley frequently expressed his outrage at the conditions under which the poor lived, and was quite unabashed about blaming the rich for their condition. As a classical scholar he was familiar with the ancient Roman sumptuary laws designed to restrict extravagance, and he advocated similar measures for Britain. His writings were full of creative ways in which the state might intervene in the economy to create employment and to restore some balance between rich and poor (e.g. Wesley, 1773: 107-113). He was far from content, however, to rely solely on public admonition. The poor he knew face-to-face. They were members of his congregations, or they lived in dingy garrets and cellars in the neighbourhoods where he worked. Famous as he was, and preoccupied with the big questions of organising a net-worked national society, Wesley devoted much of his boundless energy to visiting the poor and sick in their homes, often bringing them the means of their immediate survival. He instructed all the Methodist societies to gather their goods and make provision for the poor; he experimented with community co-operative projects and job-creation schemes. He poured enormous imaginative effort into pharmaceutical experiments designed to tend the health of the poor. The most degraded of all were the poor in prison. Wesley and his brother Charles from the earliest days of Methodism made a point of visiting prisoners, bringing them food, clothing and spiritual comfort. By 1778 Wesley had issued an instruction that all Methodist preachers should visit prisons as part of their regular round of duties. Again he worked both at the face-to-face level and the broader public level. His public agitation against the appalling conditions in British prisons was in large part responsible for the Howard report on *The State of Prisons in England and Wales* which initiated prison reform (Marquardt, 1992: 82-4).

Wesley's followers also gave considerable impetus to the cause of universal education through the Sunday Schools movement which, besides instructing people in religious piety and civic morality, also provided a basic education in literacy. The Methodist societies undoubtedly played a big part in the political education of the common people. The Methodist movement began with a tiny study circle of devout students in Christ Church College, Oxford. Its methodical attention to prayer, bible study, attendance at Holy Communion and visitation of the poor, the sick and the imprisoned was conducted with such intensity that the whole consuming manner of life was interiorised within each member. After his “conversion” in 1738, the force of Wesley's out-door preaching embraced whole new congregations who knew nothing of the Church. They were soon tautly organised into local societies tended by itinerant pastors and lay (“local”) preachers. Each local congregation was organised into class meetings for biblical instruction and into “bands” of twelve for mutual sustenance and admonition in things of the spirit. As soon as it was discovered that the societies

would need their own building in order to consolidate and make progress, funds had to be raised by regular contributions. Each member was expected to contribute a penny a week, although sometimes the expected contributions of the especially indigent were taken over by those who were better off. Self reliance and mutual sustenance were built into the very foundations of the movement. Membership required the acquisition of a ticket through a system controlled by Wesley himself. Within the class meetings and the bands, members, often newly literate, learnt to articulate the things that were important to them. Those moved to undertake leadership roles such as lay-preaching often found that they had become remarkably adept at leadership in secular affairs. Such activities certainly included support for the Chartist movement, which could almost be said to have been spawned by Methodism, at least at the grass-roots level. It can be said that

practically the whole of [Methodism's] technique was taken over by the political societies ... Its Connexionalism, its large-scale finance and enterprise, its division into districts, circuits and societies, its propaganda methods of itinerant preaching and Sunday open-air meetings, its society class and weekly penny subscription were all copied at some time or other by the political reformers (Wearmouth, 1937: 216).

In a later era these considerations would apply also to the trade union movement; in some the local branch was called the "chapel"; in turn this influence was felt in the Labour Party itself. An old but persistent slogan finds its restatement in present times: as the much-lamented John Smith wrote shortly before his death, "How true it is that the Labour Party has owed more to Methodism than to Marx" (Blair, Smith *et al.*, 1993: 138). Hilary Armstrong writes in the same volume that the relationship between Methodism and the British Labour Party developed

not through ideas or faith, but through the material experience of the Methodist Church. Because Methodism underlined the importance both of the nature of community on earth and of self-improvement, ordinary men and women were assisted not just by the ideas of faith, but by the real experience of community alongside the real experience of self-improvement. For very many working people the Methodist Church was their moral and practical university where they learnt what would now be termed "life skills" as well as faith (Blair, Smith *et al.*, 1993: 94).

The intention here is firmly to associate the growth of Methodism with a species of democratic socialism. The authors of this collection, including the present prime minister of Great Britain, identify themselves as "Christian Socialists". Socialists working within the capitalist system are nevertheless, by virtue of the label they have adopted, its internal critics. They have differentiated Methodism from Marx, yet the clear intention is to place it in the same camp of opposition to capitalism.

This very association shakes the traditional assumption about "the Protestant

ethic and the spirit of capitalism". Here at least is one stream of Protestant thought and experience claimed by its most recent political heirs to be set at odds with capitalism. There remains the problem of its founder: Wesley was clearly aligned both spiritually and socially with the working class; yet he maintained his loyalty to Toryism, and proclaimed his hostility to both republicanism and democracy.

The picture of Methodism's place in the evolution of political alignments is blurred by the arguments over its relationship to revolution. There is no easy answer to the famous Halévy question: did Methodism divert Britain from the course of revolution similar to that of France? Some observers have no doubt that it could have been a revolutionary agent. According to J.H. Plumb:

By 1760 Methodism was easily the most highly co-ordinated body of opinion in the country, the most fervent, the most dynamic. Had it been bent on revolution in Church or State nothing could have stopped it. But then Methodism was not a religion **of** the poor but **for** the poor (Plumb, 1950: 93-4).

The fact that Methodist leaders did not choose to foment revolution does not entirely address the question:

Why was it that of all the countries of Europe England had been the most free from revolution, violent crises and sudden changes? We have sought in vain to find the explanation by an analysis of her political institutions and economic organisation. Her political institutions were such that society might easily have lapsed into anarchy had there existed in England a bourgeoisie animated by the spirit of revolution. And a system of economic production that was in fact totally without organisation of any kind would have plunged the kingdom into violent revolution had the working classes found in the middle class leaders to provide it with a definite ideal, a creed, a practical programme. But the elite of the working class, the hardworking and capable bourgeoisie, had been imbued by the Evangelical movement with a spirit from which it had nothing to fear (Halévy, 1987: 371).

In this context, "...it would be difficult to overestimate the part played by the Wesleyan revival" (Halévy, 1987: 372). Where a revolutionary situation undoubtedly existed, the religious revival movement gave an outlet for the pent-up frustration of the poor, sublimating it into outbursts of religious fervour, while it bent resentment inward towards the search for personal salvation. E.P. Thompson has urged caution about oversimplifying the complexities of the Methodist influence on politics, such that the Halévy thesis can neither be endorsed nor rejected outright. Yet Thompson himself does not altogether appreciate the subtleties of Wesley's position. His "few active interventions into politics" were reactionary, while he "rarely let pass any opportunity to impress upon his followers the doctrines of submission, expressed less at the level of ideas than of superstition" (Thompson, 1968: 45). Presumably the "superstition" refers to Wesley's uncritical acceptance of the scriptural authority of Romans 13, which enjoins submission to the powers that be, whose authority comes

from God: "...there is no supreme power, no power of the sword, of life and death, but what is derived from God, the sovereign of all" (Wesley, 1998: 46). Yet Wesley's altercations with Richard Price saw through the political hypocrisy of his day, whereby advocates of popular sovereignty claimed representative authority for adult males of forty-shilling freehold status while, quite irrationally in Wesley's view, excluding from the suffrage women, children and property-less adult males; the claims made for representative government in his day were a patent sham (Wesley, 1776: 61-6). Although he was not prepared to endorse such a system, given that he disputed any suggestion that power did **not** come from God, Wesley's criticism of the representative system of his era made an implicit case for universal suffrage.

Be that as it may, Wesley was throughout bitterly and deeply anti-revolutionary. He clearly recognised the "enthusiasm" of his followers and its potential to break out into acts of uncontrolled passion. The consequences of unfettered expression of violent emotions could be socially and politically disastrous. Wesley never entered a vandalised monastery or any church ravaged by the iconoclasm of his Puritan predecessors without remarking the sheer madness of such violence. Indeed, the whole history of the Puritan revolution and the civil war of the previous century was constantly at the front of his mind, so closely did he think the "enthusiasm" of his followers resembled the passions of the regicides. Yet for Wesley no expression of human violence could be more insolent than the murder of a king who, he firmly believed, had been placed in authority by God. How unconscionable that all that destruction and bloodshed had been unleashed in the name of Christianity.

Wesley's life's work therefore sat uncomfortably on the horns of a dilemma. His preaching of the Gospel aroused in people a sense of sin powerful enough to drive them to repentance. This process resulted in all the manifestations of "enthusiasm" which often induced trance-like states, speaking in tongues, groaning and shrieking, falling down and convulsing. The aftermath of such experiences was often a burning desire not merely to save one's own soul but also to change the world. Wesley was content to arouse enthusiasm for the sake of souls and also to see his movement change the world in the sense that it would eradicate godlessness and social evil. Yet for him this could never imply political subversion or even disobedience.

Once again, however, there is an ambivalence in his approach. Although the societies were founded on discipline — and one might almost recognise in it a system of mutual moral surveillance, open to all the abuses petty jealousies might invite — in the end each person was responsible for his or her own conduct before God. If, in the final analysis, conscience dictated disobedience, then one must follow the obligation to "obey God rather than man". For most practical purposes people should submit to the discipline, but individual responsibility for one's behaviour was inescapable. Wesley had his 1747 Conference officially respond to the question whether a Christian should submit to any outside authority against the dictates of conscience:

It is unmistakably plain that he cannot: either to Pope, Council, Bishop, or Convocation. And this is that grand principle of every man's right to private judgement in opposition to implicit faith in man on which Calvin, Luther, Melancthon, and all the ancient Reformers both at home and abroad proceeded: "Every man must think for himself, since every man must be given an account for himself of God" (quoted Baker, 1970: 112-3).

At the same time, a member could not expect to obey the directives of a conscience at odds with that of the leader and remain a member of the movement. Indeed, for Wesley, it was unlikely that any Christian could continue to be so in isolation from a church community and its disciplines. For all their inward holiness, the ancient mystics taught a religion widely off the Christian mark:

Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. "Faith working by love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection (Wesley, 1739: 321).

Together with membership of the congregation, as with the Methodist societies, went discipline, and none tauter than that imposed by Wesley himself. For all that the seeds of revolution were implicit in the Protestant teaching of individualism and the final authority of conscience, the discipline of the movement was intended to regulate all outward behaviour. His assiduous attention to the containment of excessive enthusiasm ultimately sustains the Halévy thesis. To the extent that the Methodist movement could have fomented revolution, but was instead diverted from this path, Methodism prevented a revolution. Whether the emotional outlet it provided, and whether the social and economic improvements it engendered, provided an added diversion of revolutionary impulses is a question less easily answered.

Among his followers, as Thompson proposes, "Wesley could not escape the consequences of his own spiritual egalitarianism. If Christ's poor came to believe that their souls were as good as aristocratic or bourgeois souls then it might lead them on to the arguments of the *Rights of Man*" (Thompson, 1968: 46). Although the Methodist conference remained politically conservative after Wesley's death, at the periphery of the movement "spiritual egalitarianism" took a distinctly radical and political turn. Some congregations fostered a radical political presence in their own localities in defiance of the "connexion", but the most dissentient of the congregations seceded from the official movement to form their own societies. The Primitive Methodists were the most radical of all, determined as they were to adopt democratic procedures into all of their collective business. Sometimes their Bible-study circles branched out into discussions of Tom Paine and the *Rights of Man*. As we have observed, there was a close connection between them and the Chartist movement, and certainly with the earliest mining and agricultural trade unions — the Methodist connection with the Tolpuddle Martyrs being among the most

celebrated instances. Less fortunate than the eventually pardoned union martyrs were those Methodists hanged for Luddism in the early nineteenth century.

The political and social influence of Wesley, however, is scarcely contained by the activities of the Methodist Church or even its radical break-aways. Charles and John Wesley, themselves remaining Anglican priests, had a strong influence back into the Church of England, among whose clergy emerged some strongly committed to radical politics. The system of permanently funded "livings" freed many Anglican priests from direct dependence on their congregations, unlike the Methodists, whose sustenance depended on the goodwill of the membership. In some inner-city churches Anglican priests had scarcely any congregations at all, but spent their time and energies in charitable relief work among the poor (Colloms, 1982; Moses, 1990:166-70). It was among such pastors that the emerging Christian Socialist movement began to thrive. The impress of Wesley's writings, and his practical work among the poor and prisoners together with his agitation against the slavers, was unmistakable upon succeeding generations of philanthropists and political activists.

Wesley's last item of published correspondence, written a short time before his death, was, famously, his letter to William Wilberforce encouraging him in the fight against slavery. Among the reformers touched by the "evangelical awakening", of which Wesley was the spearhead, were: Shaftesbury of factory reform, Elizabeth Fry of prison reform, Florence Nightingale the nurse, Arthur Broome, the founder of the RSPCA, George Williams, the founder of the YMCA formed to nurture London apprentices, Benjamin Waugh of the NSPC extending protective welfare to children, and Thomas Barnardo, founder of orphanages (Bready, 1944: 286-7).

Much of this work clearly emerged from private charity, but the climate that it created brought about a fundamental change in public attitudes, making the idea of reform through government action acceptable in a community once seduced by the ideas of *laissez-faire* and the minimalist state.

Apart from the more radical socialist fringe, there was no attempt in these movements to destroy or to dismantle the capitalist system. Indeed, the mainstream church stood charged with active support of the capitalist system. Tawney was deeply exercised by the church's economic quietism and its failure to attack capitalism at its source: "A Christianity which resigns the economic world to the devil appears to me, in short, not Christianity at all" (Tawney, 1953: 165). There is a sense in which Tawney saw the members of the mainstream church as resting within affluent comfort and using worldly success as a sign of divine favour — a notion that Wesley would hear nothing of. Tawney drew from Weber the idea that Protestantism was especially linked with that pillar of capitalism — surplus accumulation. He is scathing about any such justification:

It is often asserted that Christianity is not concerned with the economic and social order. The reasons most commonly advanced for that statement appear to be two, one primarily economic, one primarily religious. In the first place, the economic order, it is said or implied, is a system of impersonal forces which

move by laws of their own, and to which ethical criteria are irrelevant. In the second place, Christianity, it is urged, is a thing of the spirit; to externalise it is to degrade it. It is to succumb to the facile idealism which suggests that evil, instead of being deeply rooted in human nature, is a superficial accident, which can be finally and completely exercised by a change in social organisation (Tawney, 1953: 172).

As long as the Church did not interfere with economic enterprise, its members could happily bask in their prosperity and quietly accumulate capital to help fuel the system. John Wesley is sometimes accused of promoting capitalism, a charge that rolls easily from the tongues of those who observe his royalist and authoritarian tendencies. There is no doubt that Wesley advocated assiduous gainful employment and pious frugality. The chief target of his critics is the famous "Sermon on the Use of Money", selective quotation of which can portray Wesley as a proponent of bourgeois values. To illustrate such a claim, Christopher Hill (1969: 276-7) refers only to the first part of the sermon: "Gain all you can ... by using in your business all the understanding which God has given you ... It is a shame for the Christian not to improve upon [his forefathers] in whatever he takes in hand" (Wesley, 1760: 120) It is true that Wesley could not abide the underemployment of human resources and required his followers to account for every minute of every day in service of God and their fellows. Yet he goes on to impose all kinds of restrictions on the manner in which one should pursue gain, calling in moral considerations which any modern capitalist would regard as unacceptable imposition on the free play of the market. It is also true that he abhorred poverty amongst his flock and their contemporaries, and laboured mightily to see them in gainful employment. Yet here again his approach placed him in painful paradox: once his followers had begun by strenuous effort and frugal living to raise themselves out of poverty, there was no obvious means of slowing their progress. For as mightily as Wesley abhorred poverty, so he also abhorred wealth, and despaired to see members of his flock become wealthy; there was no greater enemy of true religion than wealth; quite apart from its accumulation implying the deprivation of those still poor, it also meant that its holders ceased both to rely upon God and to obey the commands of God. "Many before Wesley had (also) noted the disturbing cycle, that godliness led to hard work which led to wealth which led to ungodliness" (Hill, 1969: 194).

Wesley's sermon on "The Use of Money" is constructed in a balanced trilogy, the second two parts of which Hill neglects to mention: earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can. In enjoining his followers to save, Wesley extolled the virtues of thrift, and castigated displays of luxury and conspicuous consumption: "despise delicacy and variety, and be content with what plain nature requires" (Wesley, 1760 : 121). Having gained by honest, diligent endeavour, and having saved by modest frugality, the Christian should then observe the third point of Wesley's trilogy: give all you can. For what you have earned and saved, says Wesley, does never actually belong to you:

In order to see the ground and reason of this, consider, when the possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being, and placed you in this world, he placed you here, not as a proprietor, but a steward: as such he entrusted you, for a season, with goods of various kinds; but the sole property of these still rests in him, nor can ever be alienated from him. As you yourself are not your own, but his, such is, likewise, all that you enjoy (Wesley, 1760: 124; cf. Maddox, 1996: 92-100).

It was a Christian imperative that the faithful should live simply. Yet Wesley's concern went much further than this. His approach offers

an exhortation with so radical an implication that the ordinary conventions of generosity and philanthropy are brought into question. It is as if Wesley regarded surplus accumulation as in itself sinful or as at the least an irresistible temptation to sin. The break here with the economic wisdom of the day (including that of the Quakers) is drastic and deliberate; he challenged his own people, and others, to a more stringent form of self-denial than most of them were prepared for (Outler, 1985 2: 265).

Wesley was incessant in his exhortations to his followers to strip themselves of all their worldly goods. It was a two-edged sword: having no excess was necessary for the spiritual wellbeing of the giver, but it was also necessary for the alleviation of the condition of the poor. At the end of a long and devout life it was Wesley's biggest frustration that so many Methodists had actually become rich. By his own instruction, he would have to shun their company. There is a note of despair in his utterance:

Who can convince a rich man that he has his heart set upon riches? For considerably above half a century I have spoken on this head, with all the plainness that was in my power. But with how little effect! I doubt whether I have, in all that time, convinced fifty misers of covetousness. When the lover of money was described ever so clearly, and painted in the strongest colours, who applied it to himself? (Wesley, 1790: 131).

The direst warning went out to the rich man: you are in peril of your soul. Scarcely any message received as constant a treatment as this.

The question remains: did Wesley and his movement contribute to the "spirit of capitalism" in the sense that Weber believed Calvin did? The biggest problem we face in confronting this question is Wesley's political quietism. He was not merely content to work within the established order, but positively sacralised it in affirming God as the origin of temporal power. By inference we would have to acknowledge that he was indeed accepting of the capitalist system. Yet he was radically opposed to at least two of its chief tenets, namely, the accumulation of surplus value, and the notion that an entire community is made better off by the entrepreneurial activity of the wealthy. Wesley denounced the existence of poverty as a social evil, to be confronted directly at its source. Far from extolling the activities of the rich, he

reserved for them a special contempt, mixed with some sympathy for the peril of their souls. All his genuine affections were for the poor, and there was no effort to be spared in improving their condition. This certainly implied direct charity demanded not just of the rich, but also of those with any meagre surplus of means. It also implied remedial measures through government action. It was a government responsibility to create employment; unemployment was the worst of social and economic evils and the chief cause of poverty. The price of food should be regulated in order to release some money for ordinary people to buy simple manufactures. This would automatically create industrial employment. Coercive authority should be applied to prohibit distilling, which would follow with lower wheat and barley prices. Legislation should set upper limits on the number of horses people might own. Regulation should limit the size of farms to those capable of producing an income of no more than one hundred pounds a year. Government initiative should promote the breeding of sheep and cattle. Luxurious spending should be repressed, taxes should be reduced by discharging the national debt, and the plethora of useless government pensions, often given for questionable if not corrupt government purposes, should be abolished (Wesley, 1773: 107-113). Professional economists might find some of Wesley's recommendations naive, but convinced capitalists would undoubtedly find his interventions repellent. In this sense he could in no wise be classed as sympathetic to capitalism. Neither could Wesley, as Tory and royalist, be called a socialist. Yet there is sufficient in his life's work to discern the stirrings of the "Christian socialism" subsequently espoused by so many who were inspired and challenged by him. In this light, the connection between Methodism and organised labour becomes more understandable, and a gulf opens between the Methodist branch of Protestantism and the nature of capitalism.

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