

"The Devil Begins to Roar": Opposition to Early Methodists in New England

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In the several decades after their arrival in the New England states in the late 1780s, Methodists were the objects of a wide variety of attacks, some of them mutually contradictory.¹ Their preachers were accused of being pickpockets, horse thieves, and sexual predators, while on the other hand some converts were mocked for their excessive moral seriousness. They were suspected alternatively of being agents of the English crown, spies for the French government, and Jeffersonian radicals. Further, to some it seemed that their episcopal form of government and ecclesiastical tribunals functioned as a sort of shadow government undermining the political institutions of the nation. They were attacked for their Arminian theology, in defense of which they vigorously condemned Calvinist doctrine. They were mocked as enthusiasts and fanatics whose preachers, pretending to an immediate divine calling, inflamed the passions of their listeners and whose gatherings degenerated into bedlams of disorder, confusion, and moral scandal. They were disturbers of churches, transgressing parochial boundaries, sowing disorder, and fracturing the covenant relationship between minister and flock, all of which recalled memories of the upheaval accompanying the awakenings of the 1740s. They were unlearned rustics not fit to instruct people in divinity, but they were also sly enough to worm their way into the hearts and minds of people by shrewdly hiding their true intentions and prejudicing their hearers against the standing ministers. In short, it

1. There had been limited and sporadic Methodist activity in New England prior to this time, and there were a handful of Methodists in New England prior to this date, but the start of the itinerant ministry of Jesse Lee (nicknamed the "Apostle" of New England Methodism) in Connecticut in June of 1789 marks the real beginning of Methodist activity in the region.

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is little exaggeration to say that they were “a sect which was everywhere spoken against.”²

Words led to actions as opposition occasionally took the form of violence or threats of violence. The itinerant preacher Billy Hibbard reported that he had stones thrown at him and dogs set loose upon him. In addition, he narrowly, and in his view providentially, escaped a mob lying in wait for him in a swamp through which he was about to ride.³ At Provincetown, Massachusetts, the town meeting denied the young Methodist society permission to build a house of worship. Undaunted, the Methodists proceeded to do so and collected a number of timbers in preparation for building. To prevent them from accomplishing their purpose, a “company of choice spirits” hauled away the timbers under cover of darkness and made a pile of the destroyed timbers, on top of which they placed effigies of the Methodists, tarred and feathered.⁴ Abel Stevens, the chronicler of New England Methodism, recounted a story told to him by the preacher Asa Kent concerning resistance to the introduction of Methodism into the area around Lancaster, New Hampshire. After preaching one evening, a couple of local preachers were kidnapped by a mob and taken to a local tavern, where they were held while the mob worked themselves into predictably high spirits. After thus fortifying their courage, the men took one of the Methodist preachers, dragged him on his back across the frozen Connecticut River, and deposited him on the Vermont side, pronouncing good riddance to the Methodists.⁵ Examples could be multiplied; the annals of early New England Methodism are filled with tales of incessant theological controversy, persecution, harassment, and mob violence.

Why did Methodists encounter such stiff opposition? What provoked the sort of suspicion and hostility they faced? The roots of the conflict lay in the fact that Methodists brought with them a conception of religion and of its relationship to society that was fundamentally at odds with the prevailing religious culture of New England. Methodists, exemplars of the quintessentially American style of religion characterized by voluntarism, democratic individualism, and an aggressive entrepreneurial sensibility, clashed sharply with a religious

2. Dan Young, *Autobiography of Dan Young, A New England Preacher of the Olden Time*, ed. W. P. Strickland (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860), 107–8.
3. Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1843), 175.
4. Minton Thrift, *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee with Extracts from His Journals* (New York: Arno, 1969), 223.
5. Abel Stevens, *Memorials of the Introduction of Methodism into the Eastern States* (Boston: Charles H. Pierce, 1848), 462–63.

culture rooted in a geographical parish structure, framed by the mutual obligations of the covenant relationship between minister and congregation, and supported by state establishments, which persisted in New England well into the nineteenth century.⁶ The logic behind establishment is telling: the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, for instance, mandated that the legislature should periodically authorize and require localities to make provision for public worship and for the support of “public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality” because “the happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government depend essentially upon piety, religion and morality,” which could only be provided by public worship and public religious instruction.⁷ This was no dead letter. While it was true that the Constitution also guaranteed freedom of conscience and provided that taxes paid for the support of public religious instruction could be applied to the minister of the sect or denomination whose teaching one attended, there were obstacles to doing so. One such obstacle was that, at least until 1811, it was necessary for a preacher to be ordained over a single, legally incorporated congregation in order to recover his hearers’ taxes, which meant that itinerant preachers such as the Methodists could be denied the ability to do so.⁸ Furthermore, in interpreting the Constitution’s provisions for religious establishment, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts maintained that it was not a violation of conscience to be required to pay taxes for the support of a public teacher of religion of another sect or denomination than one’s own. Because religious instruction tended to the public good and promoted morality, peace, and civil order, everyone could be required to pay for the support of a minister, even if they did not attend his services or derive any direct benefit from religious instruction. On the same grounds, the real estate of a corporation could be taxed to support a religious teacher, despite the fact that the

6. On the Methodist style, see Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 2001), 36–40.

7. The relevant article of the Massachusetts constitution is reprinted in William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty: The Baptists’ Struggle in New England, 1630–1833* (Hanover: University Press of New Hampshire, 1991), 202–3.

8. For example, in *Ebenezer Washburn vs. Fourth Parish of West Springfield* (1804), the court ruled that the Methodist itinerant Ebenezer Washburn could not recover the taxes paid by his hearers for the support of public worship because he served an entire circuit rather than a single congregation. The Methodist itinerant system did not fit in with the provisions for the support of public worship envisioned in the law. The report of the case is found in Ephraim Williams, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1866), 1:32–34. The requirement of incorporation and the restriction on the right of preachers serving multiple congregations was eliminated by statute in 1811.

members of the corporation lived in another parish and were members of another denomination and despite the fact that a corporation had no soul to benefit from religious instruction. The corporation did benefit, the court argued, from the protection of its property deriving from the decrease in crime brought about by public religious instruction. At least from the perspective of the commonwealth, religion was a matter of the public good and not merely of individual spiritual benefit; as such, it warranted the financial support of the entire community.⁹

Such religious establishments, and the principles underlying them, were under assault in the decades following the American Revolution. Commentators on American religion from de Tocqueville forward have noted that the fifty years after the Revolution saw the triumph of the “voluntary principle” as a defining characteristic of American religious life. American religion, predicated on religious freedom and characterized by democratic, individualistic, and competitive impulses, had taken on a new form and style by the middle third of the nineteenth century. Resistance to Methodism in New England reveals that this transition did not take place without a good deal of friction and supports the conclusion that “the religious history of the early republic is anything but evolutionary and consensual.”¹⁰ In the minds of many New Englanders, Methodism, along with the voluntary principle it represented, was a fundamental threat to social order and community cohesion, lacking the ability to promote the moral virtue in the populace necessary to secure the new republic. The irony, of course, is that evangelical religion, expressed in the revivals and reform efforts of the era of the Second Great Awakening, provided just the kind of religious and moral energy that opponents of Methodism feared would be sorely lacking if disestablishment and voluntarism destroyed the established religious culture.

Nathan Hatch has argued that debates surrounding the principles of voluntarism and disestablishment were only one aspect of a larger story that was taking place in religious history of the early republic. Such controversies “paled before [the] fundamental debate about

9. See the report on *Barnes vs. First Parish in Falmouth* (1810), in Dudley Atkins Tyng, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1842), 6:334–47, and the report on *Amesbury Nail Factory vs. Weed*, in Tyng, ed. *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1823), 17:53–55.

10. For this conclusion about the nature of religion in the early republic, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 21.

religious authority" roiling American Christianity between 1790 and 1820. This fundamental debate was itself part of a larger crisis of authority gripping the nation in the age of democratic revolutions and provided a major source of religious conflict.¹¹ Hatch has demonstrated that populist religious leaders echoed cries for popular sovereignty in the political realm and employed the art of persuasion to establish their own claims to leadership based upon appeals to the common man, thereby undermining the authority of traditional religious leaders. The question of who had the right to exercise religious leadership was hotly contested as democratic religious leaders possessing neither social status nor education pressed their claims in the religious marketplace of the early republic. The conflict between the Methodist exemplars of democratization and the established clergy of New England certainly fits this reading of the religious history of the period. Opposition to Methodism in New England provides us with a clear example of the struggle over religious authority, as established ministers resisted the Methodist itinerants' claims to religious leadership, deriding them as unlearned and unfit to be ministers. Methodists responded that a college education and extensive theological training were no substitute for the call of the Spirit and the demonstrated ability to reach the hearts of a congregation and move them to repentance and faith.

The Methodist presence represented, therefore, a fundamental challenge to New England's churches and ministers. At one level the settled clergy's opposition to Methodism was a matter of religious competition; it is doubtless the case that orthodox ministers were eager to defend their prestige and status against a rival religious movement. Like eighteenth-century English parish clergyman, New England's established ministers were the ones who were most directly challenged by the emergence of the Methodists, who threatened division and set up "pulpit against pulpit, pastor against pastor."¹² The conflicts between Methodists and the established order of New England went beyond simple competition, however. More was at stake than questions of clerical loss of status and income or of challenges to established authority, for questions surrounding the nature of religious authority and who could properly exercise it were bound up with larger questions concerning the relationship between religion and the wider society. Religion, which was supposed to promote

11. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

12. For the resentment against Methodists on the part of eighteenth-century English parish clergymen, see John Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob in the Eighteenth Century," *Studies in Church History* 8 (1972): 219.

order, community stability, and the common good, threatened to become a social solvent if Methodism succeeded in drawing significant numbers away from the existing churches. Thus, opposition to Methodism reveals the presence of deep-seated fears of social disorder and community fragmentation. Such concerns were given greater force by the generalized fears of civil disorder present in New England in the decades after the Revolution as well as by the memories of the church schisms and upheaval that had accompanied the awakenings of the 1740s. As we will see, the centrifugal forces operating in the early republic rendered the introduction of increased religious competition and fragmentation into the religious realm particularly unwelcome. Thus, the Methodist incursion threatened a repeat of the disorders associated with the Great Awakening at just the time when the need for social order and social stability seemed to be more urgent than ever.

The itinerant preacher Jesse Lee reported in his journal that during his initial foray into New England in 1789 he encountered one man in Connecticut who expressed the fear that the Methodists “might be like the New Lights.” When asked what his objection to the New Lights was, the man replied that “they went on like mad-men: there was one Davenport that would preach and hallow, and beat the pulpit with both his and hands, and cry out ‘come away, come away to the Lord Jesus Christ, why don’t you come to the Lord!’ till he would foam at the mouth, and sometimes continued it, till the congregation would be praying in companies about the house.” Lee did little to allay the man’s fears by expressing the wish that a similar work would occur among the people again.¹³

The reference to James Davenport and the New Light controversy highlights an important component of the resistance that greeted Methodist preachers upon their arrival in New England. Memories of the divided churches and the extravagancies that accompanied the Great Awakening of the 1740s haunted the region. Davenport was seen as the embodiment of those excesses. His brief and turbulent itinerant ministry was characterized by an extravagant preaching style, practiced outdoors if necessary, which resulted in powerful emotional responses on the part of his hearers. He held lengthy meetings lasting late into the night, encouraged lay preaching and exhortation, and repeatedly denounced established ministers as unconverted, while claiming a direct divine calling for himself.¹⁴ Dav-

13. *Memoir of Lee*, 113–14.

14. C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740–1800* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 20–25.

enport was the most extreme and memorable of the enthusiastic preachers who appeared during the Awakening, but he was not the only one, and the ill effects of the religious ferment of the period went beyond the bizarre behavior of a few individuals. Most notable were the conflicts and divisions that occurred in churches throughout the region. According to C. C. Goen, "the Great Awakening had thrust a two-edged sword into New England; and in the 'separatist times' that followed," legions left their churches to form pure ones. In fact, nearly one hundred separate churches were formed in New England during the Great Awakening era, and the separatist agitation extended to many other parishes where no separate church was formed.¹⁵

The Methodist itinerants, preaching wherever and whenever they could get a hearing and employing a style that must have seemed all too similar to that of Davenport, no doubt roused fears that the Methodists would bring about a repeat of the same upheaval and division. The memories of those chaotic times gave urgency to the complaints that Lee repeatedly encountered on his travels to the effect that his preaching would "break up" the societies or that his ministry would draw away a part of the church in the parish where he was then preaching.¹⁶ Along similar lines, he was criticized as a meddler in other men's affairs for preaching in an existing minister's parish.¹⁷ Unsanctioned itinerating and unwelcome preaching did not fit within the religious culture of the region.

Such activities led to unwelcome consequences from the beginning of Methodist activity in New England. A pamphlet published in Boston in 1795 complained that some "followers of the Methodist preachers will on the Sabbath day, stay at home from meeting, and sleep a considerable part of the day," rather than going to hear the established minister, "and will leave their necessary business at any time in the week, to follow those traveling strangers from town to town."¹⁸ The Methodist preacher Thomas Ware encountered a Congregational deacon in western Massachusetts in the 1790s who complained that the Methodists caused people to sin by going to hear them so often when they should have been at work, while also "leaving the places where they ought to worship to run after" the

15. *Ibid.*, 68.

16. *Memoir of Lee*, 117–19, 128–29, 144.

17. *Ibid.*, 136.

18. Silas Winch, *The Age of Superstition, containing Remarks on Methodist Preachers* (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1795), 17.

Methodists on the Sabbath.¹⁹ The itinerant preacher Dan Young recalled complaints that “the people were spending so much time in following after these [Methodist] runagates that they would raise nothing, and would have to be maintained as paupers.”²⁰ Neglecting the ministers it was their duty to hear and neglecting the work it was their duty to perform, the followers of the Methodists went outside the settled boundaries and norms of public worship and instruction.

Nathan Williams’s fast-day sermon of 1793, later published at the behest of the Congregational association of Tolland, Connecticut, further illustrates these issues. Williams’s sermon, published in order “to suppress the confusions and disorders of late years occasioned in some parts of this country, by some strangers and transient persons who have assumed the appellation or stile of *Methodists*,” extolled the importance of harmony and order in the churches.²¹ In doing so, it articulated a clear statement of the New England vision of proper church order: each church should have at least one pastor settled in it by a regular ordination, and the covenant relationship between pastor and congregation imposed a solemn duty on both parties. The minister was responsible to feed the flock over which he had been given charge, while there was “an equal obligation upon the people of his charge, to attend to him as their spiritual guide.”²² Accordingly, he condemned those “strangers” who had recently arrived in the region, pretending to an “immediate” call from the Holy Spirit to be preachers of the gospel and who broke into the bounds laid out for established ministers, destroying their work by sowing divisions in the churches and setting their altar up against the altar of God.²³

To Williams these strange preachers who had lately arrived in the region to stir up the people seemed all too familiar. There had always been false teachers who, like the Methodists of his day, “pretended to remarkable intercourse with heaven.” Indeed, he pointed out, “multitudes have come forth as preachers on this ground, within a number of years past, in these New-England churches.”²⁴ It is not difficult to

19. Thomas Ware, *Thomas Ware, a Spectator at the Christmas Conference: A Miscellany on Thomas Ware and the Methodist Christmas Conference*, ed. William R. Phinney, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Robert B. Steelman (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1984), 202.

20. Young, *Autobiography*, 103.

21. Nathan Williams, *Order and harmony in the churches of Christ, agreeable to God’s will: Illustrated in a sermon, delivered in Tolland, on the public fast, April 17th, 1793* (Hartford, Conn.: Hudson and Goodwin, 1793), 28 (emphasis in original). This sentiment was actually expressed in a letter, written to Williams by one D. Huntington, that Williams appended to the sermon when it was published.

22. *Ibid.*, 4–9; the quotation is on page 9.

23. *Ibid.*, 9–13.

24. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

perceive in Williams's comment fears of a repeat of the disorders and divisions in the churches that had accompanied the spiritual ferment that roiled New England in the 1740s.

Even pro-revival Congregational ministers feared a repeat of the disorder and schism of the earlier period. As late as 1830, an orthodox publication, reminding its readers of the delusions that had plagued revivals in New England a century before, warned that even the most sober revivals could lead to false conversions. So much more likely, then, were Methodist revivals, accompanied as they were by "every means of natural excitement which art can devise, or passion furnish," to result in transient and false experiences of religion.²⁵ Decades earlier, the Congregationalist itinerant evangelist Asahel Nettleton urged silence and decorum upon the congregations to whom he preached, even if they were powerfully affected by his preaching. In addition, he steadfastly refused to preach in another minister's parish without being invited and would never openly criticize a settled minister. Nettleton and the orthodox ministers with whom he cooperated greatly feared a repeat of the excesses of men like Davenport, which had, in their view, destroyed the revivals in the days of Whitefield and Edwards.²⁶ Accounts of New England revivals from around the turn of the century stress that ministers who led revivals studiously avoided such excesses and that the revivals were carried on with order, solemnity, and regularity. Nothing was done to arouse the passions or to produce excess religious excitement.²⁷ Similarly, a recent study of the revivals led by New Divinity preachers in Connecticut during the Second Great Awakening has pointed out that revivalist ministers manifested "a restraint learned from the hard lessons of the past." In view of those lessons, "no ranting itinerants worked up the people into a frenzy; no New Divinity pastor attacked lukewarm ministers or called for separation from compromising churches."²⁸ In contrast, Methodist preachers, as we will see below, openly attacked ministers and urged their followers to separate from existing churches. Whether or not their itinerants ranted and worked people into a frenzy is a subjective judgment, but the heartfelt nature

25. "Review of the Doctrine and Discipline," 484.

26. David Kling, *A Field of Divine Wonders: The New Divinity and Village Revivals in Northwestern Connecticut, 1792–1822* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 139–41. For Nettleton's career and preaching style, see Bennett Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.* (Hartford, Conn.: Robbins and Smith, 1845). For his relations with settled ministers and fears of the discord caused by itinerants, see especially 242.

27. See Bennet Tyler, *New England Revivals, as they existed at the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries* (Wheaton, Ill.: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980).

28. Kling, *Field of Divine Wonders*, 110–11.

of Methodist preaching and the dramatic emotional responses evoked by such preaching impressed both contemporary observers and later historians.

Methodist theology was as odious to many in New England as were the Methodists' emotional style and disruptive behavior, and doctrinal differences between their Arminianism and the established Calvinism of New England (which was under attack from a variety of quarters) provided a major source of conflict. In particular, the Methodist doctrines of "good works, perfection, and falling from grace" provoked some of the strongest opposition.²⁹ Opponents claimed that the Methodist scheme of salvation set aside God's grace because it made salvation depend on man's choice, thereby making the individual indebted to himself, and not to God.³⁰ In Calvinist minds, the stress on human initiative amounted to justification by works, which was a repeated charge leveled against Methodist theology. Likewise, the Methodist doctrine of falling from grace, because it made salvation depend on continued individual faithfulness, drew fire because it pointed in the same direction.³¹ The doctrine of Christian perfection, similarly, tended to minimize the power of sin and stressed human potential for holiness. In short, whatever its theological merits, Methodist doctrine, by placing greater emphasis on human initiative and human ability, had the potential to mobilize considerable energy in the service of a more democratic, individualized form of piety. Thus, established ministers in New England were fighting against the twin enemies of democratic individualism and Arminian theology, both of which were embodied in the Methodist challenge.³²

The activities of Methodist itinerant preachers, then, were seen as more than simply misguided zeal or excessive emotionalism. They were dangerous to the souls of individuals because they inculcated false hopes and false ideas. They were likewise harmful to the cause of religion generally, threatening to destroy revivals of religion as surely as the excesses of the Great Awakening had. Beyond religious concerns, some in New England saw the emergence of a new and

29. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 99–100.

30. "A Review of the Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church," *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, 2:2 (1830): 468–90.

31. See Jonathan Ward, *A brief statement and examination of the sentiments of the Weslean [sic] Methodists, or the followers of the Rev. John Wesley* (Hallowell, District of Maine: Peter Edes, 1799); John Gould, *A letter to the Rev. Eber Cowles, a Methodist minister containing an examination and refutation of his sermon upon Galatians V. 4: Ye are fallen from grace: also, a postscript pointing out some of the errors of modern Methodism* (Concord, N.H.: George Hough, 1813).

32. For the link between the assault on Calvinism and the assault on clerical authority, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 170–79.

enthusiastic religious movement as a threat to the maintenance of the social order and the well-being of the community. Like many in eighteenth-century England, for whom the activities of early Methodists stirred up fears of a repeat of the religious violence and chaos of the English Civil War, memories of the results of the last outburst of religious enthusiasm and zeal made New Englanders deeply nervous about the arrival of the Methodist movement on their soil.³³

The Methodist response to establishment criticisms did nothing to assuage the fears of the established clergy, as they attacked New England churches and their ministers with a level of hostility equal to that which the established clergy directed at them. Indeed, Methodists in New England, like the early English Methodists, were willing to ascribe clerical resistance to a diabolical source.³⁴ Jesse Lee, commenting on the fact that some of his early hearers in Connecticut "had been buffeted by the ministers from the pulpit," hoped that God would "soon revive his work in this place, for the devil begins to roar."³⁵ Other preachers echoed his sentiments. Freeborn Garrettson lamented in 1790 that most of the people of Hartford "seem[ed] to be fast asleep in the arms of the wicked one."³⁶ The Methodist elder George Roberts, in his 1794 response to Nathan Williams's sermon, publicly condemned the standing clergy of Connecticut as "no better than a society of wicked, designing men, that most effectually build up and promote the kingdom of satan, and are enemies of the true interest of religion."³⁷

Roberts went on to attack the religious culture of New England in terms that were typical of early New England Methodists. Roberts defended the actions of Methodist preachers by affirming that the standing churches were not true churches of Christ, but by and large "were made up of members unawakened and unconverted."³⁸ He went on to argue that the concept of a geographical parish with a minister settled for life was contrary to Scripture. Furthermore, he charged that the standing ministers, though college educated and regularly ordained unlike the Methodists, were mostly simpletons

33. For an account of the fear engendered by Methodist enthusiasm in eighteenth-century England, see Michael Snape, "Anti-Methodism in Eighteenth-Century England: The Pendle Forest Riots of 1748," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 49:2 (April, 1998): 258.

34. See Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob," 215.

35. *Memoir of Lee*, 120.

36. Robert Drew Simpson, ed., *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson* (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1984), 269.

37. George Roberts, *Strictures on a sermon delivered by Mr. Nathan Williams, A.M. in Tolland, on the public fast, April, 17, 1793: with some observations on Dr. Huntington's letter, annexed to said sermon: In a letter* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Henry Tuckniss, 1794), v.

38. *Ibid.*

who could only read prepared sermons in the pulpit. Their preaching was so stultifying and useless that "statues set up in the pulpits would be instrumental of converting as many souls as the most of them are, and would not be as expensive if they were to be overlaid with gold, as these ministers who devour the fat of the land."³⁹

In addition, Roberts turned the charge that the Methodists were false teachers back on the standing clergy, claiming that they had the characteristics of false teachers: they were "dumb dogs" who did not warn their listeners of the dangers of sin and "greedy dogs" who preached only human wisdom out of love for money and would leave the ministry if they could get a better salary elsewhere.⁴⁰ The charge that the established clergy were in the main unconverted men, devoid of true religion, echoed the charges made against the established ministers in the years during and after awakenings of the 1740s. Indeed, Roberts explicitly claimed the mantle of Whitefield for the Methodists; like them, he too had "fought with priests and devils in Connecticut."⁴¹ In addition, Roberts's charge that the ministers were college-educated "dumb dogs" echoes the language of Gilbert Tennet's notorious sermon, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, which was an attack on unconverted ministers as "Letter-learned" and "dead dogs, that can't bark." Further, like the earlier preacher, Roberts defended individuals who left their stated minister to hear one from whom they felt they could derive greater benefit.⁴² It seemed that the "separatist times" were in danger of reappearing.

To make matters worse, the threat of disorder and confusion resulting from the arrival of the Methodists came at a time when New England ministers of varying theological persuasions saw disorder and confusion threatening from many directions. Joseph Conforti and David Kling have both argued that unsettling social trends occurring in the years after the Revolution strongly affected New Divinity clergy in their efforts toward reform and revival. According to Conforti, Samuel Hopkins, architect of the New Divinity, employed the doctrine of disinterested benevolence to support his vision of a social order built on the restoration of communal and corporate ideals, in contrast to growing trends toward individualistic and egoistic patterns of behavior that Hopkins was witnessing in late-eighteenth-

39. *Ibid.*, 18.

40. *Ibid.*, 20–22.

41. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

42. *Ibid.*, 36. On Tennet, see Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, 49–51.

century New England.⁴³ Hopkins lamented the fact that post-Revolutionary America “was afflicted with ‘diversions and contentions’ that appeared ‘to be hastening to a universal confusion and anarchy’” and saw reform based on disinterested benevolence as the answer.⁴⁴ Thus, Hopkins and other New Divinity ministers welcomed the Second Great Awakening’s revitalization of “New England’s corporate social ethic,” a revitalization that had been previously spurred on by “the republican ideology of the Revolution, with . . . its emphasis on public virtue and the public good, and its criticism of extravagance, luxury, and self-interest.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Kling notes the New Divinity clergy’s “fear of a disordered, atomistic, selfish, and above all, infidel society.” In their view, the contrasting “vision of a cohesive, stable, and religious society” could only be achieved through the type of individual personal transformations that could only take place through a widespread religious revival.⁴⁶ Given these concerns, it is clear that New Divinity clergy would not have welcomed the coming of the Methodists, even if they did contribute to an increased state of religious feeling in the region. The disruptive effects of the Methodist preachers, who attacked standing ministers, urged parishioners to separate from their churches, and promoted what their opponents regarded as false conversions, actually threatened to promote the type of disordered, atomistic, and infidel society that New Divinity ministers hoped could be turned back by revival.

New Divinity ministers were not alone, for the 1790s were a time of “near paranoid cries for order and stability arising from the Federalist clergy” in New England. These cries, seemingly contradicting the clergy’s vociferous defense of liberty against British authoritarianism before and during the American Revolution, were the result of their “assumption that a power vacuum was as sure a road to tyranny as the increase of arbitrary authority.” As a result, “New England ministers began to single out the leveler and the demagogue rather than the king and the tyrant as the greatest threat to the American republic.” Disturbing news of the aftereffects of the French Revolution heightened those fears, with the effect that ministers felt ever more strongly the need to promote the virtue necessary to sustain the infant republic. They worried that America, which had so recently escaped the tyranny of British authority, was in danger of falling into the type

43. See Joseph Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Washington, D.C.: Christian College Consortium, 1981), chap. 7, especially 121–23.

44. *Ibid.*, 138.

45. *Ibid.*, 184–85.

46. Kling, *Field of Divine Wonders*, 52–54.

of “left-wing tyranny” plaguing the French republic.⁴⁷ If virtue, order, and stability were the only thing that could secure the republic from that sort of tyranny, the Methodists, by attacking the public teachers of “piety, religion, and morality” and dividing the churches whose function was in part to promote civil order and the common good, presented a significant threat to the nation. Thus, the search for order and stability in the defense of liberty in the wake of the American and French Revolutions combined with memories of the divisions and dislocations of the 1740s to cast Methodists in a very suspicious light when they arrived in New England.

Fears of encroaching tyranny of one kind or another render comprehensible two of the more bizarre charges leveled against Methodists in their early years in New England. Billy Hibbard reported that a rumor circulated during the 1780s, when fears of British tyranny remained strong, that the Methodists had been sent by the king of England to make the new states British colonies again, and that the Methodist preachers received a premium from the British government for each convert.⁴⁸ This rumor gained some credibility, no doubt, from John Wesley’s public opposition to the American Revolution and the taint of Loyalism that adhered to the Methodists in the early years of the new nation.⁴⁹ When tyranny threatened from a different quarter in the late 1790s, “it was seriously said that the preachers were emissaries of the French government; that France designed to subjugate this country whenever the Methodists should become sufficiently numerous.”⁵⁰ It seems that the Methodists had gotten caught up in the Bavarian Illuminati scare, in which French agents were alleged to be spreading throughout the region, fomenting revolution.⁵¹ As outsiders and strangers, it seems, the Methodists could be associated with whatever seemed to threaten freedom and the social stability necessary to maintain it.

Fears of Methodists as agents of “left wing tyranny” gained credibility in the minds of some New Englanders from the fact that most New England Methodists around the turn of the century aligned politically with the Republicans, prompting the justified concern that

47. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 13–15.

48. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 65.

49. See Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 56–58, for patriot suspicions of Methodist loyalties during the war years.

50. Young, *Autobiography*, 101.

51. On the Illuminati scare and fears of French influence in the country, see Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 130–33.

the Methodists “were going to join Jefferson to overturn [New England’s] political institutions.”⁵² It was certainly true that the Methodists did support an assault on at least one of New England’s key institutions. They bitterly attacked the religious establishments that they encountered in the region, and they did so in the name of the cherished cause of religious liberty.⁵³ That the New England clergy had so vigorously supported civil and religious liberty in the years leading up to the American Revolution opened them up to attacks from the Methodists, who turned the rhetoric of religious liberty and ecclesiastical tyranny on the established clergy and their supporters.⁵⁴ The journals of Methodist preachers contain repeated complaints about the burden of ecclesiastical taxation and restrictions on freedom of conscience. A favorite rhetorical strategy of the Methodists was to condemn the established minister for sending out the assessors to take the last coin from a poor family or a starving widow to pay the handsome salary of a man whom they had no interest in hearing.⁵⁵ In addition, George Roberts urged his readers to remember that they had fought for their liberty and paid for it in blood, so that they should not let “any set of men trample upon you, and take away that right which [they had] bought so dear.”⁵⁶ The editor of Dan Young’s autobiography lauded him as one who “seemed to have been raised up for the special purpose of resisting ecclesiastical tyranny, and . . . obtaining religious liberty.”⁵⁷

The debate over disestablishment in New Hampshire, in which Dan Young figured prominently, illustrates some of the issues, in addition to the principle of religious liberty, at stake in disestablishment and in the wider conflict between Methodists and the established churches. When Young introduced an ultimately successful bill in the New Hampshire Senate to disestablish the church in that state in 1817, opponents of the measure argued that it would “uproot and overturn the old established religious institutions of the country . . . and substitute for them some wild, fantastical ex-

52. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 329; Hatch, “Puzzle of American Methodism,” 39; Young, *Autobiography*, 102.

53. This is not to say that the Methodists were the major factor in disestablishment. However, they did add their voices to the cries of other dissenting sects and attacked religious establishments with considerable vigor.

54. For clergy support of civil and religious liberty, see, in addition to Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 7.

55. See, for example, Young, *Autobiography*, 285–86; Roberts, *Strictures*, iv, 11.

56. Roberts, *Strictures*, viii, 11.

57. Young, *Autobiography*, 4.

periment, which may lead the country into confusion and ruin." In response, Young argued that true religion had always prospered best when it was untrammelled by human law. Another proponent of the bill, responding to fears of the "bad condition of society" if the standing clergy lost their income and influence, countered that the current system was doing little to improve the condition of society. The established clergy were living lives of luxury, visiting only the rich and fashionable, and neglecting the care of the poor and the reformation of sinners. If one wanted to see improvement in the moral condition of society, one had to look "to the poor, the persecuted, the indefatigable Methodist preachers," who roamed the streets, visited prisons, and reformed sinners. In short, it was upon the efforts of those like the Methodists, not the established clergy, that hopes "for a healthy, moral, and religious influence in society" should be based.⁵⁸

In many ways, then, the conflict between Methodism and the religious culture of New England was part of a larger debate concerning the conditions under which religion could best thrive and promote morality, virtue, and order in the young nation. Was religious voluntarism a wild system leading to ruin or the best hope for the reformation of society? Were a state establishment, a parish structure, and a settled ministry necessary for the maintenance of order, morality, and the common good, or was such a system actually detrimental to the cause of religion and morality? History, of course, was on the side of voluntary religious organization, as religious voluntarism proved to be singularly effective in mobilizing religious energy and reforming zeal in the early decades of the nineteenth century. New Englanders, for their part, ultimately came to embrace voluntarism and were wholehearted participants in the evangelical revival and reform movements of the nineteenth century. Lyman Beecher famously embraced disestablishment as "*the best thing ever to happen to the State of Connecticut,*" and noted that the ministers' influence had actually increased through "voluntary efforts, societies, missions, and revivals."⁵⁹

Given the triumph of evangelical voluntarism and the Methodists' central role in revival and reforming efforts, it is perhaps surprising that fears of Methodists as bearers of disorder, crime, and scandal persisted into the 1820s and 1830s, when principles of religious vol-

58. *Ibid.*, 282–90.

59. Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, vol. 1, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 1:252–53 (emphasis in original).

untarism had taken root across New England.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Methodism still provoked derision and suspicion more than thirty years after its arrival in New England, despite the fact that the speed of Methodist growth meant that their churches were fast becoming nearly as numerous as Congregational churches.⁶¹ Some important persistent tensions are illustrated in a notice that appeared in the January 4, 1822, edition of the Boston weekly *New-England Galaxy*:

A premium of one copy of 'Tears of Contrition' and one copy of popular ditties, sung at night meetings at the Methodist Chapel in Broomfield's Lane, will be given for a correct list of the young ladies, who, not being able to find a gallant at so early an hour, were locked up in said chapel on Tuesday last from two o'clock in the morning until daylight. If any gentlemen were left to keep guard, the initials of *their* names will be sufficient.⁶²

This advertisement, which appeared in a publication that would prove itself to be quite hostile to Methodists in general and to the itinerant preacher John Maffitt in particular, illustrates some key elements of hostility to Methodism. The mocking of songs used in Methodist worship, the reference to the late hour at which their gatherings concluded, and the implication that young women were left in a vulnerable position and possibly taken advantage of, all point to important aspects of the criticisms aimed at Methodism in New England. The Methodist style of worship, Methodist gatherings, and the suspect relations between men and women that outsiders observed in the movement all proved to be sources of hostility. Methodist religion, in the view of antagonistic observers, crossed the established bounds of propriety in its worship, preaching, and gender relations.

We have already noted the ways in which the zeal and enthusiasm of Methodist itinerants sparked hostility. Opponents additionally condemned Methodist preaching, not just for its enthusiasm, but also for the theatricality of its appeal to the emotions and imagination of the congregation. Moreover, Methodist meetings were seen as disorderly,

60. Connecticut had embraced disestablishment in the constitution of 1818, and New Hampshire followed the next year. The establishment persisted in Massachusetts until 1833, of course, but had been considerably undermined by the 1820s, largely due to the conflict between the two parties in Massachusetts Congregationalism. See Peter S. Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780–1833* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

61. Richard D. Shiels, "The Methodist Invasion of Congregational New England," in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, ed. Hatch and Wigger, 257–58.

62. *New-England Galaxy* (Boston, Mass.), 4 January 1822 (emphasis in original). *Tears of Contrition* was the title of the Methodist itinerant John N. Maffitt's autobiography, which the *Galaxy* had ridiculed over the previous weeks.

chaotic, dangerous, and prone to acts of indecency. Insinuations of moral scandal are ironic given the fact that early New England Methodists were often condemned for their moral earnestness; they eschewed swearing, gambling, card playing, and dancing, and they pressed others to do likewise.⁶³ Nevertheless, outsiders regarded the Methodist communal experience as a tumultuous scene in which the passions and the imagination of the congregation were worked up to a fever pitch. In such circumstances, all sorts of ill effects could come about, from bodily harm to petty theft to illicit sexual liaisons. The editor of the *Galaxy* reported that he had been unable to hear John Maffitt preach in Boston “by reason of the great multitudes, which throng the gates of the sanctuary.” He added that he would not attempt to see the famed preacher again, “having a desire to preserve our bones unbroken, and moreover, death by suffocation being one of our strongest natural antipathies.”⁶⁴ A correspondent to the same paper reported that he had attended Maffitt’s preaching at the chapel in Broomfield’s Lane in Boston and “came off somewhat (*en*)-lightened,” having been so distracted by the preacher’s eloquence that a pocket book containing a small sum of money was taken from him without his notice.⁶⁵ It was further reported that an altercation had taken place at the same location at the close of a late-night meeting, which resulted in a criminal complaint being filed before the magistrate of Suffolk County. It was alleged before the court that a certain individual, who had attended the meeting and was waiting for some friends on the steps, was forcibly ejected by the sexton of the church, at considerable risk to himself and the crowd of people that was still gathered around the chapel.⁶⁶ Taken together, these scenes demonstrate the perception that Methodist gatherings were tumultuous, rowdy, dangerous, late-night affairs, lacking any semblance of order and true religious devotion. They were chaotic environments resembling a tavern, a theater, or “any scene of carnal mirth” more than a religious gathering.⁶⁷ Methodist camp meetings, according to one observer, were worse than the theater in the promotion of vice be-

63. For example, see *Memoir of Lee*, 119; Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 77–78, 104–5, 211; Young, *Autobiography*, 30–31; see also John Walsh, “Methodism and the Mob,” 222–23, for opposition to the “revolution in leisure activities” involved in eighteenth-century English Methodist efforts toward holiness.

64. *New-England Galaxy*, 5 October 1821.

65. *Ibid.*, 24 May 1822.

66. *Ibid.*, 18 January 1822.

67. Andrew Pudney, *The Spirit of Methodism: A Poem Supposed to Be Sung at a Love Feast, to the Tune of Rochdale* (New York: [s.n.], 1831), 68–69.

cause they masqueraded under the guise of religion, whereas at least one knew to be on guard when going to the theater.⁶⁸

If Methodist meetings posed a threat to life, limb, and property, they were even more dangerous to the souls of those who attended them, as they were likely to result in delusions and false religious experiences. Opponents charged that Methodist preaching was targeted to the imagination of the hearers, and designed to stir up excitement and passion in the minds of the weak. John Maffitt's preaching was described as containing "specimens of every thing that is extravagant, enthusiastic, and rhapsodical in thought or expression," accompanied "in delivery with extravagant gesticulation."⁶⁹ Some regarded Maffitt as more fit for the stage than the pulpit, echoing the charge made against the Methodists that their gatherings were more like a theater than religion.⁷⁰ The tumult and noise of a Methodist assembly and the "strong appeals to the imagination" characteristic of Methodist preaching were likely to lead to "a mere transient excitement of the natural feelings," which was nothing more than false religion. Such falsities, it was feared, would lead the individual to abandon true religion and become hardened to the gospel.⁷¹ According to another critic, Methodism was "a religion of feelings and frames," which was sustained in the individual by "frequent attendance on those exciting meetings where highly wrought feeling and sometimes hysterical affection is often mistaken for devotion."⁷² In the view of many of their opponents, Methodist preachers used tricks of the actor to excite the emotions of their hearers, leading to excesses of false religious zeal and false experiences of religion.

The Methodist camp meeting was singled out for particular attack as the primary example of the ills of Methodist gatherings. If weekly or nightly Methodist meetings were dangerous, camp meetings were infinitely more so; the camp meeting, indeed, embodied all of the ills of the Methodist movement as a whole. It was in "the high pressure of the camp meetings" that religious excitement could be most profoundly stirred up.⁷³ According to one hostile author, it was not surprising that "the great efforts made at camp meetings to work on the feelings of persons, the long continued noise, confusion, singing, shouting, groaning, exhorting, and praying, intermingled with awful

68. Catharine Williams, *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative*, ed. Patricia Caldwell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 144.

69. *New-England Galaxy*, 5 October 1821.

70. *Ibid.*, 17 May 1822; Pudney, *Spirit of Methodism*, 69, 77.

71. "Review of the Doctrine and Discipline," 496, 501.

72. Williams, *Fall River*, 75.

73. Pudney, *Spirit of Methodism*, 68–69.

expressions, and boisterous raptures of joy" should succeed in overcoming many so that they fell down under the influence of powerful, yet natural, emotion. Such agitations were produced not by the Holy Spirit, as the Methodists claimed, but by "external excitements." Those who were afflicted by such delusions seldom persevered, usually losing their zeal and becoming more hardened to religion than they had been before.⁷⁴

In addition to being the chief means of inculcating religious delusions, camp meetings were portrayed as scenes of chaos and vice that offended the sensibilities, and indeed the senses, of outside observers. Catharine Williams's narrative of her experiences visiting a camp meeting in the 1820s provides the reader with illuminating insights into the way a camp meeting could be perceived by outsiders to Methodism. Initially impressed with the stillness and beauty of the place where the gathering was to be held, which she regarded as a proper environment for religious inspiration, she gradually became disgusted with the entire affair. In her telling, the meeting degenerated into a riot of sights, sounds, and smells that assaulted the senses and produced a scene of profound disorder and vice. The road to the camp became crowded with drunkards, gamblers, liquor sellers, and thieves. The interior of the camp became increasingly disorderly, with preachers—male and female, black and white—ranting loudly and incoherently from the stand and groans and shouts arising from the audience or from prayer meetings held in individual tents. Williams professed to be shocked to hear God addressed, even commanded, in familiar and impious terms. People wandered to and fro during preaching and prayer, scarcely paying attention to what was being said, while those who had been struck by the Spirit staggered around or fell down kicking and screaming. By the end of the meeting, even the smell of the camp had become intolerable. She concluded, naturally, that this could not be true religion and that no good was done at these gatherings. Its effects were uniformly negative, both on the neighborhood where it took place and upon the spiritual and physical health of those who attended.⁷⁵

One of the most intriguing aspects of Williams's portrayal is the sense of the danger that threatened young women present at a camp meeting. She expressed no doubt that the "moral tendency" of such gatherings was entirely negative and that "the temptations and facilities of a Camp Meeting" were powerful enough to overcome a young woman's resolutions to live a chaste and virtuous life.⁷⁶ No one could

74. *Ibid.*, 85–86.

75. See Williams, *Fall River*, 147–67.

76. *Ibid.*, 144.

argue “that this free intermingling of society is not dangerous, this tumbling and falling about not indecent.” Human beings are flesh and blood, after all, so to expect them to resist such temptations was ridiculous.⁷⁷ Amidst all the other scenes of vice and chaos, Williams highlighted the danger to unprotected women in such an environment. She reported that she and her female companions were afraid to close their eyes during prayer, lest they be “grossly insulted” by men who took the opportunity to press their bodies close against unsuspecting women.⁷⁸ She later reported “a great deal of joggling, pinching, and looking under bonnets, which was extremely annoying,” and that she encountered a young woman whose arm had been pinched black and blue by some unknown wretch.⁷⁹ There was, in addition, a more sinister incident in which she saw a young woman, seemingly out of her senses, being carried into a tent by a “worthless” young man. When the author urged someone to “rescue” the girl, two other young men burst out of the tent to prevent any interference and help the young man bring her in.⁸⁰ The reader is left to imagine what might have gone on behind the closed doors of the tent. Overall, Williams reported that she and her companions did not feel safe without male protectors, and indeed that no woman would be safe there without someone to watch over her.

Williams’s portrayal of the danger to women’s virtue at camp meetings points to important themes that recurred in accusations against Methodists: sexual impropriety and related issues surrounding the movement’s appeal to women. Methodism in New England, as was often the case where it took root, was numerically dominated by women, a fact which no doubt contributed to hostility to the movement and provided grist for accusations related to illicit sexuality. Early Methodist preachers were condemned in Pauline language as “wolves” that “creep into houses and lead away captive silly women, led away with divers lusts.”⁸¹ Joseph Buckingham, editor of the *New-England Galaxy*, lost no opportunity to note that the Methodist preacher John N. Maffitt’s emotional appeal was primarily to women, speculating that “should he succeed in getting up an awakening among the women,” tears would flow in abundance.⁸² Buckingham would later mock “those young ladies of Boston, who, over-

77. *Ibid.*, 145.

78. *Ibid.*, 152.

79. *Ibid.*, 153.

80. *Ibid.*, 165.

81. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 180; Nathan Williams, *Order and Harmony*, 14; Catharine Williams, *Fall River*, 4.

82. *New-England Galaxy*, 12 October 1821.

flowing with love, are ready to rush into his arms, and . . . those silly old women, whether in breeches or petticoats, who pay their adoration to the man because—*his wife has had twins*.”⁸³ For Buckingham, Maffitt’s appeal to women clearly derived from sources beyond his piety or sound teaching. Buckingham’s attacks on Maffitt culminated in a series of accusations that the preacher regarded as so damaging as to justify a libel suit against the editor. Among them were several charges that implied improper behavior toward women. According to Buckingham’s sources, Maffitt “coaxed a young lady to look in his face and sing” and “put his face *into* the ladies’ bonnets to invite them to come to Jesus.” He further charged that Maffitt had “literally practised upon the doctrine of St. Paul, of becoming all things to all men, or rather *all women*.” Most damagingly, he claimed that Maffitt “procured two young ladies to watch with him during his pretended sickness,” and that he “contrived to send one of them out of the chamber, that he might be left alone with the other.”⁸⁴ The implications of sexual impropriety in such innuendos are clear. Maffitt did not help his, or the Methodist, cause with his libel suit. Buckingham was acquitted because he was able to demonstrate the truth of the claims he had made, which of course implied that Maffitt had been guilty of the improprieties with which he had been charged.⁸⁵

Even more damaging were the allegations of adultery and murder that swirled around the Methodist preacher Ephraim K. Avery in the 1830s. Avery, a married minister who itinerated in New England in the 1820s and 30s, was tried for murdering a young unmarried factory girl named Sarah Cornell, who was associated with the Methodists and had been at one time a member of Avery’s congregation. The young woman was pregnant at the time of her death, and public sentiment favored the theory that Avery was the father and had killed the girl to cover up the seduction.⁸⁶ Much of the publicity surrounding the trial came to place the blame for her fall and for her consequent death on her unfortunate associations with the “religious fanaticism” of the Methodists, which had undermined her virtue.⁸⁷ The leading contemporary chronicler of the Avery affair, Catharine Williams, portrayed Avery as a sexual predator, seducing young women who lacked friends or protectors. For Williams, it was only natural for such women to place their trust in ministers, rendering

83. *Ibid.*, 18 October 1822.

84. *Ibid.*

85. David Richard Kasserian, *Fall River Outrage: Life, Murder, and Justice in Early Industrial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 222–23.

86. See Kasserian, *Fall River Outrage*, for the details of this story.

87. *Ibid.*, 221–22.

Avery's crime all the more contemptible. In addition, Williams reported that the minister stayed late several nights in Sarah Cornell's room while she was living with his family, supposedly praying with her. In addition, Williams claimed that Avery was frequently "closeted" alone in his study with women, sometimes several times a day. His study, she noted, was isolated from the rest of the house and contained a bed.⁸⁸ It takes little imagination to determine the inferences to be drawn from such statements.

The insinuations against Maffitt and Avery are strongly reminiscent of accusations leveled against John Wesley himself in the early years of his traveling ministry. Such charges of sexual impropriety were "to become a favorite mode of attack on the early Methodists."⁸⁹ The first Methodists in New England were not immune to such charges; a pamphlet from the 1790s charged that a Methodist preacher had "scandalously deserted his high profession, and beguiled two young women" before fleeing the region, while an early itinerant recalled that some locals suspected that preachers were seducing women behind the closed doors of class meeting.⁹⁰ Why were such allegations so commonly leveled against the Methodists? What is it about the Methodist movement that opened it to charges of sexual impropriety? In the cases of Maffitt and Avery, their behavior was probably injudicious enough to make such accusations plausible. However, there were underlying tensions between Methodism and the surrounding culture that made Methodism a prime target for these accusations. In the first place, the numerical preponderance of women in the movement, which in New England may have reached two-thirds or three-quarters of the membership in some areas, could easily lead to the supposition that the appeal was based upon something other than religious zeal.⁹¹ Methodist preachers were seen to be tempting "silly" women with their emotional preaching and charismatic personality, leading women to fawn over ministers with an inordinate level of devotion. The irregular nature of Methodist gatherings, lasting into the night or taking place over a number of days, seemed to provide ample opportunity for indecent behavior. These accusations were not unique to New England, of course; many imagined eighteenth-century Methodist gatherings in England to be occasions for obscene behavior and supposed that Methodist preachers had some kind of occult

88. Williams, *Fall River*, 78–79.

89. Oliver A. Beckerlegge, ed., "The Lavington Correspondence," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 42 (1980): 103.

90. Silas Winch, *Age of Superstition*, 16; Young, *Autobiography*, 101–2, 105.

91. Glen Messer, in an unpublished manuscript, has compiled membership statistics for early New England Methodism that establish this ratio.

power over their audiences.⁹² To opponents, the combination of unscrupulous preachers, excessively emotional preaching, and promiscuous gatherings rendered Methodism very dangerous to single women and opened it to charges of sexual impropriety.

The publicity surrounding John Maffitt and Ephraim Avery revealed another set of suspicions about the Methodists. The behavior of the Methodist Conference during and after the preachers' legal adventures—Maffitt's libel suit and Avery's criminal trial—provoked public suspicion of the Methodist movement as a whole. Both preachers were defended by the Methodist governing body and acquitted of wrongdoing by their fellow ministers, which outraged public opinion. Such behavior seemed to condone the illicit activities of Methodist ministers and raised fears, reminiscent of the rumors from decades earlier that the Methodists might have been agents of a foreign power, that the Methodist church operated as a sort of shadow organization bent upon protecting its members from public or legal accountability.

John Maffitt's failed 1822 libel suit against Joseph Buckingham, because the verdict implied Maffitt's guilt, prompted the Methodists to hold an ecclesiastical trial to consider whether the preacher had committed any offenses. After considering the charges, Maffitt's fellow ministers unanimously cleared the preacher of the accusations, while admitting that he had perhaps been guilty of "imprudences."⁹³ In defense of Maffitt, the Methodists claimed that the preacher's motives were pure, arguing that contrary to what he had been accused of, he had not *coaxed* the young lady to sing, nor had he *procured* two women to nurse him or *contrived* for one of them to leave, without denying that the activities described actually took place.⁹⁴ The conference's defense of Maffitt predictably provoked a response. The editor of the *Connecticut Journal* wondered in print "by what magic they have softened the very disreputable, not to say scandalous, conduct, of which he has been proved to have been guilty, into mere 'imprudences.'"⁹⁵ Buckingham himself called the ecclesiastical council a group of "illegal Jesuits" and interpreted its verdict as "a vote of censure on one of the judicial tribunals of this state."⁹⁶

Ephraim Avery's acquittal in the criminal case against him likewise spurred public outrage against the Methodists. After Avery was acquitted of murder, public opinion, which was initially favorable to the verdict, turned against Avery and the Methodists, especially after the

92. Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob," 224–25.

93. *New-England Galaxy*, 10 January 1823.

94. "Strictures on the Late Trial before the Municipal Court in Boston for a Libel," *Zion's Herald*, 30 January 1823.

95. Printed in *New England Galaxy*, 24 January 1823.

96. *New England Galaxy*, 31 January 1823.

Methodist ecclesiastical council's subsequent acquittal of Avery became known and he again appeared in the pulpit.⁹⁷ A pamphlet published in the wake of the verdict proclaimed that "the whole machinery of the methodist church has been brought into operation and its artillery made to bear on the battlements of the hall of justice. Perjury, base and foul has been committed on the stand, under the sanction of a religious garb to protect a wretch from punishment."⁹⁸ A series of articles published in the *Rhode Island Republican* charged that Avery's lawyers, hired by the Methodist church, had illegally manipulated jury selection and that Methodist ministers had tampered with witnesses for the prosecution.⁹⁹ The Methodists had, according to Catharine Williams, used whatever means were necessary to suppress the truth and clear Avery, including attempts to bully or bribe witnesses into refusing to testify or giving testimony favorable to Avery. In the trial, Methodist ministers had behaved more "like a combination of men for secular and political purpose—a league offensive and defensive," which closed ranks to protect one of its own.¹⁰⁰ Williams went on to express the suspicion, which seems almost hysterical to the modern reader, that the Methodists were purposefully forcing Avery upon the public in the hopes of sparking a confrontation that would lead to a religious civil war in the country. The Methodists, she lamented, were "a people, within our own borders, having a separate and independent government within themselves."¹⁰¹

What do these patterns of opposition, hostility, and suspicion reveal about Methodism and its relationship to the wider culture of New England? First, the Methodists, despite their longstanding presence in the region and their gains in membership and respectability, remained outsiders at least into the 1830s. In the minds of many, Methodism was a religious movement that was wild, disorderly, and potentially dangerous in a whole host of ways. It threatened to undermine the stability of society by drawing people away from their pastors and dissolving existing churches. Its passionate and emotional preaching of suspect doctrines promised to lead people astray into false beliefs and false hopes, by inciting the imagination of their hearers, the majority of whom were women, many single and therefore uniquely vulnerable. Its gatherings were bedlams of confusion, during which all manner of harm was done, from bodily injury to loss of property to sexual immorality.

97. Kasserman, *Fall River Outrage*, 217 ff.

98. Quoted in Williams, *Fall River*, 127–28.

99. Kasserman, *Fall River Outrage*, 222–23.

100. Williams, *Fall River*, 128–37.

101. *Ibid.*, 141.

Beneath such concerns about Methodism it is possible to detect ongoing concerns about social order, as patterns of hierarchy, deference to authority, and community stability gave way to a more individualistic, egalitarian, and mobile society. Methodism, of course, benefited from and indeed embodied this transformation. As Dee Andrews has argued, American Methodism, like the “emerging American democratic republic” itself, was a product “of *disassociation* from organic community, familial hierarchy, classical tradition, and the church and state connection.”¹⁰² It was precisely this disassociation that seemed so problematic to many who opposed Methodism in New England. The very democratic, individualistic, and entrepreneurial character of Methodism that helped it to succeed in the mobile, expanding society of the early republic also made it suspect to those for whom the loss of organic ties of family, community, and church were deeply troubling. If Methodism was destined to become “the American religion” because of its compatibility with the emerging democratic republic, opposition to Methodism in New England indicates that some, at least, were nervous about the direction American society was taking and about the role religion would play in that society.¹⁰³ The case of Sarah Cornell, Ephraim Avery’s alleged victim, illustrates some of these fears. Unmarried and employed in New England’s emerging factory system, cut off from bonds of family and community, the vulnerable young woman turned to the Methodist church and its minister as a kind of surrogate family. The tragic outcome of her life indicated to many that the Methodists could not function as a substitute for more traditional patterns of community support.¹⁰⁴ The precarious position of a woman like Sarah Cornell demonstrated that something was needed to fill the void left as traditional patterns of religious authority faded, and communal and family bonds were stretched ever thinner by social mobility and economic changes. In the eyes of many New Englanders, Methodism remained the wrong kind of religion to fill that void. While they may have embraced disestablishment and the voluntary principle, they had not come to embrace Methodism; many remained doubtful that it could exert a “healthy, moral, and religious influence in society.”

102. Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 239 (emphasis in original).

103. The description of Methodism as “the American religion” is taken from Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 4. In this description Andrews agrees with Hatch’s assessment of Methodism as quintessentially American, although she argues for the importance of its British origins and that there was little that was uniquely American about the earliest Methodists. It only became “America’s church” in later years.

104. See Williams, *Fall River*, and Kasserman, *Fall River Outrage*, for the details of Cornell’s life. Kasserman argues persuasively that the murder and the ensuing trial served to pit the culture of the emerging factory system against that of the Methodists, each blaming the other for the young woman’s loss of virtue and ultimate death.