THE CHURCHMANSHIP
OF THOMAS COKE
by John A. Vickers

Thomas Coke’s adult life coincided with a period of transition in the history of Methodism, a period which saw the emergence of Methodism as a separate denomination in both America and Britain. During these formative years he played a leading role in the events which led to separation on both sides of the Atlantic. His changing views on Anglican-Methodist relations must, therefore, be of considerable interest to us who are heirs of the divisions he helped to create.

To Coke himself the issues can never have seemed simple, if only because, like Wesley, he was born and bred within the Church of England and carried the marks of this inheritance throughout his life. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that he was a first-generation Methodist born out of due time. By 1777, when he cast in his lot with the Methodists, although a majority still followed Wesley in considering themselves “Anglicans, only more so,” more and more were beginning to think of themselves as Methodists first and foremost and Anglicans only second, if at all. To such second-generation Methodists, the emergence of a young Anglican priest as Wesley’s right-hand man inevitably bred suspicion and even hostility. And his critics were right, in so far as it was true that Coke did not find his loyalties as simple and clear-cut as they. But this is to anticipate.

Thomas Coke was the only-surviving son of indulgent parents. His father, as befitted a leading townsman twice elected bailiff (or mayor) of Brecon, was a staunch churchman who would no doubt have been distressed could he have foreseen his son’s Methodist career. Many years after his death, the son wrote to one of the preachers whose loyalties were divided between church and parents: “I once had a father, the tenderest parent, methinks, that ever lived. I could not have found it in my heart to grieve him unless duty to God bound me so to do, in the clearest and most coercive manner.” 1 It was perhaps fortunate that the worthy Bartholomew Coke died in 1773, several years before Thomas defected to the Methodists. His mother, on the other hand, who was to spend her closing years in London with her Methodist son, seems to have had no particular difficulty in accepting his change of allegiance. Perhaps she was one of those women who, with commendable common-sense, leave such high-flown matters for the menfolk to discuss and determine.

Thomas Coke’s education conditioned him, no less than his parentage and social environment, to become a loyal churchman. From the local grammar school he went up—like all good Welshmen—to Jesus College, Oxford, where he took his B.A. in 1768 and his M.A. in 1770.

1 Undated letter to John Burdsall, c. odism in York, 1885, p. 174.
1796, in Lyth, Glimpses of Early Meth-
In later years he referred to the prevailing Deism and lax morality of the university as equally deplorable in the eyes of the pious evangelical. But the corruption of this Anglican stronghold only deepened the loyalty of this serious-minded young man and in 1770, within a few days of achieving his master’s degree, he was ordained deacon in Christ Church cathedral. Two years later he was ordained priest, and by then he had entered upon his labors as curate in the Somersetshire village of South Petherton.

We are justified in asking at this point exactly what were Coke’s motives for “entering the Church,” especially as he lived in a century which was not as easily shocked by mundane motives as we are inclined to be today. Coke would have been no more than the child of his age had he sought ordination as a step towards worldly advancement. There is evidence, moreover, that he had firm hopes of preferment, based on the promises of influential friends. Although both hopes and promises were to remain unfulfilled, they seem to have been real enough at the time of his ordination. Nor, so far as we can tell, was he as yet in any way influenced by Methodism. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, although he was a young man of means and social position, Coke not only accepted a humble curacy in an unfamiliar part of the country, but remained in it for some five years, until driven out by his critics. This was hardly the action of one motivated only, or even mainly, by self-seeking.

The course of his life in these years cannot be charted with any detailed accuracy. Only a few currents and landmarks are firmly plotted. First and foremost is the growing influence of Methodism upon him, particularly through the writings of Wesley and Fletcher. We do not know how early this began, only that it culminated in that first meeting with Wesley at Kingston St. Mary on August 13, 1776, from which Wesley sent him back to evangelize his own parish. To counterbalance this we have the evidence that his churchmanship was still so unyielding that he refused to meet a local dissenting minister, Christopher Hull, except on neutral ground.

Had this “spikiness” given way to a more ecumenical spirit by the time he rode over to Kingston in the summer of 1776? His eagerness to meet Wesley might suggest so; yet one early version of their meeting asserts that Coke was unwilling to hear even the venerable Mr. Wesley preach in an “unconsecrated” building. And a correspondence which has survived from these very weeks in Coke’s life discloses a different picture from that of the disillusioned young man eager to renounce his Anglican loyalties in favor of nonconformity.

Walter Churchey was an old schoolfellow who lived at Hay, not far from Brecon. He had studied Law, but now had some thought of entering the Church, and Coke was actively encouraging him in

2 The original ordination certificates are in the M.M.S. Archives, London, and are printed in Etheridge, Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, D.C.L., 1860. Note VIII.
3 J. Crowther, Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., 1815, p. 102; S. Drew, Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., 1817, p. 10. One of these friends was the Prime Minister, Lord North.
4 Drew, op. cit., p. 18; Sutcliffe, Memoirs of the Late Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., 1816, p. 9.
this at the very time of his first meeting with Wesley. One letter written some time during that summer pleaded with Churchey to dedicate his life to the service of Christ and concluded, "The harvest, my friend, is very great, and the faithful labourers very few"—and the addition of that unscriptural adjective is probably indicative of the writer's frame of mind. By August 3, he was sufficiently certain of Churchey's compliance to have found him a suitable parish in North Somerset and to be busy arranging a formal approach to the Bishop of Bath and Wells, as the following letter indicates:

Dear Sir,

I have sent you inclosed [Mr.] Exon's Letter to the Bishop of Bath and Wells; it is advisable, I think, that you send your papers, viz. your Title, Testimonial and the Letter as soon as possible to the Bishop: for there is no inquiry, which the Bishop may chuse to make, but may be made as well in twenty days as a month. It will be proper also to inform the Bishop in your Letter concerning the particulars of your Age. Take care to seal Mr. Exon's Letter to the Bishop; which I have sent open for your perusal. Give me leave to repeat the invitation, which I gave you in my last. The Lord bless you, and grant success to our undertaking, as far as it may promote his Glory and the salvation of souls. Mr. Exon presents his Compts to you.

His zeal for souls did not prevent Coke from adding a postscript advising Churchey on the renting of the glebe land in his parish.

You shall have the first offer, Mr. Exon says, and have it cheaper than anybody else: As the Parish contains not a great many souls, and the Pastoral Duty cannot be as much as in a populous Parish, it [might be] convenient to you to take a little ground into your hands, [but] you are the best Judge.

A few days after penning these words, Thomas Coke was sent back to South Petherton by Wesley, but he was not to remain there much longer. On Easter Sunday, 1777 hostility towards the Methodistical young curate came to a head and he was ignominiously driven from the parish. He lost no time in allying himself with the Methodists and quickly became indispensable to the veteran evangelist. For six or seven years he was deeply involved in administrative chores, traveling widely throughout the British Isles as Wesley's representative, yet beginning already to catch a vision of a world-wide mission.

There is little to be said about his churchmanship during these years. We may safely assume that his attitude to the Church of England mirrored quite faithfully that of John Wesley. But his experience at South Petherton sowed the seeds of an eventual reaction in which Coke moved further from the Established Church than Wesley was disposed to do.

By 1784, Coke was quite prepared to set the seal upon the ever-widening breach between Methodism and the Church of England, and that year saw him closely involved in two events which brought

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5 Letter to Walter Churchey, quoted in Etheridge, op. cit., p. 426.
6 Letter to Churchey, August 3, 1776.
7 His first plan for overseas missions was issued at the close of 1783.
a formal separation nearer. The first of these was the “Deed of Declaration,” a legal document which ensured the continued existence of Mr. Wesley’s Connexion after his death. It was Wesley’s decision to draw up such a document, but Coke’s legal knowledge was drawn upon in the drafting of it.

The second vital event of 1784, at once more dramatic and more far-reaching in its repercussions, was the “secret” ordination of Coke and two other preachers by Wesley before they embarked for America. This was Wesley’s most serious departure from Anglican usage and accordingly has received more attention than almost any other single event in his life. It is an issue into which we cannot enter here except to trace, so far as we can, the implications for Coke’s churchmanship.

One important question, on which the surviving evidence is tantalizingly inconclusive, is whether the initiative for these ordinations, and subsequently for founding the Methodist Episcopal Church, was Wesley’s or Coke’s. A long and distinguished line of critics, headed by Charles Wesley, has laid the blame at Coke’s door. His Welsh impetuosity, they assert, misled the aging Wesley into a totally uncharacteristic indiscretion. There are some grounds for doubting this reading of the facts. Wesley was, after all, on his own admission, acting on convictions he had reached long ago through his reading of Lord King and Stillingfleet. Again, far from ever repudiating Coke and all he did in America, Wesley followed up these first ordinations by a steady flow of others during the last six years of his life. The truth seems to be, rather, that for all his inbred loyalty to the Church of England, Wesley was a high churchman with a very pragmatic approach to church order and a deep sense of the church’s mission. Organization and forms of government—including ordination itself—were never more than means to a greater end. And young Coke was Wesley’s pupil in this. Furthermore, Charles Wesley’s relationship with his brother and with Coke at this period was strongly tinged with jealousy, some of the evidence for which will find a place later in the story.

One piece of this incomplete jigsaw which has come to light only recently is a letter which Wesley wrote to Asbury after Coke and his companions had embarked for America. It shows that Wesley saw the American Methodists beset by a twofold danger, the Scylla of Congregationalism and the Charybdis of Anglicanism; and he was as concerned about the second as about the first. “I scarce know which is the greater,” he wrote to Asbury. “Either our Travelling Preachers turning Independents, & gathering Congregations each for himself: or procuring Ordination in a regular way, & accepting Parochial Cures.” 8 Whatever his plans for English Methodism at

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8 Wesley’s letter to Asbury of 20 September 1788 is a protest against the assumption of a title, not against the exercise of an office, and has to be seen as an expression of Wesley’s resentment at being omitted from the American Minutes.

9 Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, XXXIII, p. 11.
Fig. 2. A view north to the small, two-row brick wall which was the basis for placing the corner markers in 1895.

Fig. 3. A view south along trench "a." Dennis Schulze (left), Dr. Beegle (right), and other workers view the foundation stones for the main north wall of the College.

Fig. 4. A vertical view of the old section of the foundation wall found in place.
Fig. 7. A view south to the Cokesbury College Monument. The bronze model weighs 210 pounds. The distinctive looking bricks around the plaque on the pedestal are some of the brick from the dismantled wall. Although the wall is later than the 1795 fire, the brick appear to be some of those used in the original walls. To the right and back of the monument is the open trench for viewing the foundation wall.

Fig. 5. A view east to the Cokesbury Memorial Chapel, the trench at the northeast corner of the ruins, and members of the excavation team.

Fig. 6. The original Cokesbury Bell with some of the objects from the excavation. To the left are rusted nails and a spike. At the right are pieces of glass—two flat fragments with rainbow patina and the others melted and twisted by the heat of the fire. At the lower corners are some of the oyster shells, one charred gray-black by the fire. At the bottom are pieces of pitchers, cooking pots, and bowls which date from the latter part of the 18th century.
this time, Wesley clearly did not see the will of God for American Methodism in terms of reabsorption in the Anglican fold.

If Coke's attitude differed from that of Wesley at this time, it was in two respects. He was less reluctant to accept the consequences of acting on his convictions and to witness the severing of formal ties with the Established Church. Wesley, on the other hand, remained like an oarsman looking in one direction while he rowed in the other. And secondly, his letter to Wesley of August 9, 1784 shows that in the closing stages of their deliberations Coke certainly pressed Wesley to ordain him and the other preachers before they set out on their mission. But (a) we know nothing of the discussion which led up to this and whether, for example, the suggestion had originated with the one or the other; and (b) Coke based his case chiefly on the practical consideration that by formally receiving Wesley's authority in this way, he would be greatly assisted in a difficult assignment. Whatever our judgment about his motives, we must surely admit in the light of later events that Coke's appraisal of the American Methodist scene, dominated by the figure of Asbury, was a realistic one.

The pertinent parts of Coke's letter to Wesley are these:

August 9th, 1784

Honoured and dear Sir,

The more maturely I consider the subject, the more expedient it seems to me that the power of ordaining others should be received by me from you, by the imposition of your hands; and that you should lay hands on Brother Whatcoat and Brother Vasey, for the following reasons. . . . I may well want all the influence in America which you can throw into my scale. Mr. Brackenbury informed me at Leeds that he saw a letter in London from Mr. Asbury, in which he observed "that he should not receive any person deputed by you to take any part of the superintendency of the work invested in him,"—or words that implied so much. I do not find the least degree of prejudice in my mind against Mr. Asbury; on the contrary, a very great love and esteem; and I am determined not to stir a finger without his consent, unless sheer necessity obliges me; but rather to lie at his feet in all things. But as the journey is long, and you cannot spare me often, and it is well to provide against all events, and an authority formally received from you will be fully admitted by the people, and my exercising the office of ordination without that formal authority may be disputed, if there be any opposition on any other account; I could therefore earnestly wish you would exercise that power in this instance, which I have not the shadow of a doubt but God hath invested you with for the good of the Connexion. . . . In respect to Brother Rankin's argument, that you will escape a great deal of odium by omitting this, it is nothing. Either it will be known, or not known. If not known, then no odium will arise; but if known, you will be obliged to acknowledge, that I acted under your direction, or suffer me to sink under the weight of my enemies, with perhaps your brother at the head of them.10

So, with the imposition of Wesley's hands, Coke sailed for America, ordained Asbury in his turn, and at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore acted as midwife to the Methodist Episcopal Church. He

arrived in the New World with the firm intention of establishing an independent Methodist Church, and to this end he carefully avoided any dialogue with the Episcopalians who, for their part, showed considerable cordiality towards him. As an episcopally ordained priest, he found the parish churches open to him, and his services, especially in the administration of the sacraments, were in demand wherever he rode. The clergy in Philadelphia, William White and Samuel Magaw, received him in a very friendly spirit and offered him their pulpits. Coke, for his part, took care not to disclose any hint of Wesley’s plans for American Methodism. In his later approach to Bishop White, in 1791, he felt it necessary to apologize for what in retrospect seemed uncomfortably like a discourtesy.\(^\text{11}\)

Despite Coke’s reticence in the weeks before the preachers assembled in Baltimore, news of what was proposed inevitably leaked out. On the eve of the Conference two local clergymen, Dr. John Andrews and the Rev. William West, sought out Coke and Asbury with last-minute overtures. They suggested that, to avoid an open and irreparable breach, Coke (but not, apparently, Asbury) might be regularly consecrated as an Anglican bishop, and two parallel episcopal ministries, Anglican and Methodist, established. They came, apparently, on their own initiative; but the Episcopalians had everything to gain at that point by the retention of the Methodists within their fold, and there is every reason to suppose that their plan would have had general support. But Asbury and Coke had set their course and, with the preachers already gathering, were not to be diverted from it. For the moment, Coke had no time for such a rapprochement.\(^\text{12}\)

His first visit to the newly independent United States in 1784-5, had the effect of making Coke violently pro-American; and this, added to his growing animosity toward the Church of England, brought him into headlong collision with Charles Wesley on his return to England. Charles launched a broadside at the sermon Coke had preached on the occasion of Asbury’s ordination in Baltimore. It was a three-pronged attack.

As an Englishman, he condemns the constitution of his country; as a clergyman he vilifies his brethren [i.e. the American clergy] with the opprobrious names of hirelings and parasites; as a Methodist preacher, he contradicts the uniform declarations of John and Charles Wesley.\(^\text{13}\)

A mixture of jealousy and hurt pride lies very near the surface of Charles Wesley’s outbursts against Coke in both prose and verse at this time. It seemed painfully clear to him that the younger man had

\(^{11}\) Letter to Bishop White, 24 April 1791, printed in Letters of Francis Asbury, pp. 95 ff.


\(^{13}\) Strictures on the Substance of a Sermon preached at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church on the 27th of December 1784. . . By a Methodist of the Church of England. London, 1785, p. 4. Though anonymous, it has generally been taken to be the work of Charles Wesley. Coke’s Letter to the Author of Strictures was published in the following year.
usurped the privileged position he had so long enjoyed as his brother's confidant. Charles's shafts were, nevertheless, not very wide of the mark. Coke was indeed passing through his most radical phase. Some of his language in the sermon was intemperate and inadvisable. He could see nothing good in "national churches" and spoke scathingly of "the anti-Christian union... between Church and State." When, at the Conference of 1785, John Wesley followed up his earlier misdemeanors by ordaining three of the preachers for service in Scotland, Charles knew where to point the finger of blame. He wrote to his brother:

When once you began ordaining in America, I knew, and you knew, that your Preachers here would never rest until you ordained them. You told me they would separate by and by. The Doctor tells us the same. His Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore was intended to beget a Methodist Episcopal Church here. You know he comes, armed with your authority, to make us all Dissenters.15

And again, in a later letter:

Do you not allow that the Doctor has separated? Do you not know and approve of his avowed design and resolution to get all the Methodists of the three kingdoms into a distinct, compact body? a new episcopal Church of his own... Is the high-day of his blood over? Does he do nothing rashly? 16

To his credit, John Wesley consistently and repeatedly defended Coke from these attacks. "I believe Dr. Coke is as free from ambition as from covetousness," he retorted. "He is now such a right hand to me as Thomas Walsh was. If you will not or cannot help me yourself, do not hinder those that can and will. I must and will save as many souls as I can while I live, without being careful about what may possibly be when I die." The last sentence quoted, so characteristic of Wesley's pragmatism, contains the seeds of the confusion which were shortly to spring up ready-armed and wreak havoc in the ranks of Methodism after Wesley's death.

During the remaining years of Wesley's life, Coke was the natural rallying-point of the anti-Church or "separation" party in English Methodism. Yet by 1790 his views had shifted once more and he was busy with second thoughts. In a letter to William Wilberforce he went so far as to deny that he had ever advocated separation. "I not only wish for no such thing but would oppose a separation from the establishment with my utmost influence, even if that, or a division in the connection, was the unavoidable alternative." A few months later, on the other side of the Atlantic, in a letter to Bishop Seabury of Connecticut, he was more candid about his successive changes of heart:

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Being educated a Member of the Church of England from my earliest Infancy, being ordained of that Church, and having taken two degrees in Civil Law in the University of Oxford which is entirely under the Patronage of the Church of England, I was almost a Bigot in its favour when I first joined that great and good man, Mr. John Wesley, which is fourteen years ago. For five or six years after my Union with Mr. Wesley I remained fixed in my attachments to the Church of England: but afterwards, for many reasons which it would be tedious and useless to mention, I changed my sentiments, and promoted a separation from it as far as my influence reached. Within these two years I am come back again: my Love for the Church of England has returned. I think I am attached to it on a ground much more rational, and consequently much less likely to be shaken, than formerly.¹⁰

This letter belongs to an interesting exchange of views between Coke and the two Anglican Bishops in America in the spring of 1791. Shortly after arriving in America, Coke wrote to Bishop White, setting out at length his desire to see the two churches reunited and suggesting steps by which this might be achieved. Those Methodist preachers who had been ordained since the Methodist Episcopal Church was established could not be expected to relinquish their right to administer the sacraments, though the majority of them, he believed, would have no objection to re-ordination. The unordained preachers would not be happy to find their hope of ordination dependent upon the Anglican hierarchy, and Coke hinted that some kind of parallel episcopacy (such as had been suggested by the Anglicans on the eve of the Christmas Conference) would be needed to allay their misgivings. But the greatest single obstacle to his proposals, which he mentioned only in passing, was Asbury himself; and it is significant that, just as Wesley had been careful to keep the 1784 ordinations secret from his brother Charles, so now Coke went out of his way to avoid confiding in Asbury before he had sounded out the Anglican response to his proposals.

The news of Wesley’s death interrupted Coke’s American tour and sent him scurrying home to the orphaned British Connexion, but not before he had had several conversations with White in Philadelphia and been encouraged to set out his proposals more fully in the letter to Bishop Seabury from which we have already quoted. There would have to be, he saw, concessions on both sides, including an undertaking by the Methodists to use the Anglican prayer book in their Sunday worship. He reiterated the need to safeguard the position of both ordained and unordained Methodist preachers, and admitted more frankly than he had done to White that Asbury’s disapproval was a foregone conclusion. He believed, however, that this obstacle would be removed “if the General Convention of the Clergy consented that he [Asbury] should be consecrated a Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church.” With equal candor, he referred to his own position among the Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic. “I love the Methodists in America,” was his conclusion, “and could not think of leaving them entirely, whatever might happen to me in Europe.

¹⁰Letter to Seabury, 14 May 1791; facsimile in Bodleian Library, Oxford.
The Preachers and People also love me. Many of them have a peculiar regard for me. But I could not with propriety visit the American Methodists possessing in our Church on this side of the water an Office inferior to that of Mr. Asbury.”

Years later, when this confidential exchange became known to the American Methodists, Coke had to defend himself against charges of duplicity and betrayal, which he did in a long letter to the General Conference of 1808. He admitted that he no longer believed that a union of the Episcopalian and Methodist churches in America would be beneficial, but claimed that at the time he had sincerely believed it would be so. He tried, without great success, to justify his failure to confide in Asbury; and he defended his willingness to submit to re-ordination at the hands of the Episcopalians. This did not imply, he asserted, any repudiation of Wesley’s “consecration” of him or, in turn, his ordination of Asbury. Like Wesley, he rejected “the uninterrupted apostolic succession of bishops,” took the order of bishops and presbyters to be identical, accepted the imposition of hands as the most primitive and scriptural practice, and preferred a properly controlled episcopacy to any other form of Church government. “From all I have advanced you may easily perceive, my dear brethren, that I do not consider the imposition of hands, on the one hand, as essentially necessary for any office in the Church; nor do I, on the other hand, think that the repetition of the imposition of hands for the same office, when important circumstances require it, is at all improper.” Once again, Wesley’s pragmatism came to the surface in his disciple. “If the plan [of reunion] could not have been accomplished without a repetition of the imposition of hands for the same office, I... have no doubt, that [it] would have been perfectly justifiable for the enlargement of the field of action, etc., and would not, by any means, have invalidated the former consecration.”

This vigorous rearguard action was fought in 1808, long after Coke’s overtures to the Episcopalians had been made. Back in 1791, his scheme for a reunion, though it met with an encouraging response from the other side, was doomed to failure. Quite apart from Asbury’s disapproval, it was destined to be overwhelmed and capsized by the flood of events following Wesley’s death. Coke himself was soon in the thick of the problems which were Wesley’s legacy to his English followers, and by the time he came once more to the States his ecclesiastical leanings had altered yet again. The negotiations were never resumed, and only their chance disclosure (or was it deliberate malice?) brought to the public gaze an interlude in his life which Coke would have been happy enough to leave in the limbo of lost causes.

20 Letter to White, printed in Letters of Francis Asbury, pp. 94 ff.
22 White’s reply to Coke is printed in his Memoirs of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1830, p. 343. In the following year the matter came before the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, where it was the clergy, not the bishops, who were opposed to reunion. See Addison, Episcopal Church in the United States, 1789-1931, 1951, pp. 86 ff.
In 1791, the question of British Methodism's relationship to the Church of England was no nearer being settled. Opinion quickly polarized after Wesley's death into two opposing schools of thought—the "Old Planners," including many trustees and wealthy laymen, who were against any widening of the existing gap, and the "New Planners" who favoured a formal separation. The debate, especially over the questions of ordination and the administration of the sacraments by the Methodist preachers, continued for some years and was only partially settled by the Plan of Pacification of 1795, an attempted compromise in which Coke had a hand.

Despite his recent activity in Philadelphia, Coke soon took his stand with the New Planners and became a leading advocate of separation in England. Perhaps this further change of heart was due to a realization that the tide of opinion in British Methodism was flowing much too strongly for a minority—even an influential one—to have any chance of stemming it. If separation now seemed only a matter of time, the important thing was to provide an adequate framework and polity for the new Church. The Deed of Declaration had ensured that the authority of the Conference would be legally recognized, but had left the detailed administration of Methodism undetermined. Several alternative schemes of government for British Methodism were put forward and debated during these years. One important example is the "Lichfield proposals" of 1794. Coke took the initiative in the spring of that year in bringing together a number of leading preachers at a rendezvous chosen, with his characteristic love of secrecy, because at that time it had no Methodist society. The outcome of their deliberations was a scheme for dividing the Connexion into eight Districts, each under a "superintendent" subject to annual reappointment by the Conference, and for a twofold ministry of deacons and elders, ordained by the imposition of hands. Coke was all for implementing this scheme forthwith and so presenting the Conference with a fait accompli; but the more temperate counsel of Henry Moore and Alexander Mather prevailed, and when placed before the rest of the preachers later in the year the proposals failed to gain general support. So, instead of falling into line with its American counterpart, British Methodism continued on its erratic course towards a botched-up compromise.

In the following year, 1795, the controversy over the administration of the sacraments flared up in Bristol and Coke was again in the thick of it. Henry Moore had been debarred from the pulpit of the New Room because, although not episcopally ordained, he had assisted Coke in administering the sacrament at Portland Chapel. While this was the immediate cause of dispute, the essential issue was that of the division of authority between the local trustees and the preachers represented by Conference. Coke seems to have welcomed the opportunity for a show-down, and may even have deliberately engineered it. He unhesitatingly took Moore's part, and in the unedifying squabble that followed he fought vehemently for
what he saw as a safeguard of the preachers’ authority.\textsuperscript{23}

These disputes threatened to tear British Methodism apart and for years the future of the Connexion was in the balance. By the end of the century, although none of the really important issues was resolved, a working compromise had been achieved, with the loss only of the more democratic elements to Kilham’s “New Connexion.” Coke’s part in the disputes had alienated some of the more wealthy subscribers to the missions which through all these turbulent years remained the cause nearest to his heart. It was a relief to him to be able to turn his attention more and more to the growing work overseas. The organization and financing of that work made increasing demands on his time and devotion. Yet even now Coke had not done entirely with ecclesiastical matters, and the last few years of his life saw him making two further approaches to the authorities of the Church of England.

The first of these was made in 1799, when, on his own initiative, Coke wrote to the Bishop of London, expressing his fear that the “deviation” from the Church of England which had occurred among the Methodists since Wesley’s death would become a “universal separation” unless immediate steps were taken. He mentions as a major cause of the drift away from the Established Church the reluctance among Methodists to receive the sacrament from the hands of immoral clergymen and confesses that he has failed to persuade them that “the validity of the ordinance does not depend upon the piety or even the morality of the minister.” He admits that he himself had for a time been “warped from his attachment to the Church of England” as a result of his visits to America, “but, like a bow too much bent, I have again returned.” But he defends the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church on the grounds that “our numerous societies in America would have been a regular presbyterian church, if Mr. Wesley and myself had not taken the steps which we judged it necessary to adopt.”

His plan for effecting a reconciliation in England involved parallel ministries similar to those he had suggested in America.

“I am inclined to think, that if a given number of our leading preachers, proposed by our General Conference, were to be ordained, and permitted to travel through our connexion, to administer the sacraments . . . every difficulty would be removed. I have no doubt that the people would be universally satisfied. The men of greatest influence in the connexion would, I am sure, unite with me; and every deviation from the Church of England would be done away.”\textsuperscript{24}

If we enquire into the reasons for this renewal of affection for the Church of his youth, we have, in the first place, Coke’s own explanation. “The promotion of union among Christians was never so neces-

\textsuperscript{23} Manuscript letters of Coke, Benson, and others in Methodist Archives Centre, London.

sary as in the present age, when infidelity moves with such gigantic strides. However its numerous votaries may disagree in their philosophical tenets, they cordially unite to oppose Christianity. It is only between the Methodists and the Establishment, that we can hope for any cordial and permanent union to take place.” 25 The words might, almost without modification, be those of a twentieth-century advocate of the proposals for Anglican-Methodist union in Britain. But a further motive may have impelled Coke to write to the Bishop. It was not long since the Kilhamite agitation had not only divided the Methodist people but revealed the latent radicalism in their midst. Jacobinism and infidelity were inseparable in the mind of any Wesleyan at the turn of the century, and it is quite possible that Coke was looking at the Established Church as a bulwark against political as well as theological dangers.

In due course Coke received a reply not only from the Bishop but also from the Archbishop of Canterbury to whom his letter had been passed. They agreed on the desirability of repairing the breach, but were not sure about the method Coke suggested. The Archbishop, in particular, firmly rejected any scheme which involved the implication that the Anglican clergy were immoral and the sacraments they administered invalid. No more was heard of Coke’s proposal and it remained unknown except to the handful of leading preachers in whom he had confided.

Our last glimpse of Coke’s ecclesiastical kite-flying comes at the very end of his life, in 1813, and is in some ways the most remarkable of all. Certainly it was to furnish his critics with their strongest evidence of his ambitious nature and reveals, at best, an oddly childlike naivety. The nation’s attention had been focused on the subcontinent of India by the parliamentary debates on the renewal of the East India Company’s charter. To evangelicals, including Coke and members of the Clapham Sect, this presented the opportunity of opening wider the door to Christian missionaries in India, and Coke was busy persuading the Methodist Conference to back his longcherished plans for a mission to the East. In the midst of all this activity, he wrote on April 14, 1813 to his old friend William Wilberforce, who was playing a prominent part in the parliamentary exchanges. The matter he raised was indeed an extraordinary one, nothing less than the suggestion that, in order to fulfill his lifelong desire to evangelize India, Coke should present himself as candidate for the proposed new bishopric in that country. He revealed that he had, in fact, already approached the Earl of Liverpool and assured him that “if his Royal Highness the Prince Regent and the government should think proper to appoint me their Bishop in India, I should most cheerfully and most gratefully accept of the offer.” It is difficult to imagine the Prince and his ministers finding anything but a cause for irreverent mirth in this offer, supposing that it ever came to their attention; yet, incredible as it may have seemed to them and to others since, there is every reason to believe that Coke

25 Ibid.
was sincere and disinterested, at least in his conscious motives. "Could I but close my life in being the means of raising a spiritual church in India," he wrote, "it would satisfy the utmost ambition of my soul here below." Here was the motive of ambition which so many of his enemies discovered in many of Coke's activities, but in a guise few of them were likely to understand.

It is relevant to our present theme to note that Coke was fully prepared to "return most fully and faithfully into the bosom of the established church" if appointed, and to "do everything in my power to promote its interests," and that he professed his willingness to "submit to all such restrictions in the fulfilment of my office, as the government and the bench of bishops at home should think necessary." This would have been, in effect, to renounce his associations with Methodism in order to fulfill the dream of a lifetime; but at least it was no ignoble dream that drew him on. When he wrote to Wilberforce, Coke had had no reply from Lord Liverpool, and perhaps none ever came. At any rate, within a year he was sailing to the East with a party of Methodist preachers and the blessing of the Conference, but died at sea before he reached the land on which he had so set his heart. It was not until many years later that the publication of this letter by Wilberforce's sons provoked a violent attack on both Coke and Methodism by the Anglo-Catholic Pusey and a sturdy defence of Coke's integrity by Thomas Jackson.

For more than a century after his death the rift which Thomas Coke, despite his periodic bouts of remorse, did so much to create remained unbridged; and only in recent years has there been any serious attempt from either side to restore the broken relationship. A century and a half is a long time not to be on speaking terms, and if Coke found in his day that the battle was already lost, we may well ask whether there is any real hope in our own that Methodism may again become a spiritual ginger-group or a spearhead of evangelism within the Established Church in England. (Some would cavil at such expressions, but it was in these terms, if not in these actual phrases, that Wesley and his immediate followers conceived their role. One unanticipated fruit of reunion might prove to be the discovery by Methodism that in certain respects the roles have been reversed since 1791.)

Too much has happened since his day for us to draw any firm conclusions about what would be Coke's attitude toward the actual scheme of union now being considered by British Methodism and the Church of England. But we can at least discern the principles on which his attitude would be based. There were those among his contemporaries who held that the twists and turns of this ecclesiastical "weather-cock" were no more than the marks of a vacillating and inconsistent nature, if not of duplicity. But this is to overlook the principle which underlay his repeated changes of loyalty, namely

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27 Pusey, Letter of His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, on some Circumstances connected with the Present Crisis in the English Church, 1842, pp. 159 ff; Jackson, Letter to the Rev. Edward B. Pusey D.D., 1842, pp. 73 ff.
the primacy of the Church’s mission to the world. Rightly or wrong-
ly, all else, including questions of Church order, was secondary in
Coke’s mind. Sometimes it seemed to him that the independence of
Methodism increased its missionary effectiveness either in England
or in America. At others he felt equally strongly that Methodism
must remain a leaven within the parent Church if either was to re-
main an effective instrument of God’s will. His attitude changed
with changing circumstances, but the underlying principle remained
constant.

Similarly, the question of re-ordination (or, in his own case, re-
consecration) was, in itself, a matter of indifference to him. It has
been argued that Wesley’s “consecration” of Coke was either invalid
or unnecessary, since Coke either was an episkopos already or else
could not be made one by a mere presbuteros like Wesley. This argu-
ment, though logical enough within its own terms of reference, would
have seemed beside the point to Coke, since it assumes that the im-
position of hands in itself effects some change in the ordinand,
whereas to Coke it was no more than a time-honored symbol of
conferred authority. Unlike some of his twentieth-century succes-
sors, Coke was sure enough of his status to be able to afford the
“compromise” of re-ordination for the sake of his “weaker brethren,”
those Anglicans whose scruples he did not share but was prepared to
respect. Perhaps his word to our generation would be to the effect
that in the last resort ecclesiastical charity matters more than theo-
logical chastity.