COKE AND ASBURY: A COMPARISON OF BISHOPS

by John A. Vickers

When I was asked to speak about Methodism's first two bishops, my mind went immediately to a moment during my first visit to the States in the spring of 1970—to perhaps the most memorable and moving moment of that visit. We had spent the morning at Mount Vernon, remembering the occasion in 1785 when Coke and Asbury dined with General Washington and then discussed the question of slavery with him. It was tempting to linger about the house and grounds, so rich in memories of the past; but we had a pilgrimage to make, and so the afternoon found us driving eastwards across Maryland and over the broad reaches of Chesapeake Bay into Delaware. Our goal was a simple brick chapel—Barratt’s Chapel, one of the earliest preaching places visited by the circuit riders, once in the midst of the forest and still standing among trees a mile or so out of the little town of Frederica.

The inside, lined and furnished with wood and painted white, is marked by a homely dignity that seems to have changed very little in two centuries. Perhaps because of its isolated position, it has escaped the usual fate of historic shrines and its walls are not disfigured by tasteless monuments to illustrious nonentities. But a small brass plaque let into the floor marks the spot, just in front of the pulpit, on which Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury met and embraced for the first time.

This was an historic meeting if ever there was one, and a formative one for American Methodism. It is worth recalling the account of it in the Journals of the two men concerned. Coke tells how he preached to “a noble congregation” and how “after the sermon a plain, robust man came up to me in the pulpit and kissed me: I thought it could be no other than Mr. Asbury, and I was not deceived.”

“I came to Barratt’s Chapel,” wrote Asbury; “here to my great joy, I met those dear men of God, Dr. Coke and Richard Whatcoat, we were greatly comforted together.” After supper at the Barratt’s house, they conferred together in private about Wesley’s plans for the “future management” of American Methodism; and for Asbury especially it must have been a heart-warming occasion. It was thirteen years since he had left the shores of England behind—

1 T. Coke, Extracts of the Journals of the late Rev. Thomas Coke L.L.D. Dublin, 1816, p. 73.
2 Ibid., p. 45.
thirteen years filled with endless activity and new experiences, and with many problems and challenges, especially during the recent war years. There had been letters to and from John Wesley, but such contacts were frustratingly slow in the 18th Century, even when there was no war in progress. Other preachers had come—and gone; but now at last, here was a man commissioned and sent out by Wesley himself, and one more closely associated with the Father of Methodism ("Daddy Wesley," as Asbury was to call him later on) than almost any other.

With all that this meeting—and the subsequent association of these two men—was to mean for the shaping of American Methodism in mind, we do well to consider the contrasted personalities involved in it. It is perhaps an indication that I am an amateur, not a professional historian, that I find that the stuff of history for me lies in this interplay of personalities, rather than in movements or trends; still less in the formal records of official occasions. The frictions and tensions engendered when men of like mind but differing temperaments—or of common loyalties but different opinions—come together in a common cause: these are what, for me at least, bring the past to life in dramatic ways; and hence my present theme.

Coke and Asbury clearly took to one another immediately, each recognizing in the other a kindred spirit. This, and their common loyalty to Christ, explains why their affection and respect for one another survived the many vicissitudes through which their relationship passed in the next twenty years. I emphasize this at the outset, partly because we shall be more concerned here with the differences between them than with the things they had in common; but even more, because the great things they shared formed the backdrop against which the drama of their relationship was played out.

One common factor in their early upbringing seems significant: each of them was an only child—or, to be more exact, the only surviving child and, as such, each no doubt had extra affection lavished upon him by his parents. The Asburys' first child was a daughter who died in childhood when Francis was only three. When Thomas was born, Bartholomew and Ann Coke had recently buried two infant sons within two years. There, however, the similarity ends, for the economic and social circumstances in which each grew up were otherwise very different. Asbury's father was a gardener and his boyhood home at Great Barr, now preserved as a historic shrine, is a very humble cottage, standing in those days amid fields though since engulfed by urban sprawl. If I may again intrude a purely personal note, it is a matter of some pride to me that I myself was born within five miles of the scene of Asbury's boyhood, though it was many years before I ever heard his name or learned anything of his life. There is, in fact, not very much to know; but local tradi-
tion, in the form of some manuscript notes set down in 1834, has preserved the following account which differs in one or two details from the published accounts:

"Mr. Asbury when a boy went to school near Snail's Green, Great Barr. His master, Mr. Taylor, sen., behaved unkind to him, and often beat him, which made young Asbury dislike mast & school too.

"I am informed that while the other Boys played, Frank would retire into the fields to pray. He wore a white smock frock, and the lads in derision called him the parson; he also wore a Cap like those worn by the Blue scholars.

"After F. Asbury left school, he was bound an apprentice to Jno. Griffin, his trade was chape filing. [A "chape" is the small piece of metal on the side of a bucket to which the handle is attached; it is also the name of part of a shoe buckle.] . . . Before going to America he preached his farewell sermon at his father's house, which is about 40 yards from the house where he was apprenticed; the house was crowded, and old T. Blocksidge, now living [i.e. in 1835, when, the writer of the notes says, he was 78], was a lad, and cried because his parents would not let him go."

Now, let it be said that it speaks volumes for his parents that, in their humble circumstances, they were able and willing to keep their son at school until he was thirteen. But how different were the circumstances of Thomas Coke's boyhood! Born just two years later, away to the West, in Brecon, amid the beauty of the Welsh mountains and by the lovely river Usk, Coke's upbringing was such as befitted the son of a successful apothecary and a much respected citizen twice made bailiff (or mayor) of the town. Thomas had what we would now call a grammar school education and then, as a matter of course, went on to Jesus College, Oxford, as a gentleman commoner, and eventually received a doctorate in Civil Law. Following hard on his father's heels, he became a member of the Brecon Common Council at the age of twenty-one and a mere two years later was himself chosen as Bailiff.

It is hardly surprising, in the light of all this, that Thomas Coke found the role of leader the most natural one in the world. He belonged to the section of society privileged to exercise authority. It became part of his nature to give orders and to expect obedience, as well as deference. This brought him into conflict with his parishioners in South Petherton, Somerset, and later with some of his fellows among the Methodist preachers on both sides of the Atlantic.

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4 Manuscript notes dated 1834, made by the local historian Joseph Reeves of West Bromwich and preserved at the West Bromwich Public Library.
6 Ibid., pp. 27 ff., 33 ff., 42 ff., 63 f.
Asbury, too, was born and bred to be a leader among men; but the school of life which molded and prepared him for his life's task was an altogether harder one: not the schoolroom or the quiet study, but the heat and noise of the workshop. Whether his apprenticeship was to John Griffin or, as the more widely held tradition has asserted, to Mr. Foxall at the forge just across the fields from his home, the work was arduous and no doubt helped to toughen him physically. These were years of apprenticeship in a bigger sense than anyone, least of all young Francis, could know at the time.

Francis Asbury would not rank as one of Wesley's spiritual sons if he had undervalued education; yet there was surely a clear difference here between him and Thomas Coke, a difference which I would trace back to their early years. It comes to the fore in the chequered history of the ill-fated Cokesbury College. If Coke's schemes for his pioneer educational institution were grandiose and his expectations sanguine (as they usually were in entering upon any new venture), Asbury's lack of enthusiasm was at times almost too thinly veiled to pass the tests of decency. He resented the drain on his time and energies which the college became, especially in Coke's regular absences from America. "The Lord called not Mr. Whitefield nor the Methodists to build colleges," he wrote almost peevishly after the fire of 1795. "I wished only for schools—Dr. Coke wanted a college." And he admitted to Thomas Haskins that he had "wished and prayed that if it was not for [God's] glory it might be destroyed."8

Another significant difference: Asbury's family attended the parish church of All Saints, which had a strongly evangelical tradition; but they also joined the Methodist society at West Bromwich, along with no less a person than the local lord of the manor, the Earl of Dartmouth. So, before long, young Francis was exhorting, then on the plan as a preacher, and eventually in 1769, at the age of twenty-four, was called into the full-time itinerancy. (This was the year Coke returned home from Oxford with his bachelor's degree and began to carve his niche in local affairs. He was not ordained deacon until the following year and did not take up his first and only curacy until 1771, just before Asbury sailed for America.)

Whether Coke had any contact with the Methodists in his early years is uncertain, though he may well have heard Wesley preach in Brecon on one or more occasions.9 But his family were staunch

members of the Established Church and the pride with which his father saw him ordained into the Anglican priesthood would have been very much dimmed had he been able to foresee the path by which his son became a Methodist.

The difference this made was considerable. Asbury's loyalties were firstly to Wesley and then to the Methodism he had been called out to serve. (As the years passed, and especially after the War of Independence, the order was reversed, but that point need not detain us here.) Coke, on the other hand, was conditioned by his Anglican upbringing to the very end of his life: he might burn his boats, but he could not cut his umbilical cord. The chances and changes through which his ecclesiastical sympathies passed cannot engage us here: we may sum up the matter as a "love-hate" relationship, which left no room for indifference towards the Church of his youth.\textsuperscript{10} (In this respect, Coke was much nearer to Wesley than either Asbury or most of that later generation of Methodists were.) Hence, while at certain points in his career he had some hard things to say about the Church of England and its clergy, and for the most part meant them, Coke never threw off the bonds of love which bound him to the church. Foremost among the attempts he made to heal the rift between the Anglicans and Methodists of his day was his private (perhaps the word should be "secret") approach to the Episcopalian bishops White and Seabury early in 1791. He knew better than to confide in Asbury in the initial stages of his negotiations. "My influence among the Methodists in these States . . . is, I doubt not, increasing," he told Bishop White; "yet Mr. Asbury, whose influence is very capital, will not comply: nay, I know he will be exceedingly averse to it [that is, to the reunion of the two Churches]."\textsuperscript{11} Shortly afterwards we find him writing to Bishop Seabury: "Mr. Asbury, our Resident Superintendent, is a great and good man. He possesses, and justly, the esteem of most of the preachers and most of the people. Now, if the General Convention of the Clergy consented that he should be consecrated a Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, on the supposition of a Re-union, a very capital hindrance would be removed out of the way."\textsuperscript{12}

If Coke meant by this that Asbury was open to bribery, he was surely very wide of the mark; but probably his point is that the consecration of Asbury would reconcile the rank and file of the American Methodists to a union with the Episcopalians. (In this,
he surely understood the temper of the American Methodists far more clearly than he did that of the Episcopalian.

In the event, Asbury proved as strongly opposed to the whole scheme as Coke had feared; and this was due to more than resentment that he had not been taken into Coke's confidence at the outset. When Wesley's proposals for an independent Methodist Church had first been outlined to him in 1784, he had received them with some misgivings, and was far from certain at first whether the scheme was "of God." His caution contrasted with the eagerness of the "little Doctor." By 1791, however, he had come round to Wesley's view that if the Methodist preachers were to obtain "regular" ordination and settle down within the boundaries of a parish, then the strength of Methodism, which lay in its itinerant principle, would be sapped and its adaptability lost. Perhaps, too, by 1791 it was already apparent to him that Methodism in America was continuing to advance at such a rate that alliance with the Episcopalians would hinder rather than further its future work. Subsequent history seems to have more than vindicated Asbury's point of view, for Coke's concern for the reconciliation of the two Churches was stillborn. And yet—two centuries later and in an ecumenical age—we begin to see things in a new perspective that brings us nearer to Coke, perhaps, than any earlier generation has been.

One of the most interesting differences between these two leaders of men lies in the way each exercised his authority. We are concerned here with more than just a difference of temperament, though that was real enough. Coke, it is true, was notoriously impulsive by nature, impatient of delays, sometimes hasty in judgment, given to speaking his mind in extravagant language when roused or deeply moved. (You may recall Wesley's comparison of himself and Coke to a louse and a flea—the one crawling forward, the other leaping forward and sometimes compelled to leap back again!) Asbury, by contrast, had the invaluable ability to keep silent, to reserve judgment, to bide his time: and these, far from being signs of weakness in him, were sources of strength in his dealing with others. He was, too, a far shrewder judge of character than Coke ever became.

Coke's authority, in America even more than in England, was moreover a derivative one. He was accepted, and later rejected, among the American preachers first and foremost as Wesley's representative. Asbury showed his understanding of the spirit abroad among his fellow preachers at the Christmas Conference

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by insisting that Wesley’s appointment of him as “superintendent” should be ratified by them.15 (A few years later, the roles were to be temporarily reversed, in the controversy over Asbury’s plans for a permanent “Council” to exercise authority over the Church in the intervals between annual conferences. Coke supported O’Kelly’s opposition to this on the grounds that it was an extension of autocracy, or at least of bureaucracy, in the church, though whether this was Asbury’s actual intention is not so clear. It is likely that Coke was motivated in part by resentment at Asbury’s growing authority. But—quite apart from any personal factors—the incident was no doubt an example of the proverbial “exception which proves the rule.”)16

There is no doubt in my mind that, when we are considering their attitudes to the exercise of authority within the Church, we have to take fully into account the difference between the social and cultural backgrounds of these two men. Coke, though gracious and sociable by nature, belonged as we have seen to the privileged part of an aristocratic society—one in which, indeed, “democracy” was as much a “dirty” word as “communist” has been in our own time. There was, inevitably, sometimes a hint of condescension in his attitude, particularly when he was exposed to the democratic air of post-Colonial America. You will recall the occasion on which he earned Nelson Reed’s memorable rebuke: “Yes, sir, . . . we are not only the equals of Dr. Coke, but of Dr. Coke’s king.”17

Although Coke responded sympathetically to the spirit of the new America and earned some disfavor by defending the American cause back home in England, the contrast with Asbury at this point could hardly be stronger. And here we come upon another difference, and a major one, between the two men: Asbury, as I need hardly say, gave himself unreservedly to America and to America alone. He seems never to have seriously considered returning home. Coke, on the other hand, was a man of many commitments and divided loyalties, and in his nine successive American visits comes near to earning the title of Methodism’s first commuter. It was his nature to give himself wholeheartedly to whatever he was doing at any particular time; nevertheless, his lengthy absences from the American scene, and even more his British citizenship, made him little more than a visitor, sometimes honored, sometimes suspected, sometimes both.

The relationship between Coke and Asbury as the years passed is a complex and fascinating story, involving the interplay of both issues and personalities; but it would take too long to trace it in

In the course of time, Coke became increasingly aware that Asbury was determined to restrict his episcopal authority—or the exercise of it—during his comparatively short visits to America. He was to be little more than a star preacher and a link with the parent-church in England. At the Charleston Conference in 1797, when Asbury himself was too ill to preside, he took the extraordinary step of ignoring Coke’s presence and appointed Jesse Lee to take the chair. With such snubs on one side of the Atlantic, and increasingly varied commitments on the other, Coke’s thoughts of settling for life in America came to nothing, though he was a long time giving up the idea altogether. In a long letter to the New York Conference in 1806, two years after his ninth and last visit to the States, he gave vent to his long pent-up feelings of resentment. “Every Bishop ought to have a right of giving his judgment on every point, or he is but the shadow of a Bishop.” The shadow of a bishop is exactly what Coke had become, rightly or wrongly, by Asbury’s contrivance, in the years since Wesley’s death.

After nearly 200 years, we may perhaps dare to be disrespectful enough to ask whether all this does not add up simply to a clash between two autocrats: between two powerful personalities, neither of whom could tolerate a rival to his leadership. To pronounce on a man’s motives is probably the most hazardous aspect of all historical enquiry, and any conclusions must be tentative. So far as Asbury is concerned, my knowledge of the sources is certainly much too limited to allow me to pontificate; but his outward life over forty years bears witness to his courageous devotion to the cause of Christ, whatever cross-currents in the shape of human motives or feelings may have ruffled the surface.

And Coke? Well, his overweening ambition is well known: or is it? I have recently put forward the thesis that he has been repeatedly maligned by a succession of writers who have been content to echo the criticism of his earlier detractors (among them Charles Wesley), without examining such evidence as is available. John Wesley after all was prepared to go on record as believing that Coke was “as free from ambition as from covetousness” —and, on the evidence of his later involvement in overseas missions, that is pitching it pretty high. And undoubtedly, there were those on both sides of the Atlantic with reasons for jealousy and resentment at this upstart favorite of Mr. Wesley.

All the same, the principle that “where there is smoke there is

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19 Letter of Thomas Coke to the New York Annual Conference, January 6, 1806. (Original in Rose Memorial Library, Drew University)
20 Ibid.
fire” does apply; and furthermore, we must recognize different kinds and degrees of “ambition.” To do Coke justice as well as to reach an honest conclusion, we need to go much deeper than most writers have done. And fortunately fresh and particularly valuable evidence on the matter has recently come to hand, in the form of a letter written shortly after his death by one of Coke’s closest friends in London, the Methodist layman John Holloway. The question of Coke’s character is in itself an interesting and important one, and it has an obvious bearing on the subject of this lecture; on both accounts, therefore, I propose to end by quoting at length from this unpublished document. Holloway is replying to an enquiry from Joseph Benson, one of the senior preachers in England, who had been composing a memorial sermon on Coke.

Revd. & Dear Sir,

I have read the Sermon with a bias’d mind or—such is my opinion of your judgement I should not have differd from it—for the last three years of the good Doctor’s life I was a close observer, and I was often astonish’d at those excellencies which the discourse points at—He was a pattern of all that is amiable in the Christian life—I saw nothing that could make against him but his constitutional warmth of temper—Yet this was properly tempered—his easy & graceful concessions soon obliterated the remembrance of it. Without taking up your valuable time, I think I could discern an inward warfare—he was perpetually struggling with himself—and probably it was this that gave birth to many suspicions.

Now I am positive that the pious Doctor was aiming at disinterested love—in our private devotions & conversations—it was all his wish—his aim to be a child—probably he had more natural vanity than most men and this created an ardent warfare—Once after suffering an unusual cross—he fell down upon his knees before me & exclaim’d—O my Friend—my Friend—God has gotten the victory—I am a child—Nothing but such a providence could have produced it—!

Now admitting—which I am confident was the truth—that he considered himself unsafe while motives otherwise than pure actuated him—and not being able to sacrifice wholly his vanity or at least the strong inclination to it—but wholly dissatisfied with himself at the same time—I say is it to be wonder’d at—that at times he appeared awkward—absent—& too thoughtful—besides the above memorable time—there were a few instances in which he appeared liberated—and this was at our domestic altar—in the midst of his petitions it appeared as if the holy simplicity and descended—and the child was formd—when he was at prayer on such occasions—his expressions were uncommonly beautiful—all was inspiration—and while the effect lasted which was sometimes for a considerable time—no man could be more happy than the deceased saint.

I hope you will understand my meaning—I think this constant conflict will explain what was at times enigmatical in his character—I will only observe once more that in all his conduct as a Christian & as a Gentl—
man he was the most exemplary character I ever met with—

I am

Very dear Sir
Your affectionate
J. Holloway

City Road
Decr. 30th. 1814

"As a Christian and as a gentleman he was the most exemplary character I ever met with." Perhaps the most fitting conclusion we can arrive at is the recognition that such words might as well have been written of Asbury as of Coke. For, whatever the differences between them and the strains to which their friendship was subjected, they remained united in their devotion to a common Lord and in their service of his Church and his world.

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22 Original at Methodist Archives Centre, City Road, London. Holloway was an employee of the Bank of England and a member of the City Road society.