AVOIDING THE "MANY-HEADED MONSTER":
WESLEY AND JOHNSON ON ENTHUSIASM

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As a variety of off-shoots emerged from Anglicanism in the late seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries, traditionalists found one derisive term for describing all those who made obedience to God the ruling passion of their lives. An "enthusiast" was strikingly different from his contemporaries either in belief or in conduct. Unfortunately, peculiarities of manner became connotive of enthusiasm, and the term, when applied universally to any splinter group of Anglicanism, often obscured the true tenets of the sect. John Lawson, in his analysis of Methodist discipline, suggests that this was the fate allotted to John Wesley's brand of Methodism:

Obedience to God was no longer one necessary and legitimate interest among many in the life of the rational man. It became the overmastering motive in every sphere of activity. This difference of temper and ethos was so striking that the essentially conservative and traditionalist character of Methodist teaching was largely hidden from the eyes of Wesley's fellow-countrymen. To them he appeared a revolutionary, an "enthusiast."1

What Wesley appeared to be and what he truly was must have been clear to Samuel Johnson, the acknowledged intellectual leader of the age, for nowhere does Johnson use the term "enthusiasts" to describe Wesleyan Methodists. Wesley also vehemently denied that he advocated enthusiasm in the worship of God. The picture of an illiterate mob, clustered about a lay preacher and stupified by a man howling like a dog as he accepted the mercy of God, would have repulsed both Wesley and Johnson. But, the meaning of "enthusiasm" was even more far-reaching in their century. As Thomas Shepherd notes, "enthusiasm" was a general term of disrespect from which any reasonable man would have recoiled in disgust:

It is easy to forget that the eighteenth century gentleman who snorted at "enthusiasm" when he saw the Methodists did not necessarily imply that they were wild, uneducated ranters. The term was often loosely used to describe the behaviours or beliefs of anyone with whom one disagreed, just as "Bolshevism" is used to-day. No one ever called himself an Enthusiast.2


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Although Wesley learned to tolerate the harassment of his critics, he never admitted to enthusiasm, for he, like Dr. Johnson, greatly feared not the label but the effects that real enthusiasm might produce.

Johnson’s definition of “enthusiasm” in his Dictionary reveals that his understanding of the term was far more than the superficial meaning that common usage had imposed:

**Enthusiasm:** A vain belief in private revelation; vain confidence of divine favour or communication.

It was not offensive to Johnson that a man might be involved in his religion, that every moment of his life might be governed by a love and fear of God. When, however, that commitment defied reason or orthodoxy, it became the dangerous effusion of what Locke called “a warmed and overweening brain.”

Wesley’s Dictionary confirms that enthusiasm is “religious madness” or “fancied inspiration.” The demonstrations of enthusiasm to which Wesley had been exposed served to increase his skepticism of its value to religion. To Wesley, the Welsh Jumpers, who were associated with Methodism in that country, had become instruments of Satan in their enthusiasm:

... the Welsh Jumpers were good people but simple, and Satan took advantage of their simplicity “in order to wear them out and bring discredit on the word of God.”

In 1762, Wesley found similar conditions developing among London Methodists, many of whom claimed that God had saved them from all sin:

Easily foreseeing that Satan would be endeavoring to sow tares among the wheat, I took much pains to apprize them of the danger, particularly with regard to pride and enthusiasm.

Much to his dismay, though, the warnings went unheeded. As soon as his itinerant ministry called him away from London, enthusiasm took hold of some Methodists, even causing them to proclaim their immortality. Wesley well knew that enthusiasm could become a “many-headed monster” if not tempered by reason and experience.

Wesley’s denunciation of enthusiasm shocks those readers who view Methodism as diametrically opposed to Anglicanism. This should not have shocked Dr. Johnson, a confirmed Anglican; in fact, Johnson would have approved Wesley’s thoughtful approach to the problem. Not willing

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*Wesley, Christian Perfection*, p. 75.
to condemn that which was undefined by his peers, Wesley in Sermon 37 sets out to formulate a working definition of enthusiasm. As Johnson had done in composing his *Dictionary*, Wesley draws upon the wisdom of the past to develop his definition. The "prophets of old" considered enthusiasm as a temporary suspension of reason, whereas, in the Greco-Roman world, enthusiasm was "an uncommon vigor of thought, a peculiar fervor of spirit," worthy of only a Homer or a Vergil. Since the consensus of opinion considered enthusiasm as something evil, Wesley assumes this position: "... it is undoubtedly a disorder of the mind; and such a disorder as greatly hinders the exercise of reason." For both Wesley and Johnson this "exercise of reason" must not be impeded, for in unadulterated reason lay a way to discovery of religious truth. Wesley advised the Methodists "to never use the words 'wisdom,' 'reason,' or 'knowledge' by way of reproach. On the contrary, pray that you yourself may abound in them more and more." The Methodist leader, therefore, identified reason as an "excellent gift of God" for serving "the noblest purposes," that is, discoveries of religious truths. Johnson could not agree more: "Religion is the highest experience of reason." Whereas Johnson would probably consider failure to exercise reason as simply a wrong choice or folly, Wesley considered such a failure as "religious madness" or enthusiasm. Enthusiasts were not fools but madmen: "Seeing a fool is properly one who draws wrong conclusions from right premises; whereas a madman draws right conclusions, but from wrong premises." These "right conclusions" drawn from "wrong premises" deeply worried Wesley. The same fears of enthusiasm dogged Johnson. Would not destructive zeal, departure from Scripture, and imaginings of divine intervention result?

If enthusiasm was the "daughter of pride" as Wesley contended, then zeal was the daughter of enthusiasm. Neither Johnson nor Wesley could condemn zeal in the abstract, but, in practice, zeal had seemingly done more harm than good for the world. The term explained a fervent love of religion which engulfed the whole man and pressed him to convert others, at any expense to himself and to the converts. In his *Dictionary*, Johnson balances his literary references which define "zeal" by drawing a positive definition from Sprat's sermons and a negative definition from Tillotson. Johnson must have accepted Sprat's idea that properly controlled zeal was most admirable:

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True zeal seems not to be any one single affection of the soul; but rather a strong mixture of many holy affections; rather than a gracious constitution of the whole mind, than any one particular grace, swaying a devout heart, and filling it with all pious intentions, all not only uncounterfeit, but most fervent.17

This apparent ambivalence toward zealous expressions of religion was due, in part, to Johnson’s concern about the complacency that had crept into eighteenth century Anglicanism. Perhaps the solution to the increasing problem of nominal Christianity was, as Wesley suggested in Sermon 92, a little added zeal: “Sixty years ago there seemed to be scarce any such thing as religious zeal left in the nation. People in general were wonderfully cool and undisturbed about that trifle, religion.”18 Both men agreed that without zeal there was no progress in religion.

Yet, as history had demonstrated, zeal had been the cause of holy wars like the Crusades and religious persecutions like those of the Inquisition. Misdirected zeal was not limited to Western Europe alone. In Sermon 7, Johnson claims that every nation of the world can testify that changes in religion came about without calmness and moderation.19 Wesley also understood the universality of problems created by zeal: “And yet nothing has done more disservice to religion, or more mischief to mankind, than a sort of zeal which has for several ages prevailed, both in Pagan, Mahometan, and Christian nations.”20 The violence which so often resulted from uncontrolled zeal was also detrimental to the religion itself. Drawing from his own dictionary illustration, Johnson reinforces this idea in Sermon 7: “Rage has been called in to the assistance of zeal, and destruction joined with reformation. Resolved not to stop short, men have generally gone too far, and, in lopping superfluities, have wounded essentials.”21 Wesley more simply states the case in Sermon 132: “In former times, whenever any unusual religious concern has appeared, there has sprung up with it a zeal for things that were no part of religion.”22 Wesley did not intend for this to happen in Methodism, a stand which must have warranted the admiration of Dr. Johnson.

When zeal accompanied by reason failed as persuasion, men too frequently resorted to zeal accompanied by violence. Johnson clearly saw that the resultant persecutions served no viable purpose:

But surely pure zeal cannot carry him [man] beyond warm dispute and earnest exhortation; because by dispute and exhortation alone can real proselytes be made. Violence may extort confession from the tongue but the mind must remain unchanged.23

17Johnson, Dictionary, II, n. pag.
Wesley agreed that a true confession of faith must be made from the power of the Scripture acting on man, not from the force of inhumanity directed toward man. Thus, Wesley characterized Methodists as anti-zealous:

They dread that *bitter zeal*, that spirit of *persecution*, which has so often accompanied the spirit of reformation. They do not approve of using any kind of violence, on any pretence, in matters of religion.²⁴

Religious zeal should never be allowed to spill over as religious revolution. The contrary should be true. Both Johnson and Wesley believed that a “religious revival could sublimate political revolution, or reduce its urgency, by effecting an utter change of power within the self.”²⁵ On this premise, Wesley directed his American Methodist leaders to support the Crown so that religious change might not be equated with political violence. Wesley himself had learned from his experiences in Georgia that religious zeal could breed violence directed toward the zealot as easily as violence supportive of the religious cause. In either case, zeal was self-destructive.

Of greatest concern to both Johnson and Wesley, however, were the devastating effects of zeal on the individual man. The pride one might cultivate in zealous promotion of his religion was damning. The sweetness of victory in the cause might become more satisfying than the yearning for truth. So Johnson wrote in Sermon 23:

> Whenever, therefore, we find the teacher, jealous of the honour of his sect, and apparently more solicitious to see his opinions *established* than *approved*, we may conclude, that he has added envy to his zeal; and that he feels more pain from the want of victory, than pleasure from the enjoyment of truth.²⁶

A pure zealot would have to be on guard constantly for intimations of pride and self-gain in his work. Johnson warned his hearers that “to be strictly religious is difficult, but we may be zealously religious at little expense.”²⁷ How easily man could be entrapped by zeal, losing his soul in the deadly sin of pride. Wesley anticipated the same problem and wrote that humility was inseparable from true zeal.²⁸ The zealot must refrain from praying for his own particular sect, but he must pray for the Church universal.²⁹ Only then did zeal serve God. Wesley preached that “the same love which fills a man with zeal for God, makes him little, and poor, and vile in his own eyes.”³⁰

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Zeal, when cleansed of pride and violence, still served no purpose unless it culminated in improvement of the lot of mankind. On this point Anglicans and Methodists agreed whole-heartedly. Johnson considered practically-directed zeal as a way to happiness:

He is happy that carries about with him in the world the temper of the cloister; and preserves the fear of doing evil, while he suffers himself to be impelled by the zeal of doing good...  

Wesley also insisted that no Christian zeal exists without charity: “Thus should he show his zeal for works of piety; but much more for works of mercy...” The way to salvation for the zealous Christian was clear to both Johnson and Wesley. Zeal, controlled by reason, ingrained with humility, and directed toward doing good, could insure man of at least two blessings: “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:5,7).

So Scripture said. But, how long would people, caught up in emotional religious revivals, continue to adhere to biblical teachings? Another result of enthusiasm which was feared by Johnson and Wesley alike was abandonment of scriptural teachings. The Scriptures, provided as a guide for humanity, could soon be cast aside and considered non-essential if persons accepted that they had received private illuminations. In Sermon 7, Johnson attributes “many of the disorders of the present age,” to a “desire of striking out new paths to peace and happiness, and a neglect of following the precept in the text of asking for the old paths, where is the good way, and walking therein.” Only by drawing upon the words of Christ, the Apostles, and leaders of the early church would one avoid “an overfondness for novelty” which was associated with enthusiasm:

Thus, by consulting first the holy Scriptures, and next the writers of the primitive church, we shall make ourselves acquainted with the will of God; thus shall we discover the good way. ...

Wesley agreed that in order “to know what is the will of God on any particular occasion,” the devout man must apply “the plain scripture rule.” In his account of Christian perfection, Wesley admonished his readers to follow Biblical teachings: “You are in danger of enthusiasm every hour if you depart ever so little from Scripture;...” In the shared anti-enthusiast sentiments, therefore, Johnson and Wesley were in the simplest sense “evangelical.” As Johnson defined “evangelical” in his dictionary,

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87 Wesley, Christian Perfection, p. 114.
he perhaps knowingly described his own religious philosophy and Wesley's: "Agreeable to [the] gospel; consonant to the Christian law revealed in the holy gospel." 88

Although Johnson's definition of "evangelical" stressed tradition, the colloquial term described personal experience of divine intervention. Neither Johnson nor Wesley dismissed the possibility of supernatural revelation, but both were skeptical of it as a common occurrence. This was the third, and perhaps most frightening, effect of enthusiasm—that individuals might imagine they had been visited by the Holy Spirit and, consequently, had been granted extraordinary insight or powers. Johnson's position on the legitimacy of experiences of divine intervention is not as simple as his stereotype might imply. As Walter Jackson Bate points out, Johnson's belief in self-reliance and self-responsibility in matters of religion "flies in the face of the cherished stereotype of Johnson . . . declaiming against the Dissenters, particularly the Quakers or some of the Methodists, with their belief in the 'Inner Light' . . . ." 39 It is interesting to note that Johnson apparently disapproved only of "some" Methodists, among whose number probably were not Wesley's followers. John Wesley declared that the "inward" light, intimations of divine favor, was rightfully a Quaker doctrine and not a part of Methodist teaching. 40 Richard Brantley notes that "Wesleyan Methodists, for the most part claimed no such exclusive favor as they communed with God." 41 Wesley, like Johnson, was skeptical of a belief in an inner light, for such a belief, as a product of enthusiasm, could mislead even the most pious men.

This is not to say that Johnson believed the presence of God could never be revealed to an individual. 42 Johnson proposes that God's presence is not felt in a flash of insight or unexpected impression but in sincere religious devotion. 48 In this John Wesley agreed. "Trust not in visions or dreams; in sudden impressions, or strong impulses of any kind," preached Wesley. 44 Wesley cautioned his hearers not easily to suppose these things were from God. 46 Like Johnson, he did not discount the possibility, but only the probability, of divine revelation. Johnson may personally have desired such an experience, but, as for so many other truly pious men, he was passed by:

88Johnson, *Dictionary*, 1, n. pag.
60Shepherd, p. 231.
46Brantley, p. 154.
48Quinlan, p. 147.
—And possibly it may please God to afford us some consolation, some secret intimations of acceptance and forgiveness. But these radiations of favor are not always felt by the sincerest penitents. To the greater part of those whom angels stand ready to receive, nothing is granted in this world beyond rational hope; and with hope, founded on _promise_, we may well be satisfied.46

Although this statement appears in a sermon written for another man to deliver, the keen student of Johnson can detect the personal tone. That he should be satisfied by hope was not enough for Johnson, as his pervading fears of the after-life indicate. In analyzing Johnson’s religion, Chester Chapin suggests that had he “let himself go and not let rationality intervene,” Johnson might have come to accept the mysteries of divine revelation47 or even to experience such a revelation first-hand. The case was not far different for John Wesley. Although he described his heart as “strangely warmed” when undergoing his Aldersgate conversion, Wesley did not claim that he had experienced divine intervention or the influence of the Holy Spirit.48 Like Johnson, though, Wesley could not disavow the possibility of such revelation. In Sermon 113, he cautions those who believe they have felt the presence of God that others will pronounce them insane.49 Wesley himself would not make such an accusation unless the same men began to imagine they possessed gifts from God which they did not have. Among such gifts Wesley lists unlimited grace, power to work miracles—healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, raising the dead—and prophesying.50 As scriptural evangelists, Wesley and Johnson knew such powers were granted by God to carefully selected men of old, but no indications of divine favor had occurred within recent memory. Wesley’s stand must have comforted Johnson who considered his search for religious truth stifled by his inability to experience divine revelation. Not all revelation was reliable. As Wesley wrote, most “revelation” was a product of enthusiasm: “I say yet again, beware of enthusiasm. Such is the imagining you have the gift of prophesying or of discerning spirits, which I do not believe one of you has; no, nor ever had yet.”51

At the root of both Johnson’s and Wesley’s religion, then, was a conviction that God was omnipresent but that secret intimations of his presence were limited. Most intimations were the vain imaginings of an “overweening brain,” the product of unrestrained enthusiasm. Johnson insisted that true joy was found “by preserving in the mind a constant ap-

51Wesley, _Christian Perfection_, p. 117.
prehension of the divine presence.”⁵² Stanley Ayling summarizes the Methodist stand on the presence of God as similar to Johnson’s: “No circumstance was so trivial that the hand of God might not be seen in it.”⁵³ God was present with humanity, but unbridled enthusiasm could pervert the nature of that relationship. Surely Johnson could nod in assent when Wesley defended not just Methodism but true religion as free from superstition and enthusiasm: “It is true, the contrary has been continually affirmed; but to affirm is one thing, to prove is another. Who will prove that it is enthusiasm to love God, yea, to love him with all our heart?”⁵⁴

⁵²Johnson, “Sermon 3,” Sermons, p. 34.
⁵³Ayling, p. 108.