FROM RIOTS TO REVIVALISM:
The Gordon Riots of 1780, Methodist Hymnody, and the Halevy Thesis Revisited

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The Gordon Riots of 1780 were the most violent outbreak of mob violence in the history of eighteenth-century England. For seven days (June 2–9, 1780) riots convulsed London and a mob of sixty thousand rioters burned and looted the city. Eyewitnesses to the destruction included George III, Horace Walpole, Edward Gibbon, and Charles Wesley. These and other onlookers described the Riots as the worst calamity to strike London since the Great Fire of 1666.

The Gordon Riots also represented a turning point in the history of Methodism, a critical moment in which Methodist antipathy for social reform and revolution from below became irreversibly determined and unyielding. This raises Elie Halevy’s famous thesis that Methodism acted as an antidote to radicalism among the working class of England, preventing the French Revolution from having an English counterpart. The Gordon Riots provide a testing-ground for the Halevy thesis, and reveal that Charles Wesley and other key figures in the Methodist connection in London engaged in a deliberate attempt to turn the city’s populace from riots to revivalism after 1780. In addition, this study undertakes an inquiry into the language of Methodist hymnody, suggesting that the eighteenth-century Methodist mind was both unwilling and unable to conceive of radical political agitation as a remedy for the conditions of Britain’s working poor.

Elie Halevy was an unlikely student of Methodism. Born in Paris in 1870 to a Catholic father of Jewish ancestry and a Protestant mother, he was raised as a Protestant, held Buddhism in affectionate regard, but confessed himself an unbeliever. Halevy undertook his first study of Methodism in two essays published in the Revue de Paris in 1906 under the title, “The Birth of Methodism in England.” Halevy was chiefly concerned in these articles with the revivals of 1739 and 1740, when George Whitefield, and later Charles and John Wesley, preached in open fields to vast crowds of colliers and textile workers in Kingswood and Bristol. He argued that Methodist revivalism had quelled worker unrest in these industrial areas, ensuring that “popular discontent took the form the discontent of the bourgeoisie wanted to give it: a religious and conservative form.”

1P. Cunningham (ed.), The Letters of Horace Walpole, (9 vols., 1891), vii. 388.
In his classic *England in 1815*, published in 1913, Halevy asked the provocative question: "Why is it that, of all the countries of Europe, England has been most free from revolutions, violent crises, and sudden changes?" The answer, he argued, was Methodism, which had imbued workers "with a spirit from which the established order had nothing to fear" and had helped create "a religious and obedient proletariat" in England. To Methodism he attributed "the miracle of modern England, anarchist but orderly, practical and business-like, but religious and even pietist." Methodism, in this sense, replaced political radicalism with religious revivalism, and inculcated in workers a spirit of voluntary obedience, thus sparing England the violent social revolutions that plagued France and other European nations between 1789 and 1848. In Elie Halevy's words, "Methodism was the antidote of Jacobinism, and the free organization of the sects was the foundation of the social order in England."³

In testing the validity of the Halevy thesis, E. P. Thompson has argued that "we should know more about, not just the years of revivalism, but the months; not just the counties, but the towns and villages."⁴ In this sense, the Gordon Riots of 1780 are an especially promising case study of the relationship between Methodism and radicalism at the local level. By studying the reaction of Methodists in London to the Gordon Riots, one may test the Halevy thesis that Methodism acted as an antidote to radicalism.

The Gordon Riots, the most violent popular rebellion in London's history, erupted against a background of political turmoil. The government of Lord North stood on the threshold of collapse following a string of defeats suffered by British forces in 1778 and 1779 in the war with the American colonies. In hopes of mustering more troops for the war in the colonies, the government in 1778 had repealed a number of anti-Catholic laws (most of which had been enacted in 1699) to attract more Roman Catholics to join the British army. The Catholic Relief Act of 1778 repealed the law excluding hearers and sayers of the Mass from the military, as well as the law prohibiting Catholics from owning and inheriting land. The enactment also provided that Catholics need only swear their allegiance to the king as a condition of joining the army, not renounce their faith in the Pope, as had been previously required.⁵

In 1779, following anti-Catholic riots in the Scottish cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, the English Protestant Association was organized to petition Parliament for repeal of the Catholic Relief Act, and a certain Lord George Gordon was chosen President of the Protestant Association. Gordon was the twenty-nine year-old third son of a deceased English peer, a former military placeman, and a member of the House of Commons. Eccentric, neurotic, and probably half-mad, Gordon sent fear into his fellow members of Parliament with his violent harangues against Popery, pledging that if the Relief Act were not repealed, “the government will find 120,000 men at my back to avow and support” his threats.6

By the end of May, 1780, petitions circulated by the Protestant Association demanding repeal of the Relief Act had garnered over forty thousand signatures. Placards plastered throughout London on June 1 and 2 announced that “this association do meet on Friday next [June 2] in St. George’s Fields, at 10 o’clock in the morning, to consider the most prudent and respectable manner of attending their petition, which will be presented the same day at the House of Commons.” Gordon urged all “good Protestants” to don “blue cockades to distinguish themselves from the papists” during the proposed march on Parliament.7

The weather on June 2 was hot and oppressive when a crowd estimated at sixty thousand gathered at St. George’s field at the appointed hour. Following a series of speeches and preliminary ceremonies, Lord George mounted his horse and led the throng across the Thames by Westminster Bridge to the whistling of bagpipes, the singing of Protestant hymns, and the waving of blue banners bearing the slogan, “No Popery!” Arriving at the Palace Yard between 2:30 and 3:00 in the afternoon, the mob sealed off all passages to and from the chambers of the Commons and Lords, trapping the assembled members inside. While Gordon presented his petition inside, the mob roughed up members of both Houses seeking to make their escape. Thomas Thurlow, newly appointed Bishop of Lincoln, had the wheels of his carriage wrenched off, and was buffeted through the crowd and “seized by the throat until blood oozed from his mouth.” Guards eventually cleared a path for some members to flee, while others slipped quietly down the Thames in rowboats, and Parliament finally adjourned at 11:00 that night.8

When the House of Commons attempted to reconvene on Tuesday, June 6, blue-cockaded, banner-waving crowds filled the streets; the

6Ibid., 17.
7Ibid., 25–26.
8Ibid., 35.
members quickly adjourned rather than risk another riot. That same evening, rioters marched to Newgate Gaol, where the police had imprisoned four members of the Protestant Association on account of the violence of the previous Friday. After firing the home of the prison-master, the mob—now armed with axes, sledge-hammers, and crowbars—stormed the prison gates, released all three hundred prisoners, and set fire to the buildings. One eye-witness described the scene: “The activity of the mob was amazing. They dragged out prisoners by the hair of the head, by legs or arms, or whatever part they could lay hold of.”

The following Wednesday, June 7, (Walpole called it “Black Wednesday”), events came to a bloody climax. At 6:00 in the evening, the mob incinerated a distillery owned by a Catholic gentleman named Thomas Langdale, and vats containing an estimated 120,000 gallons of gin burst into flames. Twenty-one neighboring homes and warehouses caught fire, and the blaze could be seen from more than thirty miles away. Several hours later a group of rioters fired the Fleet Prison and released all its captives; five other prisons were similarly attacked during the night, including the Marshalsea, a debtor’s prison. Near midnight, as fire consumed entire city blocks, a well-armed and thoroughly inebriated mob (drunk from gin from Langdale’s burning distillery) launched an assault on the Bank of England. At this point Lord George Gordon appeared, dazed and distracted, and mounted the steps of the Bank to urge the crowd to disperse. But Gordon’s pleas fell on deaf (and drunken) ears. The attack on the Bank was finally repulsed by militiamen under the direction of Colonel Holroyd, commander of the London militia.

King George presided over an emergency meeting of the Privy Council that same day and declared martial law in London. The King’s proclamation directed the military “to use force for dispersing the illegal and tumultuous assemblies of the people.” Ten thousand of His Majesty’s troops entered the city to restore order and, in the bloody skirmishes that followed, 285 persons were killed and an additional 173 wounded. On Friday, June 9, soldiers arrested Lord Gordon and escorted him to the Tower to await trial. In the subsequent trials, 62 persons were sentenced to death (25 eventually were hanged); Gordon, benefiting from a brilliant defense by his lawyer, was acquitted.
The Gordon Riots were more than simply a violent demonstration of anti-Catholic sentiment. Indeed, George Rude has found “a distinct class bias in the direction of the attack made by the rioters on the Roman Catholic community.” The mob directed its outrage against the gentleman and merchant, not the craftsman and wage-earner. The deeper social significance of the Gordon Riots indicates that they may have represented a turning point not only in the history of English radicalism, but in the history of Methodism as well. Evidence that Methodism successfully turned London workers from riots to revivalism after 1780 would lend substantial support to Elie Halevy’s famous hypothesis.

Charles Wesley—though a strong anti-Papist—never signed the Protestant Association petition, and felt nothing but contempt for Gordon and his followers. Consequently, he became a target of the mob during the riots. “Last night the mob was parading, and putting us in bodily fear,” he wrote his brother John on June 8. “Some of the Tabernacle have asked if Charles Wesley was not with the petitioners; and were surprised to hear that I was not. ‘What then,’ said they, ‘does he not stand up for the Protestant cause?’” Upon learning that some of the rioters planned to burn down the Methodist chapel on City Road, Wesley gathered his preachers for a prayer meeting to entreat divine protection for the chapel, and begged the city’s populace to return to their homes in reverence to Christ and King. “I preached peace and charity,” he informed John, “the one true religion, and prayed earnestly for the trembling persecuted Catholics.”

John Wesley was on an itinerant preaching expedition in the north of England when the riots broke out. He turned down three separate requests from Lord Gordon to visit him in the Tower after his arrest. “I had no great desire to see Lord George Gordon,” Wesley explained, “fearing that he wanted to talk to me about political matters.” He agreed with Charles that “many of the patriots seriously intended to overthrow the government.” Wesley spruned Gordon’s advanced rather than lend his name to the cause of the mob: “It is well that I accepted none of Lord George’s invitations. If the government suffers this tamely, I know not what they will not suffer.” Eventually, in December of 1780, Wesley did visit Gordon in the Tower—but only after receiving the written permission of Lord North. The riots had created such unsettling fear among Methodist leaders concerning the threat of social upheaval that even the appearance of sympathy with radicals was carefully avoided.

13Ibid., 109, 111.
John Pawson, one of Wesley’s most prominent lay-preachers and the Superintendent of the London connexion at the time of the riots, joined John and Charles Wesley in their effort to neutralize popular radicalism. Pawson peppered his sermons to the city’s working poor with exhortations of submissiveness and deference to authority. He had been present at the Wesleyan Conference meeting in London in August, 1779, which resolved that “no one speaking evil of those in authority, or prophesying evil to the nation, should be a Methodist preacher.”16 After the Gordon Riots, Pawson grew increasingly intolerant of those given to political radicalism. In 1795 he printed an “Address of Loyalty to the King,” urging Methodists throughout Great Britain to sign a petition pledging their devotion to George III. “I am satisfied,” he informed a fellow lay-preacher, “that the Government has received information from different quarters that we are a disaffected people … I am also satisfied that it is highly necessary to present this address.” And in 1797 Pawson led the fight to expel Alexander Kilam and his followers from the Wesleyan connexion for their radical political views. “The spirit of leviling,” Pawson argued, “is become so prevalent in our connexion, as well as in the nation at large, that it is to be feared, it will bring total ruin in the end.”17 Pawson had learned a valuable lesson from the Gordon Riots: popular radicalism, left to its own devices, would reduce Great Britain to a scene of revolution and ruin.

The Wesleys gained an additional and unlikely ally in their campaign against radicalism in the person of Rowland Hill, a Calvinistic Methodist opposed to Wesleyan Arminianism. Hill, the thirty-six year old son of a wealthy English land-owner, had graduated from Cambridge in 1769, and had subsequently been denied ordination by the Church of England for his “Methodist tendencies.” Hill was a belligerent Calvinist, an ardent follower of George Whitefield, and a harsh critic of John Wesley. During the Calvinian Controversy in the 1770’s, Hill published an incendiary pamphlet titled “Imposter Detected” (1777), blasting John Wesley as a “scatter-brained old gentleman” and a “lying apostle” who could scarcely be distinguished from “a Jew, a

Papist, a Pagan or a Turk.” He denounced Wesley’s lay preachers as a “ragged legion of preaching barbers, cobblers, tinkers, scavengers, draymen, and chimney sweepers.”¹⁸

But after the Gordon Riots, Rowland Hill dropped his theological dispute with the Wesleys and focused on the working poor of London. He preached to huge crowds in St. George’s fields—the same site of Lord George Gordon’s ill-fated gathering on June 2—and “addressed vast concourses of discontented and starving workmen upon the verities of the world to come.” Hill’s biographer relates that “many of these were so wrought on by his preaching that they returned home to seek in retirement mercy from God, forgetting political excitement in an all-absorbing anxiety for their souls.” Another eyewitness recounts that Hill’s preaching “pierced the consciences of men hungry for bread, and heated with political excitement” so that “the grievances of the present life, great as they seemed to be, and great as they really were, sunk into comparative insignificance.” Interest among the workers in political radicalism faded “before the momentous interests of the life to come.” Hill, for his part, boasted that “the state receives daily benefits by the gospel we attempt to disseminate” and pledged that “even such as are suspected of disloyalty to the constitution are refused connexion with us.”¹⁹

In 1782 Hill opened Surrey Chapel, located near Blackfriars Bridge south of the Thames, inaugurating a life-long ministry among London’s poor that lasted until his death in 1833. He founded the first Sunday schools in London, the Benevolent Society for the visitation and education of the poor in their homes, the School of Industry for young women, as well as numerous almshouses built and funded entirely by Surrey Chapel. In the 1790’s after France had exploded in revolution, Hill endeavored to “preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as the surest antidote to disloyalty and error.”²⁰

Thus we see the disparate elements of Methodism coming together after 1780 in a deliberate effort to quell worker unrest in London. The evidence suggests that this Methodist campaign was remarkably successful. With the exception of two relatively minor bread riots in 1795 and 1800, London never suffered another outbreak of popular protest during the remainder of the Hanoverian period. As George Rude notes, disturbances in London after 1780 “were small-scale affairs and far

less violent and extensive than many of the food riots that broke out in other cities and market towns. And it is remarkable that there was no outbreak at all in the far greater crisis of 1811-1812." To be sure, one cannot ascribe this development to Methodism alone, but the contribution of Methodism was significant, especially in robbing the Guildhall of its support among workers and putting a damper on street activity in London for the remainder of the eighteenth century. The Methodist campaign undertaken by the London connexion after the Gordon Riots had indeed turned the city's populace from riots to revivalism.

One of the most effective weapons in the Methodist arsenal against radicalism was a hymn written by Charles Wesley during the Gordon Riots entitled "The Protestant Association, written in the Midst of Tumults." Wesley accused the rioters of conspiring to "execute the dark design of France, America, and Hell" by destroying English liberty. The mob, he charged in the hymn, was a collection of "rebels, regicides, and traitors," an alliance of "Ruffians and Frenchmen in Disguise" and "Americans, their sworn Allies." According to Wesley's imagery, Satan had conjured up the Gordon Riots to affect a social revolution. The real target of the mob was not the Pope but England's ruling class:

Bishops and Lords and Gentlemen
Who proudly o'er the people reign
And all the men on gain intent
And all the tools of government.

"With blasphemies then rend the sky / And both their King and God defy," contended Wesley. The mob's ultimate goal was "the rich to level with the poor" and "to pull the Courts and Churches down." Wesley cleverly removed the cloak of anti-Popery from the Protestant Association to reveal its hidden objective: social revolution. And he hailed George III as God's instrument of judgment: "Their King by heaven's Almighty Lord / Intrusted with the Nation's Sword." As for the working poor of London, Wesley urged them to quietly submit to the authorities:

All counsels to sum up in one,
Do what so few of you have done,
Poor guilty worms, your Maker fear
And then ye must your King revere.

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Wesley's poetic assault on the Protestant Association was one of the most remarkable statements in defense of the English social order in the history of eighteenth-century Methodism. Wesley equated social revolution with national suicide, popular radicalism with Satanic intrigue, and King George with Christ as an instrument of Divine wrath. His rhetoric made almost no distinctions between civil and religious duty.

Wesley's "The Protestant Association" was representative of a vast collection of counter-revolutionary tracts in Methodist hymnody. And these hymns may comprise the single most reliable source for the exploration of the psychology and theology of Methodism. "One of the greatest blessings that God has ever bestowed upon the Methodists, next to their Bible, is their collection of hymns," remarked John Fletcher. According to Charles Wesley's biographer, "these hymns are of inestimable value, and exert an influence which is only exceeded by that of the Holy Scriptures." The estimated seven thousand hymns that Charles Wesley composed during his lifetime comprise a text of sorts that reflects a distinctive Methodist mentalité that was incompatible with popular Radicalism.  

The foundation of this Methodist mentalité was the ethic of suffering, the idea that personal suffering was the special lot of God's people, and the very badge of their discipleship. Worldly prosperity, the ethic of suffering argued, was a sign of spiritual bastardism. "Alas! Crosses and afflictions are the common lot of the people of God in this world," asserted John Berridge, vicar of Everton, and Rowland Hill's mentor. "If we are without afflictions, whereof all are partakers, we are bastards and not sons."  

Or, in the words of Rowland Hill spoken shortly after the Gordon Riots: "True, I am what the world despises ... but I am certainly convinced of the Lord's blessings on the work." According to Hill and other Methodist preachers, poverty was a blessing and prosperity was a curse. Methodist hymns contained identical language:

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\begin{align*}
\text{The man whom God delights to bless} \\
\text{He never curses with success.} \\
\text{Our Savior by the rich unknown} \\
\text{Is worshipped by the poor alone.}
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This exaltation of suffering sometimes caused Methodists to view affliction as an expression of God's love. Charles Wesley rejoiced in one hymn: "How different now Thy ways appear / Most merciful when

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25Jackson, 794.
27Sidney, 167.
most severe!” The Lord kept His people in a state of constant suffering, the sure path to happiness and holiness: “In suffering we cannot err / We cannot follow Thee too far.” And what of those who enjoyed a life of ease and comfort? Their fate was sealed: “No strife, no conflict, and no care / No cross, or holiness is there.” Suffering was synonymous with discipleship:

Taught by Thine afflictive hand,
Now I know Thy law to obey;
Now I clearly understand
Suffering is the perfect way.29

John Berridge used similar language in comforting those who had lost loved ones, assuring them that the painful life was the godly life. “Sanctified afflictions are a thousand times to be chosen than unsanctified prosperity,” he informed one woman upon the death of her daughter. “These may consist of, yea, are often the effects of God’s special love.” As Charles Wesley comforted a friend upon the death of his son: “God wisely and graciously adapts all our sufferings to our wants and necessities, and kindly makes poor nature often to groan, out of pure love and compassion.” He added that, “my ways have been filled with briers and thorns” and “many a bitter cup has my heavenly Father forced me to drink.”30

For many Methodists, this “bitter cup” often meant poverty and unemployment. John Wesley urged them to drink up: “And hence will naturally follow the loss of business or employment, and consequently of substance. But all these circumstances are under the wise direction of God.” In the suffering motif, work became a central metaphor of affliction and Providential pain. Henry Venn, a Calvinistic Methodist preacher, instructed his daughter to repeat the following to herself during her daily labor: “I am the Lord’s, to do the work he has given me to do by the allotment of providence, and to be intent on discharging it with all diligence, humility, and cheerfulness.” This kind of mental drill helped to create a willfully docile labor force that was held in check by internalized values rather than external coercion.31

The ethic of suffering allowed Methodist adherents among the lower classes to find in their abject condition the very seal of God’s approval. Meekness and meager means were signs of His love and affection. “We all know that it is far better to be of meek spirit with the humble, then to divide the spoil with the strong,” John Pawson assured London’s poor. “And when, in a suffering state, we can through

29Ibid., viii, 119, 211; v, 193, 249.
30Whittingham (ed.), 472; Jackson, 671.
divine grace, possess our souls in patience, it is a matter of great thankfulness . . ." While radical organizers saw poverty and oppression as opportunities for protest, Methodism counseled sobriety, patience, and resignation:

Patient till death I feel my pain
But neither murmur nor complain
While humbled in the dust.

Far from seeking Divine deliverance from suffering, Methodists prayed that God would increase it still more:

Strengthen me to suffer more,
Still increase my heavy load,
Child of sorrow from the womb,
Send me weeping to the tomb. 33

It is easy to find in this suffering motif a tangle of pathology, and a masochistic desire for mistreatment of every kind. But the Methodist mentalité was not so simple. The cornerstone of Methodist psychology was the metaphor of Christ on the cross. In Methodist sermons and hymnody, Christological suffering was a classic and persistent theme. Christ on the cross became imitable by men and women in their daily lives. Believers lived their lives on earth as their Lord had: poor, meek, persecuted, scorned, and crucified. From his humble birth in a stable to his death on the cross, Christ had lived a life of pain and poverty:

Quite from the manger to the cross
Thy life one scene of suffering was

Methodists aspired to know Christ in the fellowship of his suffering:

Like Him would I be
My Master I see
In a stable; a stable shall satisfy me.

Me to Thy suffering self conform
The mortal power impart
Pity a weak, labouring worm 34

In persecution and oppression, Methodists discovered intimacy and closeness with God. "Did not the world scourge your Master, spit in His face, crown Him with thorns, and crucify Him?" John Berridge asked Rowland Hill in 1771. "Well, a servant must be as his Master." Or, as Charles Wesley wrote in stanzas composed during the Jacobite invasion of 1745:

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33 *Poetical Works,* viii, 425; v, 187.

Master, we call to mind Thy word,
We are not above our Lord:
Sufficient 'tis for us to be
In suffering and griefs like Thee.

Taking up our daily cross
Called to shame, and pain and loss
Well contented to sustain
All the rage of cruel man.\(^{35}\)

The metaphor of Christ on the cross was not something that Methodists invented as a clever device to justify poor social conditions in England. The thrust of the Methodist message was, above all else, theological rather than political. Nevertheless, the implicit political and ideological component in Methodist sermons and hymnody tended to encourage the lower class to accept the status quo as an expression of Divine will, and simultaneously discouraged workers from seeking relief through reform or revolution. As Rowland Hill admonished the working class in London, “our greatest honor is to be a sufferer for our God. No cross, no crown.” He further assured them that they would “find the portion of the outcast a happy one indeed.” Methodist hymns drove this point home with vivid language. “In all my Master’s steps to go / To suffer is my lot below,” testified Charles Wesley. And in another hymn, he prayed:

> Sweeten the cup of grief and pain,
> And melt and meeken all my Soul
> Conform me to the crucified.\(^{36}\)

It is difficult to imagine a people with this kind of psychic response to deprivation and suffering as a breeding ground for revolution. Wesley’s critics charged that he and his followers welcomed pain and rejoiced in persecution. The language of Methodist hymns added strength to their argument:

> Sorrow is solid joy, and pain
> Is pure delight, endured for Thee
> Reproach and loss are glorious gain.
> In loss, reproach, distress, and pain
> A strange delight we take.
> Sorrow is joy, and pain is ease
> To those who trust in Thee.\(^{37}\)

E.P. Thompson has argued that Methodism victimized its adherents with “psychic masturbation,” causing “a central disorganization

\(^{35}\)John Berridge to Rowland Hill, October 20, 1777, Emory University Special Collections; *Poetical Works*, iv, 28, 34.

\(^{36}\)Rowland Hill to David Simpson, quoted in Charlesworth, 29.

\(^{37}\)Poetical Works*, v, 69, 152, iv, 39.
of the human personality.” In Thompson’s words, “Since joy was associated with sin and guilt, and pain (Christ’s wounds) with goodness and love, so every impulse became twisted into the reverse, and it became natural to suppose that man or child only found grace in God’s eyes when performing painful, laborious or self-denying tasks.” Methodists believed that “to labour and to sorrow was to find pleasure, and masochism was love.”

The Methodist mind, however, was not this simple—or masochistic. Methodists rejoiced in their suffering, to be sure, but they never argued that suffering and joy were the same. This distinction was subtle but extremely important. As John Pawson argued in a sermon entitled “Walking Humbly with God,” only afflictions “for righteousness sake” were an inevitable companion of the Christian life, and even these were to be endured, not hoped for. There was, after all, a significant difference between rejoicing in spite of trials, and rejoicing because of tribulation. John Wesley, for his part, insisted that the pursuit of happiness was the ultimate objective of Christianity. “God does not raise up such a monument of his power and love to hide it from all mankind,” he argued in 1760. Wesley further asserted that even in times of suffering God blessed His people, and “designs not barely the happiness of that individual person but the animating and encouraging others to follow after the same blessing.”

Charges that Wesley terrorized his followers with threats of hell-fire, burdened them with feelings of guilt and shame, and indoctrinated them with a merciless doctrine of work plagued him throughout his life. But Wesley’s writings in his daily journal and personal correspondence soften and humanize this caricature. “The cheerfulness of faith you should aim at in and above all things,” he implored one friend in 1780. “I am wishing you a continual supply of righteousness, peace and joy.” Wesley lashed out at critics who dismissed Methodist “mourni& poverty of spirit” as simply “stupidity and dullness” or “down-right lunacy and distraction.” He considered it “no wonder at all that this judgement should be passed by those who do not know God.”

No one had less concern about the accusation that they suffered from masochism than the Methodists themselves. They prided themselves in the world’s inability to appreciate their “strange delight” in suffering. And they shared a joy unspeakable in shared experiences.

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like that of John Pawson’s conversion in 1760: “I was brought out of darkness into marvelous light—out of miserable bondage into glorious liberty—and out of most bitter distress into unspeakable happiness.” Methodist hymns, sermons, and correspondence brim with words like “bliss,” “joy,” “happiness,” and “ecstasy.” During their watch-nights, the Methodists celebrated the joy of their faith in spontaneous and informal communal worship:

Come let us anew  
Our pleasures pursue:  
For Christian delight  
The day is too short; let us borrow the night  
In sanctified joy  
Each moment employ  
To Jesus’ praise⁴¹

The caricature so frequently drawn by historians of Methodists as joyless, pitiable neurotics is not sustained by the evidence. The Methodist mentalité that emerged after the Gordon Riots was a complex animal, entertaining neither notions of masichism nor revolution. Methodist hymns reveal a psyche that viewed affliction and poverty as signs of spiritual adoption; comfort and prosperity as symptoms of spiritual bastardism; disloyalty to civil authority as incompatible with devotion to God; and genuine peace and joy as attainable in the midst of tumult and deprivation. The twin themes of the suffering motif and the Christological metaphor were the most pervasive in Wesleyan hymnody, and they provided the logic for acquiescence to the most abject of social conditions—and for the distinctly Methodist antipathy for popular Radicalism.⁴² And, as Lowell Harland has demonstrated in his study of eighteenth-century pietist hymnody, the persistence of these themes was unique to Methodist hymns. Indeed, the celebration of sanctification through daily suffering is virtually non-existent in the hymns of other eighteenth-century pietist composers such as Isaac Watts and August Toplady.⁴³

After 1780 Methodist opposition to popular radicalism became increasingly determined and unyielding. This attitude was reflected in Methodist hymns. In “Hymns Written in Times of Tumults,” composed shortly after the Gordon Riots, Charles Wesley stressed obedience to civil authority:

⁴¹Poetical Works, v, 52, 282.  
⁴²Of the 700 hymns studied during the course of my research (or approximately ten percent of Wesley’s lifetime work), 304, or 43 percent, contained language reflecting the themes of suffering and Christological mimesis. These two themes were the most recurrent in the hymns studied.

And O! beneath Thy mercy's wings
Hail and preserve the best of kings,
Our king by right Divine

Obedient to their King and Thee
Let all the loyal nation bow.44

After the Gordon Riots, Methodism grew more and more intolerant of political dissent and discord, and Methodist leaders like Rowland Hill and John Pawson did their best to quell worker unrest. As late as 1819 the Methodist antipathy for popular radicalism remained as firm as ever, demonstrated by a Wesleyan Committee circular that urged "the poor of our manufacturing districts, whose distresses the Committee sincerely commiserate, to bear their privations with patience, and to seek relief, not in schemes of agitation or crime, but in reliance on divine providence . . ."45

And yet all this evidence does not add up to the conclusion that the Halevy thesis is valid. Ultimately, the Halevy thesis cannot be proven because it rests upon an undemonstrable counterfactual argument: a social revolution would have occurred in England in the absence of Methodism. A logical starting point for an alternative model to the Halevy thesis is Norman Sykes' assertion in his classic Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century that the foundation of the social order in England after 1707 was the "tripartite compact" of the Protestant succession, the Established Church, and tolerated Dissent.46 To these three "pillars" undergirding the social structure of England in the eighteenth century, one may gingerly add a fourth: Methodist revivalism.

Assuming that the Methodist response to the Gordon Riots in 1780 was a generalized phenomenon, Methodism did indeed turn English workers from riots to revivalism, providing desperately needed support for the British government during the Hanoverian reign. The language found in Methodist hymnody provides an important dimension to this portrait of Methodism, suggesting that it imbued in its adherents a deep and abiding respect for established authority, while simultaneously providing powerful logic for patiently and joyfully enduring the

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44Poetical Works, viii, 266, 272, 276.
46Norman Sykes, Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century, (Cambridge, 1934), 315. Although my argument is admittedly a modest, minimalist formulation of the Halevy thesis, I do not mean to ascribe any less importance to the socially conservative effects of Methodism than Halevy did. Rather, my argument is one of necessity; there is simply no accurate way of determining whether a social revolution could have taken place in England without Methodist revivalism. For the moment, the only incontrovertible conclusion is that Methodism was a major component in the religio-political order in England that helped prevent Radicalism from having the kind of success in Great Britain that Jacobinism had in France.
social conditions of industrial Great Britain. Although Methodism’s role in preventing a social revolution in England may never be ascertained to our complete satisfaction, it clearly succeeded in encouraging acquiescence to the status quo and in discouraging popular radicalism among the working class, and thus comprised the “fourth pillar” upon which the eighteenth-century English social order rested.