FRANCIS ASBURY ON AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE
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I can leave all the little affairs of this confused world to those men to whose province
they pertain; and can comfortably go on in my proper business of instrumentally saving
my own soul and those that hear me.1

What has been the relationship between Methodism and American
public life? Numerous historians and apologists have essayed answers to
this question. Stevens, Foster, and Peck are notable nineteenth century
examples of apologists who believed Methodism was the conscience of
the nation.2 In the twentieth century, Hofstadler, Ferguson, Kline, Pelikan,
and MacKenzie are a few who have taken more critical perspectives. Their
arguments range from asserting that Methodists have contributed to
American anti-intellectualism, to America's love affair with statistics, and
to the country's occasional jingoistic nationalism.3 We still await, however,
a fair, critical, and comprehensive study of this question, especially a study
that seeks to ascertain Methodist intentions regarding a proper relation-
ship and what the effects of Methodist actions and policies have been.

This paper attempts nothing nearly so bold. However, it does wrestle
with one major figure responsible for shaping American Methodism:
Francis Asbury.

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the relationship Francis
Asbury had, and intended for his Methodists to have, with American
public life. To keep within the bounds of an article, I shall focus on his

Epworth Press; and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), March 26, 1776. Entries in Asbury's
journal and letters sometimes give the day of the week without giving the precise date. In
those instances, I deciphered the date from the surrounding context.
2Abel Stevens, A Centenary of American Methodism, 1865; Randolph Sinks Foster, Centenary
 Thoughts for the Pew and Pulpit of Methodism, 1884; Jesse Truesdell Peck, The History
of the Great Republic, Considered from a Christian Standpoint, 1868; referred to in Lawrence
O. Kline, "Monitoring the Nation's Conscience: A Perspective on Methodism and American
3Richard Hofstadler, Anti-intellectualism in American Life (New York: Vintage Books, 1963);
Charles W. Ferguson, Organizing to Beat the Devil (Garden City, New York: Doubleday
and Company, 1971); Kline, "Monitoring," 44-62; Jaroslav J. Pelikan, "Methodism's Con-
tribution to America," The History of American Methodism vol. III (New York: Abingdon
intentions and not on the more complex problem of discerning the actual effects of his actions and policies; I shall, however, hint at the latter in the conclusion.

In order to define Asbury’s intended relationship with American public life on his own terms, we may not actually employ our public-private distinction because he divided up the world in a different way. Rather than dividing life into private and public spheres, Asbury distinguished between secular and spiritual orders. The secular order includes government, entertainment (theaters, taverns, and the like), and education for purposes other than the edification of one’s soul. It is a residual category, composed of anything which is not part of the spiritual order. The spiritual order is all that relates to the conviction, conversion, and perfection of souls. Hence, any thought or deed or affection, whether occurring in the closet of one’s home or in the halls of Congress, if it has anything to do with salvation as understood by Methodism of the time, is a matter of the spiritual order. In addition, and very importantly for Asbury, the needs of the secular order were subservient to the needs of the spiritual order. This was so because the spiritual order deals with the eternal soul, while the secular order circumcises only transitory temporal life—and the major purpose of temporal life is to prepare for eternal life. Should there be a conflict between the requisite commitments of the two orders, Asbury ardently believed that those of the secular must give way.

Thus far, Asbury does not differ from the widely held Christian belief in two societies, one secular and one sacred, each with its own sphere of influence. But his concept of salvation, with its emphasis on the possibility of perfection in this life and his ascetic tendencies combine with the two societies theory to produce a “hands-off” understanding of the relationship between the two orders. Therefore, the principle that I believe guided Asbury’s understanding of the relationship between the secular and the sacred orders is: The secular order must acknowledge that individuals and churches have the God-given right to work for the salvation of souls as understood by those so working. Contacts between the sacred and the secular orders are not desirable because they divert people from their eternal ends. Contacts shall take place only when they are necessary in order to free the sacred from secular hindrances to the salvation of souls.

I will show below that this principle, set in the context of Asbury’s intentions for his American ministry, provides plausible explanation for his relationship with secular “public” life and his teachings regarding how he wanted his Methodists to interact with public life. We will also see that

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*I cannot treat Asbury’s ambitious scheme for educational institutions here. Although tinged with anti-intellectualism, especially after the camp meetings began, Asbury was himself an avid student. He also started numerous schools for all age levels, although most died an early death from lack of rank-and-file support and money.*
Asbury's guiding principle could not be consistently enacted because it was undergirded by an eschatology that waffled between pre- and post-millenarianism.

In order to establish this argument, I will present: how Asbury understood salvation, what he understood America and his mission in America to be, the relationship he saw between religion and politics/church and state, and his attitude toward blacks and the institution of slavery. Along the way, we will also turn to pertinent thoughts on camp meetings, which Asbury believed God had given to the Methodists for the work of "reforming the continent and spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land."

**Salvation: Going On to Perfection**

Jerald Brauer argues that revivalism, as encountered in the 18th and 19th centuries in America, is a distinctive way of becoming, being, and remaining a Christian. Its central concept is the conversion of the soul, the demand that one must be "born again." Being born again reorients one toward the world; it replaces one's old stance in and toward the cosmos with a new one.⁵

Francis Asbury stands in this revivalistic tradition. More particularly, Asbury belongs to the Methodist strand of revivalism with its emphasis on "going on to perfection," i.e., the possibility of coming to dwell without sin in divine love on this side of death.

Asbury labored primarily for conversion and growth in the converted life. His account of his own conversion is pregnant with this dual interest in conversion and growth. He referred to his conversion several times, assumed it always, and encouraged his preachers to record their own conversions and calls to ministry in order that subsequent generations might have proper inspirational literature that God could use to instigate more conversions.⁶

Methodism taught that one's whole life ought to be organized so as to maintain and enhance one's own pilgrimage toward salvation, as well as to encourage and support others in the same pursuit. Methodism's piety, theology, discipline, and organization cannot be understood until this is grasped. Asbury both embraced Methodism thus understood and further extended its practical application. Once converted, one's faith is to order the whole of one's life. One is to move toward living more in the spiritual realm and less in the secular. He preached that conversion ought to bring about a "great change—in judgment, desire, spirit, temper, and practice."

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⁶*JLFA*, I, July 24, 1774; III, February 4, 1801.
In conversion as he understood it, one is given a new orientation toward everyday relationships and to the cosmos.\(^7\)

For Asbury, it was essential that going on to perfection followed conversion. John Wesley understood Christian perfection not in the sense of perfectionism—that a perfect person would never make a mistake—but in the sense of the mystics and Eastern Fathers on whom he drew: one is perfect whose practice, thought, desire, and affection are motivated only out of love for God. Perfected Christians may still err because they are still limited creatures, but they will no longer sin, i.e., they will no longer desire to disobey God, nor do so intentionally. One never reaches a perfected state, since one will always have need to grow in grace, even on the other side of death. Perfection is the work of the Holy Spirit, with whom one ought to cooperate. The power of sin over the soul is to grow less and less while the power of divine love increases proportionately. One’s going on to perfection ought to be gradually withdrawing, extracted from the things of this world while adhering to the things of God. For Wesley, sin was not simply personal wrong-doing. It was a disease which came into the world through Adam. Through the process of going on to perfection, a person was both overcoming the temptation to commit sins, while at the same time the believer was being cleansed by the Holy Spirit of original sin.\(^8\)

Asbury substantially followed Wesley in this matter of perfection. It is that for which the converted person is to strive. One is justified by the merits of Christ at conversion but by one’s works on the day of judgment. Complete freedom will entail entire deliverance from sin. He preached perfection at the beginning of his ministry in America, but especially emphasized the theme during the camp meetings of the early 1800s. Besides his fear of backsliding, he was also worried that, in the early union camp meetings with Baptists and Presbyterians, campers might become antinomians if going on to perfection were not preached.\(^9\)

The Methodist organization of societies, class meetings, and (for a while) bands was conceived as a necessary practical means to help Christians along in their journey toward perfection. In this system of fellowship Christians could exhort and correct one another, pray, sing, and shout together. Asbury held these meetings to be crucial to help Christians maintain their faith, to grow in their faith, and to enable others to do the same. Each one is personally responsible for going on to perfection, but Asbury could not conceive of the journey taking place except in a community of support.

\(^7\) *JLFA*, I, March 18, 1775; III, date unknown, 92.


\(^9\) *JLFA*, I, December 2, 1776; II, October 16, 1814; I, June 20, 1773, November 23, 1802.
To summarize Asbury’s understanding of salvation: Salvation is the process whereby God convinces, convicts, converts, and sanctifies a person. It affects all of a person’s thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions. It is a process of being perfected in divine love, of being extracted from the web of sin and healed of sin’s effects. The person on the way to perfection should shift primary associations away from secular society and toward the class, which would help—even as the believer helped others—steer safely through this world and on into the next. This world is only a “probationary existence.” Heaven is home.  

Although he desired no home but heaven, Asbury lived most of his adult life in America, a country and a people he grew to love greatly. We now turn to his thinking about what America is and how he saw God using him in it.

**Asbury and America**

It is difficult to say what manner or how much of a millennarian Asbury was when he stepped onto the American shore. But once a massive number of souls were being caught with the net of camp meetings, and Napoleon reigned over ten kingdoms (making him the Beast with ten horns), Asbury could confidently predict that the millennium would begin in 1808 or 1809—its true start being signalled by the incredible work of God here in America.  

For Asbury, as for all those settlers who prefixed “New” to the names of their towns and regions, America was the New World. Here was a place where humankind could throw off the ancient prejudices and become the people God really meant for humanity to be. Asbury was conscious that his was the first denomination birthed on American soil, that the Methodist Episcopal Church was growing up alongside the new nation. He tied the destiny of the two together, a tie that can be seen in how he described America and in the means he embraced for reaching America’s people: the camp meeting.  

Asbury peppered his writings with superlatives about America, calling it “the glory of the world for religion” and “the young child of God.” For him, God had given America a distinctive place in God’s salvific plan. Whatever the United States of America decides to be about, it had better first get straight whose it is and for whom it exists or, as God judged ancient Israel by means of natural and political disasters, so God would judge America. Using Napoleon’s rumored downfall as a parable, Asbury warned that either America’s rulers must govern with the righteousness of God and Christ or “ruin” would be the consequence. America was the “infant

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10 *JLFA*, III, May 29, 1789; II, November 7, 1801.
11 "Unpublished Letters of Francis Asbury," in *Methodist History* I (October, 1962); July 30, 1807; and November 2, 1808.
of Divine Providence...”; and God would correct this nation as a father corrects a son. A plague in Philadelphia, a city that Asbury thought was particularly wicked, was occasion to preach how this might be the judgment of God. Barely able to find living religion in Connecticut, he penned: “... I am afraid that God will punish the people himself for their wickedness; it may be pestilence, or civil discord, or internal plague.”

Asbury believed his Methodists had a critical role to play in helping this favored land remain favored. At a quarterly meeting, Asbury drew parallels between Israel and the present, paying particular attention to “pious characters” and “that the well-being of future generations required that a decided tone to the morals, manners, and religious opinions should be given by the first settlers of the country.” Methodists were to “civilize, methodize, and spiritualize” the people.

Methodism required an extraordinary tool to reach an ever-expanding population with its converting, perfecting, civilizing, methodizing, and spiritualizing gospel. In the hands of the itinerant ministry, that tool was the camp meeting. From the first time Asbury heard of it, he never doubted it was the work of God to convert the continent. He referred to camp meetings as Methodism’s “harvest times.” They allowed itinerant preachers to fish “with a large net.” Asbury once exclaimed: “Camp meetings. The battle ax and weapon of war. . . .” Although he feared backsliding because of the mass conversions and the difficulty of getting all the reborn into classes, and although he did not like the occasional excessive emotionalism, he still believed that camp meetings tamed savage persons and that revivals produced pure doctrine, strict discipline, great harmony, love, and life. Asbury saw God using camp meetings to redeem the world, beginning right here in America.

According to Asbury, America’s destiny was to be the origin of God’s world-wide revival. Methodists were the agents, and camp meetings were the tools. Nothing should obstruct the agents from using their tools in pursuit of the destiny. This will be shown more clearly in the following section.

**Relationship Between Asbury’s Methodism and the Political/Secular Sphere**

From the time he stepped on American soil until the day he breathed his last breath of American air, Asbury held that he was here to do God’s business, which was more important than any affair that might be on the

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12 JLFA, III, August 1783, August 1796; II, August 23, 1815; III, November 7, 1804; II, September 3, 1793, August 26, 1794.
13 Ibid., December 8, 1799; I, March 18, 1792.
14 JLFA, II, August 3, 1809, December 2, 1802; III, September 1, 1811; II, September 10, 1802, May 29, 1800; III, November 7, 1806.
world's agenda. He was here to save souls, i.e., to convert them and to enable their journey on to perfection. Anything which hindered him and his preachers in this pursuit had better get out of the way, for God had chosen the Methodists for a special work.

Asbury feared, however, that Methodists might stray away from their appointed work. The chief temptations which he feared were secular entertainment, wealth, and involvement in politics. Here we will primarily treat the last.

Asbury held that there are essentially two orders competing for people's attention in this life: the spiritual and the secular. The institution which advocates for the former is the church; that which speaks for the latter is politics. The church tries to open a person to communion with God for the sake of the soul. Politics tries to draw a person into systems of give and take for the sake of the concerns of this world. "(M)y mind was troubled by turning on political subjects, which are out of my province. Alas! what a small matter may interrupt our communion with God; and even draw away our affections from him." Being politically concerned has a detrimental effect upon religion: "Among too many of the citizens the spirit of politics has, in whole or in part, eaten out the spirit of religion." He felt very uncomfortable when politics came into the conversation, even in the home of Ohio governor, and Methodist local preacher, Edward Tiffin! He lamented that his own preachers were not immune from the political virus and was particularly grieved the day when Methodism's "Silver Trumpet," elder Nicolas Snethen, became chaplain to the United States Congress.\textsuperscript{15}

There were times, however, when, despite the above attitude, Asbury did support contacts with the political order. He advocated for the general fast days during the Revolution, observing them both personally and by means of special services. On June 1, 1789, Asbury and fellow bishop Thomas Coke presented a congratulatory address from the conference to President Washington, pledging that "the whole Society are warmly attached to the Constitution and government of the United States."\textsuperscript{16}

There were also tense moments between Asbury's Methodism and the political order. James O'Kelly, founder of the Republican Methodists who protested against Asbury's monarchical power, tried to stir up trouble by claiming that Asbury's church would take over the country by force, if it had the opportunity. Asbury pointed out how few Methodists were in elected office, compared to their actual percentage of the population, to show that Methodists could not care less about worldly power.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15}JLFA, I, November 13, 1774, October 21, 1781; II, September 10, 1809, February 12, 1809, November 24, 1811.
\textsuperscript{16}Quoted in JLFA, I, 598, fn. 40.
\textsuperscript{17}JLFA, II, February 13, 1805. A later critic accused Methodists of being so attached to the government that they had modeled their ecclesiastical structure after the secular one. To this Asbury responded that, since the Methodist system was conceived first, the US federal government had copied off of it! See JLFA, III, September 15, 1809.
A more serious situation erupted because of public reaction to the camp meetings. Injunctions were filed against the “noisy preachers” in Virginia and Delaware, charging them with being “subverters of government” and “movers of insurrections.” To Asbury, it would not matter who might oppose the camp meetings, Methodists were willing to be martyred for them.\textsuperscript{18}

Asbury wanted his Methodists to stay as far as possible away from the secular world of politics. Politics was religion’s nemesis. Going on to perfection involved withdrawing from this world and its concerns while taking up the life of the next. Politics was an albatross that prevented people from realizing their spiritual destiny. Political agents, for their part, ought to leave Methodists alone to pursue their God-given task.

There was one partial exception to all of the above, that being the issue of slavery. Here, during Asbury’s time, Methodism agitated politically for abolition—that is, until it became clear that moving in this direction was hurting the primary mission of winning souls for Christ. Then Methodist policy, led by Asbury himself, shifted from emancipation to the amelioration of the slave’s condition. This stance and shift will be shown in the next section.

**Asbury on Blacks and Slavery**

Francis Asbury believed that African peoples, no less than the Caucasian peoples of the Old and New Worlds, were children of God with precious souls in need of salvation. From the first he understood his American mission to include them. He was moved by both their condition and the depth of affection and piety many showed. Early in his ministry he wrote that he was preparing a Negro to be sent to England on a preaching mission. “Black” Harry Hosier was his sometime traveling companion who preached to white audiences.\textsuperscript{19}

In agreement with Wesley, and spurred on by Thomas Coke, Asbury believed slaveholding was incompatible with being a converted Christian. He held up as the ideal Maryland resident Henry Ennalls, who was “powerfully brought to God” and freed his slaves immediately. How could one go on to perfection while holding other human beings—who were sometimes brothers and sisters in Christ—against their wills? Converting and sanctifying experiences were to permeate the whole of one’s life. Given this perspective, Asbury was wholly frustrated when the relationship between conversion and behavior was not as self-evident to others as it was to him. While conversing with a society member, “the subject of slavery being introduced, he [John Willson] acknowledged the wrong done the blacks by taking them from their own country, but defended the right

\textsuperscript{18} JLFA, II, December 26, 1806, July 27, 1807.
\textsuperscript{19} JLFA, III, January 24, 1773; I, May 13, 1781.
of holding them: our talk had well-nigh occasioned too much warmth." He was frustrated and angered that slaveholding persisted among the converted.20

Slavery was an issue—perhaps the issue—in the secular order on which Asbury drove Methodism to take a stand. In May 1785, the Virginia Conference sent a petition to the Virginia General Assembly remonstrating against slavery and pushing for abolition. Coke and Asbury sought General Washington's signature on this petition when they met with him later the same month. The South Carolina Conference some years later sent a similar petition to the general assembly of that state—the response being that legal restrictions were placed on Methodists working with slaves. Even worse than this new law itself were the actions of many slaveholders who no longer allowed their slaves to attend Methodist services. It was this type of restriction that eventuated the change in Asbury's strategy from agitation for abolition to efforts to ameliorate the slaves' condition.21

We must remember that Asbury came to America to save souls—both his own and as many others as he and his Methodists could. He seemed to believe that the body is but a shell, necessary for existence on earth, but at least as much a burden as it is a blessing. The body is valuable only to the extent that it houses the soul. Asbury took very poor care of his own body, denying himself necessary food and rest, to say nothing of outright pleasure. He was ill, often severely so, a great deal of the time. He took his suffering in stride, and admonished others to do the same. Suffering is a companion of bodily existence. He sometimes looked forward to death, even while a comparatively young man, because it would mean release from the sufferings of this world.

This attitude towards the body, and the above stated belief in what salvation is, set Asbury's position on slavery in its context. Although he thought slaves ought to have their physical freedom, his primary concern was to have access to their souls. He first advocated for both, but then Methodist actions hardened the hearts of the slaveholders against the Methodists—the result being that many blacks no longer had access to Methodist preaching. Asbury once mused at a camp meeting that the Blacks had been "abandoned by all sects to us." The way he saw things, if Blacks were not served by the Methodists, they were not being served by anyone and their souls were in jeopardy. Therefore, Asbury began to agitate less for emancipation and more for amelioration.22

20JLFA, III, November 9, 1790, June 15, 1783; II, January 9, 1798.
21JLFA, I, April 30, 1785 (and fn 36 on the same entry), May 26, 1785; II, December 21, 1800.
Thus, Asbury challenged the secular order regarding slavery because he believed that no human being ought to be in bondage and because slavery hindered Methodist evangelistic work. But because of his theology of salvation, his ascetic attitude, the latter perhaps stemming from the former, and the practical legal context in the southern states, he sought to change the secular order only to the extent that free access to souls demanded it. When it became clear that Methodism's agitation for emancipation resulted in decreased access to the slaves' souls, he began to think in terms of amelioration as his public stance, although he continued to maintain that Methodists ought not to hold slaves.

Conclusion

We have sought to demonstrate that Francis Asbury intended his Methodism to be related to the secular life only to the extent necessary in order that he and his preachers might have free access to people's souls.

We are left wondering, however, whether Asbury's way of thinking about the relationship between the sacred and secular orders allowed him and his followers to take a consistent position. It appears that his position was not coherent. His inconsistency is highlighted when one asks whether he was a pre-millennialist or a post-millennialist. On the one hand, he sounds post-millennial in that he thought long-term. He did not write that he expected Christ's imminent return. Rather, he built permanent camp grounds, made provisions for expanding Methodism as America grows, and envisioned the eventual conversion of the world.

On the other hand, he reads like a pre-millennialist. He constructed a thick wall to separate the sacred from the secular, not to protect the civil order, as with Jefferson's wall of separation between church and state, but to shield the sacred from the evil influence of the secular. He did not describe the secular order in positive or neutral terms, but only in negative ones. He did not envision Christianized politics or entertainment, one was incompatible with the other.

Asbury's dilemma, then, was: if converted Christians are to stay aloof from secular life, and if the secular world is likely to perdure for some time to come, then who will be left to norm and govern secular affairs? Does not his stance consign the secular to the devil and the devil's people? If so, then one could expect increasing friction between the sacred and secular orders. Consequently, more contacts for the sake of protecting the sacred would be needed, hence, more contact with the political, which Asbury wanted to avoid in the first place. His sectarian or alternative society strategy coheres only with a pre-millenarian stance, yet he was not fully a pre-millennialist.

That Asbury powerfully shaped American Methodism is undeniable. That he left us a mixed legacy is only slightly less certain. Even within
the context of his time, his teachings regarding citizenship and Christianity are confused; and they offer us little help today in thinking about how to be a good citizen and a practicing Christian at the same time.