The specific focus of this essay is occasioned by an article published eighteen years ago by Leon Hynson in which he suggested that John Wesley is better understood as a democrat than as a Tory. The issue to be addressed below is whether, during the American War for Independence, Wesley's political thought is better understood as democrat or Tory? The question posed is limited to the general period of the struggle for American independence from Great Britain because it was during this time that Wesley wrote his political essays.

Through almost two-hundred years of interpretation, the common observation regarding Wesley and his politics is that he was a Tory. The classic statement of this position is offered by William Warren Sweet, the eminent Methodist scholar, in a paper entitled “John Wesley, Tory” in which he draws from Wesley's fourteen political essays. Sweet poses five theses:

1. Wesley writes as a champion of order and the king;
2. Wesley was a staunch Tory in politics as evidenced by his high church commitment;
3. Wesley believed in the divine right of kings;
4. Wesley was always the consistent supporter of kingly authority; and,
5. Wesley believed in passive obedience and nonresistance.

A brief survey of some of Wesley's political essays gives credence to Sweet's theses. For example, in “Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs,” Wesley vigorously opposed the parliamentary candidacy of John Wilkes. According to Sweet, Wesley's opposition was rooted in his belief that Wilkes was a threat to social order and to the monarchy. In opposing Wilkes, Wesley noted that George III had been unjustifiably vilified. Indeed, in defense of George III, Wesley stated:

But does he [George III] not likewise want understanding? So it has been boldly affirmed. And it must be acknowledged, this charge is supported by facts which cannot be denied.

The First is, he believes the Bible; the Second, he fears God; the Third, he loves the Queen.\(^5\)

Wesley continued his defense of George III by accounting ill-fated government policies to the counsel of bad ministers advising the king, to a bad parliament and to a Jacobite conspiracy and not to King George III.\(^6\)

In February 1772, Wesley delivered himself of another essay, again directed against John Wilkes. In “Thoughts Upon Liberty,” Wesley argued that the limit of civil liberty is that point at which one begins to breed dissension between the king and his subjects.\(^7\) Short of this point, he observes, the liberty enjoyed by English subjects is unsurpassed the world over, and thus they have no grievance.

Later in 1772 Wesley published an essay entitled, “Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power”\(^8\) in which he sets forth the view that ultimately all power derives from God. Specifically he notes:

> It is allowed, no man can dispose of another’s life but by his own consent. I add, No, nor with his consent; for no man has a right to dispose of his own life. The Creator of man has the sole right to take the life which he gave. Now, it is an indisputable truth, *Nihil dat quod non habet*, “none gives what he has not.” It plainly follows, that no man can give to another a right which he never had himself; a right which only the Governor of the world has, even the wiser heathens being judges, but which no man upon the face of the earth either has or can have. No man therefore can give the power of the sword, any such power as implies a right to take away life. Wherever it is, it must descend from God alone, the sole disposer of life and death.\(^9\)

For this reason, according to Wesley, the people of England should not select their leaders. If one does not accept this position, then the only alternative is that all persons, men, women, and children, without respect to position or income, should participate in selecting rulers, which neither is the case nor is likely to be in the future.\(^10\)

Three years later, in 1775, as the political situation between England and its American colonies deteriorated, Wesley penned additional thoughts on things political. In “A Calm Address to Our American Colonies,”\(^11\) after a detailed analysis of the origins and current state of the colonial controversy, he concluded that the unrest was the result of the efforts of those who sought to overthrow the monarchy and set up a republican form of government, a prospect that horrified Wesley.\(^12\)

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\(^5\) *Works,* 11:16.


\(^7\) *Ibid.*, 34–46.

\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 46–53.


\(^12\) *Ibid.*, 88.
contains an entry on November 11, 1775, in which he comments on his motives in writing “Calm Address:”

Need any one ask from what motive this was wrote? Let him look round: England is in a flame! A flame of malice and rage against the King, and almost all that are in authority under him. I labour to put out this flame. Ought not every true patriot to do the same?13

In 1776 Wesley called for unity to end the conflict between England and the American colonies, a unity that assumed the colonies would remain in the empire and loyal to the monarchy.14 In 1777, in “Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England,” Wesley claimed to have letters from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia that proved true his earlier description of the causes of the American War for Independence as the actions of seekers of republican government rather than seekers of British legal rights.15 In 1778 he assured the Irish that all was well with England because George Washington’s army was in decline and the war would soon be won by England.16

This is but a brief review of Wesley’s thoughts on the political affairs of his day, but it is offered as typical of his political posture. The point is to demonstrate the reasonableness of Sweet’s observation that Wesley was a Tory. As noted earlier, this is the position not only of Sweet but of most other Wesleyan scholars.

So, what of Hynson’s contention? Considering Sweet’s thesis, Hynson’s opposing position that Wesley was not a Tory but, instead, a democrat is intriguing. In his piece, “John Wesley and Political Reality,” Hynson sets forth five counter theses to those of Sweet:

1. Wesley was committed to human liberty.
2. Wesley was a Tory insofar as he accepted the biblical view that all power is of God, but more importantly he supported “human delegation and regulation of that authority.”
3. Hynson understands Wesley’s support of the limited monarchy that resulted from the Glorious Revolution as evidence of Wesley’s opposition to the theory of “divine right of kings.”
4. Wesley limited his support of royal authority only to that which supported human liberty rather than unlimited monarchical authority.

13Ibid., 4:58.
15Ibid., 80–90. Wesley was correct. Up until January 1776 when Thomas Paine published Common Sense, the common call was for the rights of Englishmen rather than appeal to a more abstract concept of universal rights.
16“A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland,” Ibid., 149–154.
5. Wesley was more committed to the imperatives of "liberty of conscience" than to the more characteristic Tory position of passive obedience and nonresistance appeals.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, there seems to be considerable difference in judgment between Sweet and Hynson. More careful consideration, however, suggests that the point of difference between Hynson and Sweet may lie not so much in their readings of Wesley as in their definitions of "Tory." Thus, let us consider what the term Tory might have meant in Wesley's time, especially at the time of the American War for Independence.

O'Gorman, in his analysis of British conservatism, observes:

> The real difficulty with using labels with "Tory" or "Conservative" in the early and mid-eighteenth century is that such unmistakably "Tory" or "Conservative" values as the defence of authority, the continuity of institutions, the rights of property and the rule of law within the context of a rapidly observed social hierarchy were so widespread that the description becomes almost meaningless.\(^\text{18}\)

Although O'Gorman may overstate the case in casting the term "Tory" as "almost meaningless," it is clear the history of the term at the time of Wesley was mixed at best. The term apparently was first used in the seventeenth century in Ireland to describe "dispossessed Irish" who became outlaws, supporting themselves through thievery and such against the English settlers. Eventually "Tory" became a term that also referred to Irish supporters of the papacy.\(^\text{19}\)

Occurrence of the term in England grew out of the Exclusion Controversy in late seventeenth-century England.\(^\text{20}\) That controversy centered on James, the Duke of York, a Roman Catholic (later to become James II of England), and whether or not he should be permitted to succeed to the throne. The Exclusioners sought to keep him from the throne because of his Catholicism, and they labeled as Tory those who supported his right to succession. Because of the already negative connotation associated with the term with regard to the Irish, it certainly was intended in this connection to be negative as well. In other words, the supporters of James II, a Catholic, were seen by their opponents as no better than the Irish ruffians who supported the papacy.

But with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 came the occasion of dissenion within Tory ranks, and this dissenion is central to understanding

\(^{17}\)Hynson, 41–42.


\(^{20}\)Ibid.
the difference in judgment between Sweet and Hynson. Whether or not James II should remain on the throne posed to the Tory a choice between loyalty to James II, a Catholic, or loyalty to the Church of England. Put differently, the Tory who was committed to the Church of England was caught in the dilemma of faithfulness to the reformed faith or loyalty to the monarchy. On the one hand, faithfulness to the Church of England might mean that one supported the deposition of James II.

But deposing the king raised difficult questions regarding the divine right of kings and of monarchical succession, both issues very central to typical Tory thinking at that time. As Smellie notes in his analysis, the Tory preferred to think that, de facto, James II had abdicated, thereby creating a need for Parliament to fill the royal vacuum. But if one held to this position, then the wisdom of “the king is dead; long live the king” is lost to the newly emerging notion of republican prerogative. Yet, if the Tory understood the situation as one in which James II had not abdicated but, instead, was forced from his throne, then the situation was even worse, for this represented an active effort to depose the king, which was contrary to the political passiveness of the Tory, a doctrine which was especially strong during the reign of Charles II.

James II was deposed and Parliament determined his successor. Significant numbers of Tories gave up their belief in the divine right of kings doctrine, at least as an extreme and absolute doctrine. Their way around this problem was to adopt what Smellie calls “the lawyer’s fiction”—that the king could do no wrong in matters of government. Instead, the king’s ministers were to be held responsible for policy successes and failures. This being the case, the way in which ministers were to be held accountable was through impeachment, which, in turn, argued for periodic convocations of the Parliament so matters such as impeachment might be discussed.

The Whigs, on the other hand, were united by several commonalities. Smellie’s characterization of them is to the point:

The Whig party was a party of new man and new interests. Its leaders were drawn from the great landed families who had gathered territory and influence during the seventeenth century. They were for limited monarchy and the supremacy of Parliament, the Toleration Act and the Protestant Succession, hostility to France, the development of commerce, and the security of property. Their political allies were the Dissenters—those rationalists of Christianity who did not accept the ornate complexities of the Church of England as the only possible house of God... By 1714 a political alliance of the Dissenters and the greater landowners against the smaller landed gentry was the backbone of the Whig party.

22 Ibid., 20-21.
23 Ibid., 25-26.
24 Ibid., 24-25.
And yet one needs remember that it was a bipartisan delegation of Whigs and Tories that went to the Netherlands and invited William and Mary to be England’s monarchs. One needs remember further that it was a Tory-dominated clergy that, in 1688, virtually unanimously defied James II in refusing to read the second Declaration of Indulgence from the pulpits of England.

With the Tory identity and political posture in English politics as confused as it was, it is difficult to characterize clearly what the Tory party was either before or after the Glorious Revolution in distinction to the Whigs. In many ways, as we have seen, the Tories looked much like the Whigs; indeed, one finds the Duke of Marlborough and Godolphin, both moderate Tories, serving as the leading ministers of government under Queen Anne and cooperating with a Whig-controlled parliament. Yet there remained differences in terms of the socio-economic bases of the two groups. So it is accurate to suggest that the Revolution of 1688 was, to some degree, a joint effort of Whigs and Tories. Ending the reign of James II was the work of both Tories and Whigs alike. The fact that the Tories contributed to this Revolution is evidence of the flux in which the understanding of royal authority and the emerging notion of republican government stood. What seems clear is that the prospect of James II’s turning all of England to Rome was more than most Tories could accept, for they held a loyalty to the Church of England as well.

Further evidence of the ambiguity attending the label of “Tory” is found in the period between 1710 and 1715. The War of Spanish Succession ended in 1713, due largely to the negotiations of Bolingbroke, a political leader of the Tories. Peace was regarded especially important to allow growth in economic trade, an issue especially dear to the Whigs. But the Peace of Utrecht proved disastrous, for in ending the war for England, compromises and concessions had been made which, once known publicly, generated an outrage. Specifically, the Treaty called for England to disengage from certain war areas and to give France, the archenemy, secret information. None of England’s allies were aware that all this was to take place.25

More importantly, Bolingbroke, a committed Jacobite Tory, pursued efforts to break the back of Whig political power and to restore the Stuart line by bringing the Pretender to the throne upon the death of Queen Anne. Bolingbroke saw France as an ally to help in this latter effort. At the same time other, more moderate Tories, under the leadership of Harley, feared a Stuart restoration as irrevocably harmful to the unity of the nation.26 Instead, they supported the Act of Settlement of 1701 that was designed to prevent a Stuart restoration. So the more moderate Tories were eased

out of the government by Bolingbroke. Marlborough, the leader of English military forces in the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713), was dismissed and Walpole, the Tory leader, was sent to the Tower of London. Before the Tories could heal this intra-party rift, Anne died, leaving the question of succession open once again. The Whigs prevailed, inviting George I, the Hanoverian, to be the English monarch. The Tory party was dead for the time.\footnote{In Lloyd, 87, it is noted that the main difference between the Whigs and Tories during the reign of the first two Georges is that the Whigs were in power and the Tories wanted to be in power.}

The point of this brief summary of Toryism is that one of the central factors that led to the demise of Tory influence in English politics when Anne died was the division within the Tories; there was not a clearly identifiable position that unequivocally could be designated "Tory."

Now began several decades of Whig ascendancy in British history, especially under the leadership of Robert Walpole. The distinctive character of the Whigs at this time was opposition to "unconstitutional" exercise of monarchical power. The first two Georges were willing to accede to Whig leadership in Parliament, but George III did not prove so cooperative.\footnote{It is remarkable, however, that in his first ten years as king, George III assiduously sought to honor the results of the Glorious Revolution by deferring to Parliament, so much so he hampered his own leadership. This was a king who himself did not subscribe to the divine right of kings and to unlimited royal prerogatives (Derry, 9). Indeed, the Hanoverian legacy was one of the few in Europe to honor parliamentary prerogatives so readily. George I understood clearly that as Duke of Brunswick and Luneburg, he served, as Brooke states the matter, "[a]lone among the great European monarchies, the [Hanoverians] could boast that they held their crown by the free and deliberate consent of the elected representatives of their people" (in Derry, 7).}

Without an identifiable Tory organization, George III sought to cultivate a "Royal Party" in parliament. The time was especially ripe for this. The Whig party had virtually ceased to exist, lacking any serious opposition from the Tories. What Whig leadership there was had faltered, especially damaged by the foreign policies early in the Seven Years' War.\footnote{Watson, 71-78.}

It was not to be until the 1780's, under the leadership of William Pitt the Younger, that a Tory party could be said to exist. Thus, at the time under consideration, i.e., the American Revolution, it would be fair to say that Britain lacked viable political parties. Indeed, it is more accurate to refer to Whig and Tory \textit{sentiments} rather than \textit{parties} in the country at this time. The Tory sentiment that slowly emerged in response to George III's effort to create a Royal Party, was different from the old Tory party of 1688. The new Toryism was not committed to the Stuarts (Wesley feared the possibilities of a Jacobite cabal in his day) but was loyal to the \textit{constitutional} monarchy.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 118-120.} Where the Whigs and Tories differed was
in the degree to which they were willing to liberalize the polity and permit an expanded degree of civil and religious liberty. The Tories were more conservative on this point than were the Whigs, but not conservative to the extent that they were a throwback to the old Stuart Tories of the previous century.

The error of Hynson's position is that he defines "Tory" in terms that were fifty years too late, and even then his definition is not adequate, for it fails to reflect the diversity of thought within the Tory camp in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. What happened in the years of the eighteenth century was that Toryism underwent a transformation that, in many respects, left it looking similar to the old Whig party of the Glorious Revolution. A more accurate characterization of the term "Tory" at the time Wesley was writing includes ample room for the characteristics of Wesley that are correctly noted by Hynson. But in addition to these correct attributions, Hynson fails to account for the fierce loyalty of Wesley to the monarchy and his marked efforts to resist expansion of civil liberties. Wesley's sentiments clearly were with the Royal Party, with the King's friends. Indeed, on the question of government power, Wesley may have been more conservative than most Tories of his day.

So let us return to Hynson's counter theses and judge them in light of the variable definition of "Tory":

1. Wesley was committed to human liberty. This is true but this does not make the case that Wesley was not a Tory. When Toryism began to re-emerge in the latter part of eighteenth century England, it generally accepted the principle of a constitutional monarchy, which, by definition, means government is limited in order to permit human liberty. But Wesley always understood liberty as possible only within the disciplining restraint of social and political order.

2. Wesley was a Tory insofar as he accepted the biblical view that all power is of God, but more importantly he supported "human delegation and regulation of that authority." In much the same vein as the comment in the previous paragraph, this characterization of Wesley does not make the case that he was a democrat rather than a Tory. Human delegation and regulation of authority that ultimately derives from God was generally recognized and practiced by the Tories of Wesley's day.

3. Wesley's commitment to the limited monarchy which the Glorious Revolution brought must be seen as a precise opposition to the divine right argument. This is not necessarily the case. Many Tories were among the architects of the Glorious Revolution. After the Revolution a significant portion of the Tory camp had markedly moderated or even abandoned its commitment to an absolute divine right of kings, as evidenced by support by some Tories for the Act of Settlement. It is inaccurate to say that in the middle of the eighteenth century the typical Tory understanding of
monarchical power was that of the unlimited monarch invested with the authority of God.

4. Wesley supported kingly authority which undergirded human rights, not all or any kingly authority. This is quite true not only of Wesley but of others among the "Kings friends." The Tories of Wesley's day did not hold to an indiscriminate support of monarchical power.

5. Wesley's powerful assertion of liberty of conscience undercut the old passive obedience and non-resistance appeals. Even before the Glorious Revolution Tories were beginning to abandon the positions of passive obedience and non-resistance. These positions were appropriate characterizations of the Tory party during the reign of Charles II, but even these characteristics of the Tory were falling away by the time of the Glorious Revolution.

In conclusion, the contention of this paper is that Wesley was a typical Tory of his day. Concepts, of course, must be understood in context, for the whole of reality is one grand network of "situatedness." The problem with Hynson's position is that his operational definition of "Tory" is dated in that it comes closer to an understanding of Toryism that is found before the Glorious Revolution than in mid-eighteenth century England. And even during the era of the Glorious Revolution and the thirty years thereafter, Hynson employs an understanding of Tory that may not be that accurate a description of Toryism for that period of history. Either way, Hynson fails to make the case that Wesley was not a Tory.