On November 2nd 1728, the party surveying the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina were caught in a severe thunderstorm and soaked to the skin. "This rain," noted William Byrd, "was enliven'd with very loud thunder, which was echoed back by the hills in the neighborhood in a frightful manner. There is something in the woods that makes the sound of this meteor more awful and violence of the lightning more visible. The trees are frequently shiver'd quite down to the root, and sometimes perfectly twisted."

The thunderstorm is used in the Bible as a dramatic image for the awesome presence of God, as the announcement of Christ's coming to judge and to punish an ungodly and disobedient world. Because of this the thunderstorm had a powerful fearsome hold on the religious consciousness and the conscience of the 18th and 19th century English and north Americans. The terrified state of mind that could be induced by a thunderstorm can be seen in the experience of the inhabitants of Whitney in Oxfordshire.

On the night of Friday, July 11, 1783, when the town was enveloped for two successive days in thunderstorms, which in ferocity, intensity and duration was the equal of any such storms to occur in North America, John Wesley reported that "both the bursts of thunder and lightning or rather sheets of flame were without intermission." Many of the inhabitants thought the Day of Judgment had come.

Men, women, and children flocked out of their houses to kneel and pray in the streets. The Methodists preaching house on the Saturday and the parish church on the Sunday were filled to capacity with worshippers. To the guilty conscience of John Purser, a native of the town and a lapsed Quaker, the dreadful storm was the voice of God speaking to the inhabitants of Whitney "from the heavens in dreadful majesty and with great terror." In his terror his heart trembled and fainted within him. He expected nothing but to be destroyed every moment. All his sins were brought back to his mind and stared him in the face. They all stood in battle array against him. The terrors of God fell upon him and he was pierced to his inmost self with his guilt and
sense of awfulness. He “burst into a flood of penitential tears, wept most bit­
terly, and determined to save his soul and let others do as they might.”

Some Methodist preachers with the necessary gift of oratory were able to
exploit such situations to stimulate local religious revivals. One August
Sunday in 1775, as the inexperienced young preacher, William Spencer,
began to preach in the impressive brick built Methodist chapel in
Chickahominy: “Thunder was heard and an awful cloud came up, which
looked terrible indeed! The people ran out to secure their saddles.” Spencer
announced a hymn for the nervous congregation to sing until the people
were composed. “Presently the rain began to descend, the lightnings to flash
and the thunder to roar!” The congregation was intimidated by the lengthy
duration and alarming noise of the storm—even more so when a carriage a
few steps from the door was struck by lightning.

Spencer then turned the attentive congregation’s consternation at their
imminent destruction to his own advantage; “while my awful God was thun­
dering from heaven I endeavoured to thunder out the terrors of his holy law
against the workers of iniquity.” The powerful conversion of a woman
sparked off a typical unrestrained noisy Methodist revival. “This woman
leaped up and praised God with a loud and joyful voice while the dear chil­
dren of God joyfully joined in the heavenly work. The louder it thundered,
the louder the Christians shouted.” As a result of the revival that began that
dramatic afternoon in the church “between three and four hundred souls
were added to the Church that year in Williamsburgh circuit. The people
were constrained to acknowledge that this was indeed the work of God, and
not of man.”

Seven years later, in 1782, while officiating at Hansen’s chapel in Kent
County, Maryland, the vastly more experienced itinerant Benjamin Abbott
turned a violent protracted thunderstorm to his advantage. The members of
the congregation, who were gathered for a funeral, were dreadfully alarmed
by the claps of thunder that shook the church to its foundations and rattled
the windows. So Abbott set before them “the awful coming of Christ in all
his splendor, with all the armies of heaven to judge the world, and to take
vengeance on the ungodly.” Not surprisingly “the people wept, cried aloud
and fell through the house—including one ‘old sinner’ who attempted to
escape but fell to the floor as if dead.”

Fourteen years later, on a return visit to the area, Abbott met twelve people who dated their conversion from that
‘thunder-gust sermon’ and also many others who had been similarly affected.

Such incidents were not confined to America. In 1807, David McCurdy
and Neal Horan, two Methodist preachers in northeast Ireland arrived in a
district which had been ravaged by a terrible storm accompanied with thun­
der and lightning. To the astonishment of the local inhabitants, one house

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was reduced to a heap of ruins by a bolt of lightning. A large crowd assem­
bled to inspect the ruin and to hear the inmate tell of his narrow escape.
McCurdy and Horan were so inspired by the occasion that they preached
passionately with such powerful effect that, “a gracious work of awakening
commenced which extended and continued for years until at length a
preaching-house had to be erected for those brought into connection with
the local society.”

In 1778 a revival added above 700 members to the Methodist Birstal
circuit in Yorkshire. Thomas Taylor, one of the circuit ministers marvelled at
“the simple means” made use of by God “to bring sinners to himself.” One
of these means was “thunder and lightning.” Jonas Booker, of Clayton near
Bradford, was one of those sinners who “was awakened to the sense of his
sin by means of an awful storm of thunder and lightning.” He joined the
nearest Methodist society in a village some three miles away from Clayton.
Wearying of having to travel so far he invited the Methodist preachers to hold
meetings in his cottage. A class was formed of which he became the leader.
Eventually a preaching house of which he became a trustee was built to
house the growing society. Jonas Booker is one example of those who were
the exception to the scornful belief of the reliable Methodist members that
conversions during the terrors of the thunderstorm were spurious and short­
lived.

The terror of the thunderstorm that emerges, from the accounts already
given, is the fear of being made the object of Christ’s vengeance and pun­
ishment with everlasting destruction on the day of judgment.

According to Michael Watts in his study of the History of Dissent in
Great Britain, it was this fear of eternal punishment and torments, which
accounts for the psychological mass appeal of Methodism in the 18th cen­
tury. After analyzing the conversion experiences of 670 Dissenters he came
to the conclusion, in his second volume, that, “the most important factor
which induced men and women to attend chapel, which prompted them to
seek salvation, which secured their conversion and which guaranteed the
expansion of nonconformity, was fear of disease, fear of death, fear of
judgement, fear above all of eternal punishment in the torments of hell.”

The figures for Methodist growth in Great Britain are astounding. The
100 members in 1740 were 301,743 in 1840, and 478,480 in 1791. In the
United States the 56,664 of 1796 had swollen to 214,325 members in 1816.
To account for this phenomenal growth in terms of one psychological expla­
nation appears overly simplistic! Watts, however, does have the support of

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6 Wesleyan Methodist Magazine (1834), 479.
7 Michael R. Watts, The Dissenters (Oxford, 1995), II, 72. He reached the same conclusion in
John Wesley. Wesley was not exaggerating when he informed a Mrs. H. that she was not a special case in feeling herself to be the object of God’s wrath and punishment; “indeed there may be, ten thousand persons who are now in the same state as are you. I myself was so a few years ago. I felt the wrath of God abiding in me, I was afraid every hour of dropping into hell.”

The era of the Methodist revival was also the period when many felt Western Europe was living in the last days prior to Christ’s descending to earth to execute the final judgment.

In 1783, Wesley taking assurance from the fact that the Methodist revival had already lasted for over fifty years from its first beginnings at Oxford in 1732, robustly rebutted the predictions of critics of the revival—that it would collapse on his death. Wesley affirmed, “I cannot induce myself to think that God has wrought so glorious a work to let it sink and die away in a few years; I trust this is only the beginning of a far greater work—the dawn of the latter day glory.”

The overthrow of the Ancien Regime in Europe, under the weight of the French Revolution, inspired a preacher like William Bramwell to anticipate that the final coming of Jesus was at hand. In 1809 he informed a colleague; “The powers of heaven are shaken, the inquisition, feudal system, nunneries, devils, coming down. Glory! Glory! Glory! Christ will come; He will reign triumphant.”

This sense of cosmic crisis also had a powerful hold on the popular imagination of North Americans. When preaching at Pocomote on the Delmarva peninsula in 1805, Lorenzo Dow paid a small black boy to blow his tin horn at the point in his sermon when he declared, “blow Gabriel, blow!” At the sound of the horn, the congregation fell to the ground crying for mercy, causing the horses tethered nearby to go into a frenzy.

The enormity of the revival was itself a proof of the daily imminence of the coming of Christ. It was this sense of living hourly on the brink of hell and the end of time which gave such urgency and immediacy to the Methodist preaching for repentance and faith. Here is Wesley pressing the “Evangelical Now” upon his congregation at Macclesfield in 1782: “You may now be delivered from the power of your most besetting sins—even this day, this moment, The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand; Crying, ‘serve the devil no longer he is a bad master’, yield now to him who loveth you, who died for you, who will save you from all your sins here and from hell hereafter.”

*Thomas Harris, Memoir of The Rev. William Bramwell (London, 1869), 183.
*W. H. Williams, The Garden of Methodism (Scholarly Resources, 1984), 136. At Bridgend in Wales, while David Morris was preaching on the Day of Judgment, hearers screamed, fainted and ran wildly through the town thinking the solemn day had actually arrived (Watts, I, 414).
*Quoted in Paul Smith, John Wesley Preacher of the Gospel (Wesley Fellowship, 1999), 18–19.
According to Watts, Methodist preaching had its most success in attracting a mass following among the more backward and superstitious sections of the English and Welsh people. It is not enough, as Watts did, to attribute the superstition of these people to their lack of education or to discuss the mental world of the people concerned as "superstitious beliefs." The area where Methodism was strongest was in the counties north of a line drawn between the Bristol Channel and the Wash. These counties constitute what John Gay has called "the Catholic North." In 1790 the Wesleyan circuits in the relevant northern counties contained 34,512 members and the circuits in the southern counties contained 16,805 members. The so-called superstitious beliefs were the residue of the medieval Catholic cosmology, of a world exposed to the agencies of beneficent and malign supernatural agencies and, in which, people needed all the help they could obtain from divinely inspired dreams, foreknowledge, faith healing, exorcisms, charms, spells, and practitioners of occult powers. Methodism appealed to the common people of the northern counties because it took seriously their fears and uncertainties of living in a world liable to unpredictable disasters and unfortunate death.

Catholic cosmology unwittingly encouraged the expansion of Methodism by having nurtured over the medieval centuries the fear of sin, death, judgment, and eternal punishment to which Methodist preaching appealed so dramatically and successfully. How this fear was nurtured can be seen in the stone friezes of Lincoln Cathedral.

Above the southeast door a frieze depicts the last judgment. Christ with stern forbidding face sits in judgment. Those who have practiced the seven acts of mercy described in the parable of the sheep and the goats are led by the angels towards the portals of heaven. Those who have callously neglected the hungry, thirsty, destitute, sick, imprisoned, homeless, and unburied are hauled by fearsome devils into the gaping mouth of hell.

Inside the cathedral joyful hosts of angels beam down heavenly smiles from the frieze above the choir stalls. These may be the gates to heaven, but there is no room for complacency for the faces of demons glare out from the borders of the frieze. These are the demons who inhabit the natural world and its dangerous lonely places releasing at their whims, storms, floods, pestilence, stealing the housewife's eggs, butter, milk, and seducing people to sin.

Outside the north door, there is a badly corroded frieze depicting the torments of the damned in hell with their flesh torn by fearsome huge sharp claws of monstrous ugly bestial devils and their throats choked by writhing snakes. Here in this frieze, depicting the physical suffering of what is a spir-
itual immaterial soul, lies the conundrum of the mental world of medieval cosmology which was posed by Lorenzo Mazzalotte as the difficult question of the immateriality of the human soul, of its susceptibility and capacity to receive the imprint of material things even after having been separated from the body. Both educated and popular minds seem, however, to have been content to accept the conventional ideas of hell they had been taught without questioning the paradox. The frieze ends on a note of hope and triumph for the last figure is that of the gentle sweet-faced Christ who has harrowed hell, stands triumphantly upon the vanquished form of Satan, and calls forth those whom he has liberated from the prison house of the devil.

Worshippers entered the cathedral downcast with fear of the vengeful stern faced Christ and left it uplifted with faith and hope in the gentle sweet face of Christ the Redeemer. The medieval church played alternately upon this fear of Christ the implacable judge and Christ the kindly savior to create that perpetual dread of hell which would drive people to the sacraments of the church.

One sultry overcast July day in 1505 a young student was returning to Erfurt university from a visit to the home of his parents in a nearby town, when he was caught in a thunderstorm and a sudden bolt of lightning struck him to the ground. “In that single flash,” says Roland Bainton, “he saw the denouement of the drama of existence. There was God the all terrible, Christ the inexorable and all the leering fiends springing from their lurking places in pond and wood that might seize his shock of curly hair and bolt him into hell.” 14 In that fateful moment Martin Luther made his vow to save his soul by turning to the sacrament of the monastic cowl. Luther was to play an important part in the birth of Methodism.

Wesley, like Luther, was a country boy with a country boy’s inculcated gullible belief in the supernatural world of popular Catholicism. Like Luther, Wesley oscillated between the fear of death, eternal punishment, and the mercy of God. Wesley believed in Jesus as the advocate for his sins and the atonement for his sins with God and that this belief was enough but, unfortunately, his fear was more real to him than his faith. As he imagined himself teetering on the brink of hell within reach of the clutching hands of bestial demons in the drama of the Last Judgment, he did not know how safe he would be from the condemnation that would hurl him to destruction. On May 24, 1738, while sitting in a little religious meeting house in Aldersgate Street listening to a reading of Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans, he felt his heart “strangely warmed” and “an assurance” was given him that Christ had taken away his sins and saved him “from the law of sin and death.”

When Abel Stevens came to write a centennial history of American Methodism in 1866 it was Wesley’s experience of the “warmed heart” which

14Roland Bainton, Here I Stand (Mentor, 1963), 25.
Stevens identified as "the proximate cause of all the Methodism in the world today" for "on that memorable night genuine Methodism had its birth." From that moment onwards Wesley's preaching was designed as he admitted, "to drive all I can into what you may term a species of madness which I term repentance and conversion." He defended this method by saying, "may not love itself constrain us to lay before men the terrors of the Lord? And is it not better that sinners should be terrified now that they should sleep and awake in hell? I have known exceeding happy results of this even upon men of strong understanding." This approach had severe unforeseen consequences for the future growth and strength of Methodism in Great Britain. As the furnaces of hell were gradually extinguished in the popular imagination, during the 19th and 20th centuries, so the heat of the warmed heart and its appeal cooled. In 1841 the percentage ratio of Methodist members to the population aged 15 and over was 2.79%. In 1891 it had declined to 1.98%; in 1931 it was 1.47%. The once blazing bonfire of Methodist growth had spluttered down to the embers of a mere 353,330 members by 1998.

The alliance of Methodism with medieval Catholic cosmology in England may be seen as part of the complex Reformation process of transition of England from a Catholic to a Protestant country. It also served to provide a massive bulwark against the attack of the rational natural theology that began to flourish in England after 1688 upon the old spiritual world of the medieval Catholic cosmology. It was this spiritual world with its stories of the miraculous, wonderful, apparitions, spirits, ghosts that championed the cause of divine revelation, which required a spirit animated world to justify the existence and works of God. Recorded human experience of this spirit-filled world was proof of its existence.

Recorded experiences of this residue of Catholic cosmology in North America are found in the memoirs of preachers like Benjamin Abbott, Peter Cartwright, and Freeborn Garrettson. A Methodist preacher awakened Benjamin Abbott to his need for divine forgiveness. His fears were aggravated by his belief that Satan had told him that his day of grace was over and, however much he might pray and cry, Satan was sure of him at the last. Driven to the brink of committing suicide, he drove home in his wagon "under the greatest anxiety imaginable with his hair rising on his head" because he was afraid Satan was pursuing him closely behind to prevent his escape. Peter Cartwright was another who was consumed with fear of the devil. In 1801 he was in a cave on his father's farm praying for pardon that such a fear of the devil fell on him that he felt the devil was personally there

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15 Stevens, 193.
17 The nature of this attack is discussed by John Redwood, Reason, Ridicule and Religion in the Age of Enlightenment in England 1660–1750 (London, 1876).
to seize him and drag him down to hell, body and soul. He sprang to his feet and ran home to his mother who told him it was a device of Satan to prevent him from finding the blessing of forgiveness. People at camp meetings would rise from their ecstatic trances to professing to have conversed with the spirits of the dead in heaven and hell and to have the power to heal all manner of diseases and to raise the dead. Cartwright was credited with having exorcised “the little mean and sickly devils” who were irritating one of his persecutors. The journal of Freeborn Garrettson contains accounts of miraculous healings, descriptions of visions of God, premonitions, guidance in vivid dreams, and hearing the voice of God addressing him directly.

No one could deny the massive presence of Methodism in the 18th and 19th century Trans-Atlantic world. The existence of Methodism and the stories of visions, dreams, special providences, and exorcisms provided by its members and preachers in the pages of the Arminian and Wesleyan Methodist magazines all add up to an incontrovertible demonstration of the existence of God and the reality of the spirit-filled world.

The terrors of the thunderstorm even penetrated the dreams of the Catholics and Protestants tormenting both in their infernal nightmares, “watching heaven come down and rain fire and lightning with the most terrifying forms and strange figures” as one medieval Catholic sufferer graphically described it. And Bunyan’s Christian, in the house of the interpreter, is told by a visibly shaken man of how in his sleep “I dreamed and behold the heavens grew exceedingly black, also it thundered and lightned in most fearful wise that it put me in an agony.”

When, however, Catholic and Methodist came to contemplate the sacrificial love of Christ which secured the forgiveness of their sin both experienced the ecstasy of the warmed heart. “My soul is rejoicing in such great happiness,” wrote Catherine of Sienna. “My soul was filled with divine peace and a heavenly joy,” said William Reeves a member of Lambeth Methodist chapel.

A myth, it has been claimed, “lasts for only as long as it answers a lasting need.” Medieval cosmology with its spirit-animate world provided the evidence necessary to the whole notion of good and bad rewards and punishments and the motive for belief. To deny spirits and witches was to be an atheist. Darwin, Marx, and Freud demythologized the mental world of the

2Extracts from journal reproduced in Arminian Magazine (February, 1794), 11–60; (January), 6–9; (March), 115–119; (August) 394–398; (September) 450–454.
3Piero Camporesi, Fear of Hell in Early Modern Europe (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 190.
4Camporesi, 190.
5Edward Corderoy, Father Reeves, The Methodist Class Leader (New York, 1853), 145.
6C.p., Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down (1984), 296. The triumph of mechanical philosophy created further problems for Christianity. Witches, malignant spirits, had been
19th and 20th centuries. The thunderstorm still has the power to create fear and unease in the modern mind but it no longer signals the presence of God and heralds the coming of the denouement of the drama of human existence.

We end with two caveats. The first relates to the role of popular Catholicism in aiding the rapid growth of Methodism in the north of England. When Edwin H. Tindall published his *Wesleyan Methodist Atlas of England and Wales* in 1878, its reviewer pointed out that anyone travelling by train from Essex to London “would be able to count as he passed, thirty-five villages on the right and left, before he got to Stratford le-Bow, all without the shadow of a Wesleyan Methodist Chapel or preaching room in them.”

Essex was almost a sheet of white paper for anything Wesleyan Methodism has done to color it. Most of Surrey looked like no man’s land. This was the region that had been part of the orthodox conservative Roman Catholic diocese of Winchester, which had offered such an obstinate protracted resistance to Edward VI’s militant protestantization policies!

The second caveat relates to the warmed heart. In the popular Methodist experience of assurance of salvation there seems to have been a close relationship to the Reformation doctrine of assurance in predestination. Hugh Bourne spent 20 years going to bed at night with the dread of awakening in hell. His sense of forgiveness on Sunday December 4, 1808, under the preaching of a fellow lay preacher, A. Lees, was an illuminating and heart-warming experience. “The Lord showed me the judgement, and that I should have a reward for standing in testimony. My heart slowed within me. I had a greater blessing now than ever.” Hundreds of Methodist converts prayed and shouted aloud with all the power of their lungs in unison with whatever their hearts showed within them, at their relief from their fear of eternal damnation at the day of their last judgment. They were “safe men and women” at the last day. They knew with absolute certainty they were destined for heaven.

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*Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, 1878, 56–58.