BOOK REVIEWS


As I read the final installment of what is now a three-volume set on the history of American Methodism, I was reminded of nineteenth century Methodist leader Frances Willard’s rallying cry to “do everything” as she expanded her temperance crusade to include the many-headed hydra of alcohol’s attendant social problems. The authors of this text could doubtless sympathize with Willard’s challenges as each paragraph written suggests a plethora of options for continuing the Methodist story they sought to write. Rich in detail, the authors have given professors of United Methodist history many choices to consider in crafting a course that tells the Methodist story. A historiographical essay setting this work in the context of preceding efforts of a similar nature is unfortunately not present in this volume or the more extensive volume one. Such a discussion, however, is laid out in an April, 2010, article of this journal and well worth a careful reading.

Readers of the third volume will find little that has changed from the approach taken in volume one, except that it is less than half the length at 276 pages. This volume will likely be most frequently assigned for classroom use along with the *Sourcebook*. (Volume one of the set is less amenable for this purpose due primarily to the length of the survey which limits instructors’ flexibility in assigning supplemental reading.) Because volume three does a good job of outlining the development of United Methodist polity, it may be especially useful for those professors who closely integrate the study of United Methodist history with changes in its polity. It is less well-suited to the study of key personalities in the Methodist movement or in assessing the popular spirituality of Wesley’s American followers. The *Sourcebook* is a necessary text to read alongside both volumes one and three. Without frequent pauses to consult the splendid primary source documents, the narrative simply feels too encyclopedic as it moves from subheading to subheading in a sometimes tiresome march through important changes in the church.

The two companion volumes for the *Sourcebook* are structurally similar to one another and both are helpfully keyed to the *Sourcebook*. The interpretive framework chosen for volume one as well as for the “compact history” is one that accentuates the tensions between and the evolution from piety to nurture and then advocacy in the history of Methodism in America. The authors readily acknowledge, however, that this framework only goes so far in explaining the diverse movements which have swirled through
American Methodism for nearly 300 years. They neglect in-depth analysis of the events they chronicle in order to favor discussion of the rich texture of Methodist ecclesial developments. Providing deeper analysis of the meaning of many historical events will be the responsibility of the instructors and students who use these books.

Undoubtedly most readers of *American Methodism: A Compact History* will easily identify the lack of attention or nuance to any number of topics they find to be of particular interest. This is unavoidable in a book of such scope. This reviewer, for example, found the mid twentieth century debates over mission in the denomination’s mission board to have been treated somewhat one-sidedly. The cursory attention given to Methodism’s most famous twentieth-century missionary, E. Stanley Jones, is an example of this. The wider historiographical neglect of Midwest Methodism and other regional particularities is unfortunately (if understandably) reflected in this volume as well.

With the completion of this three-volume project, some additional remarks concerning the project as a whole are warranted. Of the three volumes it is clear that volume two, the *Sourcebook*, has been and will be of greatest use for teachers of United Methodist history. The authors began with this text and it is their most valuable contribution as a significant improvement over the previous compilation by Frederick Norwood. As one reads the *Sourcebook*, it is easy to sympathize with the challenge of their editorial decisions. The preface to the *Sourcebook* also alerts the reader to what are the two greatest weaknesses in the project’s design. These weaknesses, however, are provocatively suggestive of how future surveys of Methodism could take shape.

First among these problems is the authors’ stated decision to make this book only about the North American context. Understanding how Methodism emerged outside North America is vitally important for all United Methodists, not just for those who happen to live there. The historiographical trends toward “transnational history” and the growth of United Methodism in Africa and Asia should have been sufficient to prompt the authors to venture beyond their considerable expertise in the study of American Methodism. To be fair, the *Sourcebook* contains several good selections on the global nature of Methodism, but how the unfolding of Methodism occurred in dozens of countries around the world is mostly overlooked. Clearly, quadrennial debates over denominational restructuring require a worldwide outlook as United Methodists seek to overcome dualistic thinking concerning “the west and the rest.” Previous survey texts which examine world Methodism are helpful, but there remains ample room for improvement.

A second decision by the authors (or the publisher?) is reflected in the misleading use of the term “Methodist” in the project’s title. The many vibrant Methodist offshoots from the Methodist Episcopal Church and subsequent bodies are not discussed beyond the point of the departure from the main trunk. Had the authors chosen otherwise, readers would have gained not only a more thorough understanding of black Methodism in America
but also of the holiness and Pentecostal movements and the institutions they formed which are playing an increasingly formative role in United Methodist experience. As other scholars have noted, relatively few holiness adherents left the main trunk of Methodism in the late 1890s. The decline of holiness teaching in American United Methodism must be explained in more nuanced ways besides that of the departure of holiness advocates. A study of American Methodism that included multiple Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal offshoots would have broken new historiographical ground and born different fruit from the current project. More attention to this is necessary as United Methodism develops deeper ecumenical relationships with traditions which departed from them.

What this reviewer perceives as limitations in the project’s design underscores how difficult a task it is to tell the full story of American Methodism for this or any age. As Frances Willard learned over a century ago one simply cannot “do everything.” And yet one must try. The authors would be delighted if this project served as an invitation for instructors of Methodist history to collaborate in the months and years ahead to develop other resources to complement this one. At the top of the list—and a project which would prove an easy collaboration by readers of this journal—would be a set of well-crafted discussion questions for each chapter which integrates all three volumes to introduce deeper analysis of the issues raised in this study. Dynamic conversations in classrooms based on the Sourcebook have been occurring for well over a decade throughout the country already. One hopes that those conversations about United Methodism’s past will also yield fruit in imagining—and praying for—a bold United Methodist future.

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In One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism, Anna M. Lawrence considers both the “language and roles of the Methodist family.” By expanding definitions of the family beyond “a unit of the household,” she is able to explain how evangelicals “used the terms of family” to denote a “broader measure of association” (4). To eighteenth-century Methodists, she argues, the term family included both biological and religious ties—unrelated “fathers” and “mothers,” “brothers” and “sisters,” indeed, converts to Methodism who created a “unified culture” (2, 7). This “flexibility of familial association,” the author suggests, enabled
choice and also made the “soul mate” a central consideration for marriage (2). Throughout her book, Lawrence thus argues for a reassessment of “the formation of the modern family” as shaped by evangelical influences in transatlantic contexts.

During the eighteenth century, Lawrence explains, Methodists and other evangelicals challenged ideas about family and family life in Britain and American culture by expanding its meaning to include fictive relationships that developed in religious contexts. Because Methodists so carefully positioned themselves within the society in which they lived, they ably influenced their surrounding culture. “Unlike Moravians,” for example, “Methodists never sought to create separate Methodist settlements.” Lawrence explains further, “They lived within communities and families that held different, often conflicting, values” (100). In other words, despite their religious differences, Methodists chose to integrate into society. In many cases, this sparked criticism while simultaneously allowing them to expand familial norms.

In the early chapters of her book, Lawrence examines the “span and sociability of early Methodism” as members developed into a transatlantic group. Her first chapter begins with a discussion drawn from and about the “narratives and personal writings” of both English and American Methodists of the eighteenth century (15). Lawrence then considers the place of families in conversion narratives (often describing alienation from one’s birth family while entering a new spiritual family), the familial culture of Evangelicalism within church organization, and the role of family within Methodist sermons and print culture (46). Specific examples, drawn from manuscript and printed sources, are used aptly by Lawrence to illustrate her claims.

In later chapters of her book, the author focuses on Methodist (and anti-Methodist) discourse about sexuality. In particular, she explains how sexuality impacted Methodist marriages as well as ministerial and lay celibacy—both male and female. While discussing this topic, Lawrence makes it clear that John Wesley and other Methodists departed from other Protestant views of marriage by promoting (albeit temporarily) celibate lifestyles. Although decried for embracing “popish practices,” Wesley emphasized not only the religious motivations for sexual abstinence (he believed this allowed male itinerants and female exhorters to focus on their ministries more completely) but he also explained how it could create pragmatic and temporal concerns (it would be difficult to support a family on an itinerant’s rather limited earnings). Nonetheless, many Methodist preachers, including Charles Wesley and John Fletcher, as well as female exhorter Mary Bosanquet, eventually married. Some even settled permanently in homes of their own and started families. Depending on the circumstance and the individuals involved, both marriage and celibacy were deemed acceptable.

Lawrence’s work certainly expands the scope of family history, religious history, transatlantic Methodism and gendered roles in a religious context. For example, unlike other historians of the family who have focused primarily on demographic details, Lawrence has considered how religion has shaped
and been shaped by the family, both fictive and biological. And, rather than focusing on worship patterns within localized evangelical communities, Lawrence argues that the Methodist family transcended local ties by creating unity and promoting organization throughout the Atlantic world. They were, she contends, attempting to establish “one family under God.” Lawrence’s transatlantic focus thus builds on the scholarly foundation established by historians such as David Hempton, who helped shift historiographic thinking about Methodism beyond a national scope. Relationships beyond the Atlantic, they contend convincingly, indeed mattered.

In the final chapters of her work, Lawrence explores the political and social changes Methodists encountered during the American Revolution, which she described as a rather complex conflict within the Methodist community—indeed, “a struggle between Wesley and ‘his sons’” (192). When American Methodists chose to separate from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784—separation from their British brothers and sisters—their familial ties became increasingly distant. Consequently, even if unwittingly, their relationships were redefined as spiritual cousins, aunts, and uncles, rather than continuing as parents and siblings. In addition, further familial gaps emerged as a result of the large number of black converts to Methodism (free and slave). Over time, American Methodists felt the need to redefine familial relationships within the religious sphere; African Americans, for example, were relegated to the role of spiritual children. Only whites were deemed spiritual “fathers” and “mothers in Israel.” By the nineteenth century, Methodism no longer challenged its surrounding culture; rather, it began to flourish within Victorian culture (218).

In this book, Lawrence successfully moves family history, and Methodist history, into a larger and more nuanced contextual framework. Rather than limiting her scope to demography, or describing Methodist growth and eventual accommodation within American society, she creates a complex account that considers how family, gender and race influenced Methodism, and how Methodism shaped and was shaped by American and British culture.

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Robert Black and Keith Drury have presented a narrative history of the nearly 170 years of the Wesleyan Church. There are two main streams that came together in 1968 to form this denomination. Ironically, the authors observe, neither stream wanted to be a denomination. The Wesleyan Methodists formed as a protest of Methodist ministers and laity. They objected to the lukewarm stance of the Methodist Episcopal Church to
slavery and the heavy Episcopal dominance in the direction of the church. While forming a new Methodist connection, the Wesleyan Methodists resisted creating a new church. The Pilgrim Holiness Church also began as a parachurch organization devoted to personal holiness. Over the decades in the twentieth century, these two groups underwent fundamental transformations that led to formation of a new denomination. That path to becoming a denomination included major gains as well as departures from the original Wesleyan distinctiveness. The authors address these concerns.

In the main, the authors narrate the denomination’s successful development and stress the providential nature of its maturation. The book has a clear intention of telling readers that the growth of the Wesleyan Church owes itself to divine blessing. The authors believe that the denomination’s present status is a testament to the faithfulness of Wesleyan and Pilgrim Holiness forebears and to God’s faithfulness. That testament is supposed to inspire future stewardship among the younger generations in the Wesleyan Church.

The question, the authors ask, is what type of stewardship new generations will bring to this denomination. With growth and development, the denomination seems to have lost some of its key distinctiveness. The emphases on social reform and justice and personal holiness appear to have waned in the twentieth century. This fact, the authors lament. The decrease in the holiness component of the Wesleyan Church is a matter that Drury has addressed at length in other areas. He identified the church growth movement as the cause for the attenuation of holiness. This book does not make such an assertion. The other major change is what historian Timothy L. Smith called the Great Reversal. This reversal was the shift from social activism in antebellum period toward an emphasis on personal salvation. While Wesleyans had also focused on personal holiness, it appears that personal spiritual life became more their ambition in the decades following the Civil War. The Great Reversal appears as a recurring theme throughout the book to illustrate how the Wesleyan Church had transformed by the turn of the twentieth century. The authors do not make an explicit statement that the Wesleyan Church should re-energize both personal holiness and social activism, but this can be inferred.

The book has an accessible, narrative style that eschews the accoutrements that at times encumber scholarly writing. Citations are available online at www.wesleyanhistory.org. This pared-down style appeals to a wider audience and could be useful in college classes and local church education classes. Scholars in Methodist history will find the catalog of fascinating examples as ample fodder for research in depth on any given topic. The book achieves in updating the historiography on the Wesleyan Church and in making that update available to a wide audience.

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