

## FRANCIS ASBURY AND THE OPPOSITION TO EARLY METHODISM<sup>1</sup>

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“I was deeply dejected,” Francis Asbury remarked in his journal on February 5, 1795, during a stay in Charleston, South Carolina. The preacher’s despondency had a simple cause—the failure of Methodism in the city to date: “the white and worldly people are intolerably ignorant of God; playing, dancing, swearing, racing; these are their common practices and pursuits. Our few male members do not attend preaching; and I fear there is hardly one who walks with God: the women and Africans attend our meetings, and some few strangers also.”<sup>2</sup> Asbury’s analysis is revealing. His audience was overwhelmingly female and black, and the white men who stayed away from the Methodist services were involved in activities that Asbury on numerous occasions had denounced.

These anti-“worldly” values and the race and gender of early converts in large measure accounts for the disinterest in and hostility to early Methodism. And as we shall see, the character of worship services themselves, though not mentioned by Asbury in this passage, also contributed to the opposition to the early church.

From his arrival in America in 1771 until his death in 1816, Asbury witnessed and helped lead a transformation of the American religious landscape. With this religious transformation came fundamental psychological, intellectual, and social change. Asbury was in a unique position to observe this revolution. He travelled and preached throughout the country, conversed with other itinerants and ministers, dined with the unconverted and the converted, and dutifully recorded much of what he saw and felt on these journeys. The scope of this change is vividly illustrated by the sources and types of opposition that Asbury encountered.

Because Methodist ideals eventually became widely accepted, the transition seems in retrospect much smoother than it actually was. Asbury and his ministers brought with them a new style of preaching and worship, a critique of contemporary values, and a new concept of the self. Converts conceived of themselves as part of a larger Christian community and struggled to center

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Methodist History* 31.4 (July, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), February 5, 1795, 2:41, hereafter cited as *JL* and followed by month, date (where given), year, volume, and page number. Charleston’s unique character cannot alone account for this entry. Asbury made similar comments about many other locales, such as when he wrote about Hartford, Connecticut in 1796: “I can scarcely find a breath of living, holy, spiritual religion here, except amongst a few women in East Hartford” (*JL*, August 1794, 2:25).

their lives around their church and their new faith. Not all shared this new vision and not all who viewed these changes in their friends, families, and communities welcomed the Methodists.

Although Asbury was clearly not a social activist as we would define one today, there were many profoundly revolutionary aspects to his ministry. If we are to understand the positions he took and the beliefs he held, we must put them into the context of the larger Methodist movement and its opposition. Before turning to the reasons he and his fellow ministers were considered so revolutionary, we must first look at the sources and kinds of opposition they encountered.

As we might expect, some opposition came from elites. On February 6, 1774, Asbury recorded the following incident in Maryland: “. . . many people attended at Mrs. Triplett’s to hear me preach; but a company of men, who would wish to support the character of gentlemen, came drunk, and attempted an interruption . . . .”<sup>3</sup> Many references in the journal to the opposition of elites are less oblique. Civil authorities fined him for preaching in 1776.<sup>4</sup> In post-war New Jersey, Asbury and his entourage were stopped several times in a few days and asked to present their preaching passes and were “threatened with desperate work in the morning, an attack on the road,” although it never came to pass.<sup>5</sup>

More prevalent, though less overt, were attacks from other sects. “The priests of all denominations, Dutch and English,” Asbury wrote in 1782, “appear to be much alarmed at our success; some oppose openly, others more secretly . . . .”<sup>6</sup> In 1796, Asbury noted that a “Universalist” attending his Sunday sermon came with “book and pen . . . ready to take down my discourse.” Thinking this sermon, like a previous one by another Methodist, would be “printed and traduced,” the audience apparently tried to stop the transcriber, but Asbury intervened: “I said, ‘Stop, let that gentleman write’; but it appeared as though his fingers or heart failed him.”<sup>7</sup> Another incident involved a Baptist who tried to prevent an infant baptism.<sup>8</sup> Although much of this tension was doubtless over doctrine, these incidents illustrate how contentious the climate was and how other denominations felt threatened by the Methodists.

Elites still considered Asbury and his fellow preachers dangerous after the turn of the century. In 1806, he sarcastically noted:

The work of God is wonderful in Delaware. But what a *rumpus* is raised! We are subverters of government—disturbers of society—movers of insurrections. Grand juries in Delaware and Virginia have presented the noisy preachers—lawyers and doctors are in arms—the lives, blood and livers of the poor Methodists are threatened.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *JL*, February 6, 1774, 1:106.

<sup>4</sup> *JL*, June 20, 1776, 1:190.

<sup>5</sup> *JL*, September 5, 1782, 1:431.

<sup>6</sup> *JL*, August 1782, 1:432.

<sup>7</sup> *JL*, September 18, 1796, 2:98-99.

<sup>8</sup> *JL*, February 6, 1785, 1:481.

<sup>9</sup> *JL*, December 1806, 2:524.

Yet we need not accept this sarcasm as proof that the charges were unfounded. Asbury's message of spiritual equality in an age of hierarchy and deference could well have threatening implications. It certainly carried over into his daily encounters:

I visited Charles Tait, a judge; I did not present myself in the character of a gentleman, but as a Christian, and a Christian minister: I would visit the President of the United States in no other character; true, I would be innocently polite and respectful—no more. As to the Presbyterian ministers, and all ministers of the Gospel . . . to humble ourselves before those who think themselves so much above the Methodist preachers by worldly honour, by learning, and especially by salary, will do them no good.<sup>10</sup>

The full meaning of this entry is unclear, but we can see that Asbury believed that more deference was expected of him and that he withheld it.

By far the most common protests against the Methodists, however, came from non-elites. These more hostile confrontations occurred throughout the country, although they seem to have been more common in cities. Upon arriving in Providence, Rhode Island, one July evening, Asbury remarked: "when we entered the town, some drunken fellows raised a cry and shout, and made a sacrifice of the Methodists to hell."<sup>11</sup> "I was insulted on the pavement," he wrote of a Charleston incident, "with some as horrible sayings as could come out of a creature's mouth on this side of hell."<sup>12</sup>

Nor were churches or services considered off-limits by his opposers. Once when preaching in a second-story window in Boston, on the street below "the boys and Jack-tars made a noise, but mine was the loudest . . ."<sup>13</sup> In 1774 Baltimore, "two young men, in the midst of the sermon, came in and broke the order of the meeting."<sup>14</sup> Another sermon was interrupted in Waltham, Massachusetts, where "the young people seemed very wild; there was an old drunkard too, who stood up and spoke once and again . . ." This crowd was not "wild" with conviction, for he closed this entry with: "perhaps they will behave better the next Sabbath I give them."<sup>15</sup>

These confrontations were not always just with words. Asbury recorded numerous acts of vandalism against Methodist meeting houses, as when he noted that: "One young man behaved amiss, for which I reprov'd him: perhaps he might be among those in the evening who made a riot, broke the windows, and beat open the doors."<sup>16</sup> Occasionally these incidents were more violent, as the following two episodes from Charleston illustrate. In 1788:

<sup>10</sup> *JL*, December 7, 1806, 2:523.

<sup>11</sup> *JL*, July 23, 1795, 2:56-7.

<sup>12</sup> *JL*, February 1795, 2:41. I believe these to be non-elites for two reasons: one, because of the way Asbury describes them—"Jack-tars," "drunks," etc.—and two, because he often uses "respectables" or "gentlemen" in a derogatory fashion when he wishes to describe (and pillory) elites. The larger number of urban incidents may be due to the fact that cities had better notice of Asbury's scheduled appearances.

<sup>13</sup> *JL*, July 22, 1794, 2:21.

<sup>14</sup> *JL*, January 16, 1774, 1:104.

<sup>15</sup> *JL*, July 11, 1802, 2:351.

<sup>16</sup> *JL*, January 18, 1795, 2:40.

While another was speaking . . . a man made a riot at the door; an alarm at once took place; the ladies leaped out at the windows . . . Again whilst I was speaking at night, a stone was thrown against the north side of the church; then another on the south; a third came through the pulpit window, and struck near me inside the pulpit.<sup>17</sup>

In 1797:

A young Scot shouted in the church, and after he was taken out of the house struck three or four men; no bill was found against him; and we are insulted every night by candlelight.<sup>18</sup>

At least once, Asbury suspected elites were behind such acts: “the mob had been after brother Everett with clubs, and, it was supposed, under the connivance of their superiors . . . .”<sup>19</sup>

It is often difficult to see the threat that these evangelicals posed in specific situations. How, for example, are we to interpret the actions of the “lady” in the following account?

. . . at Mrs. Agatha Ball’s, who is a famous heroine for Christ. A lady came by craft [boat] and took her from her own house, and with tears, threats, and entreaties, urged her to desist from receiving the preachers, and Methodist preaching; but all in vain.<sup>20</sup>

We are told no more about this encounter. What is clear is that this lady was seriously opposed to Mrs. Ball’s housing the preachers, and that Mrs. Ball was equally serious about Methodism.

Although motives in specific cases are difficult to recover, we can posit some reasons for this opposition by noting the context, both intellectual and temporal, of these events. One important factor was racism, with all its attendant fears, social and political implications, and hysterical manifestations. Asbury himself was not immune to it. His descriptions of blacks and his interaction with them often smack of condescension and patronization. He took racial segregation for granted in situations we would find extraordinarily offensive today. Perhaps it is redundant to say that whites, north and south, of this era were racists, yet this racism as a source of opposition to the early Methodists must be considered. The evidence of it runs the gamut from vague anxieties about interracial gatherings to violent anti-abolitionism.

A Charleston mob in 1800 almost drowned a Methodist minister there because he possessed copies of an address of the Methodist General Conference. The address contained a summary of the church position that slavery and Christianity were incompatible as well as directions for Methodist circuits to petition state legislatures to enact gradual emancipation laws. The reaction of the mob surprised Asbury:

I had thought our address would move their majesties and peers of Charleston. Report says they have pumped poor George Dougherty until they had almost de-

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<sup>17</sup> *JL*, March 16, 1788, 1:564.

<sup>18</sup> *JL*, January 25, 1797, 2:117.

<sup>19</sup> *JL*, August [6], 1782, 1:432. Brother Everett was spared a beating when it was discovered that he had his license.

<sup>20</sup> *JL*, January 17, 1787, 1:532.

prived him of breath; and John Harper [another Methodist minister] committed the address to the flames before the intendant of the city.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes the challenges the Methodists made to existing race relations were much more subtle. “I reprov’d myself for a sudden and violent laugh” Asbury noted on another occasion, “at the relation of a man’s having given an old Negro woman her liberty *because she had too much religion for him*.”<sup>22</sup>

Methodism also threatened traditional relations between the sexes. Asbury certainly noticed that his audiences were often overwhelmingly female (and black, in the south). He sometimes explained this by the fact that sermons were given during working hours; elsewhere, he attributed this to male irreligion: “. . . I had many women and but few men to hear. Some of the men are gone to war, some to their sports, and some have no desire to hear.” Evangelical religion had great appeal to women, and Asbury was heartened by their receptivity to his message.<sup>23</sup>

His journal also shows how women played key roles in the church. In class meetings, through charities, or during services, these Methodist women inspired and led others. In 1802, Asbury was moved by a woman who “rose up and gave an exhortation: she spoke as if she were going home to glory—I felt it . . . .”<sup>24</sup> After the funeral of a “sister Jones” in Virginia, Asbury noted her piety and contribution: “She was doubtless a woman of sense, vivacity, and grace. She wrote to admiration—all in raptures. She would pray in any place, and before any people; she reprov’d with pointed severity, and sung with great sweetness.”<sup>25</sup>

Women like sister Jones abound in these pages, although we rarely see how these women were received by those outside the membership. A close reading provides a few clues, such as when Asbury wrote about the departed sister Jones that “her persecutions and troubles are now at an end,”<sup>26</sup> or later when he described Jones and “sister Taylor” as “those female *flames*, and almost martyrs for Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> Earlier, he noted how a community shunned two schoolteachers after conversion:

I admire the piety, prudence, and good sense of the Misses Childs: since they have experienced religion, none of the *great* will employ them; their patrons, alarmed at the deep and gracious impressions apparent on the young minds of some of the scholars, withdraw their children at once.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *JL*, November, 1800, 2:266. The editors of the journal claim that the address spoken of was from northern abolitionists, but considering Asbury’s use of “our address,” Donald Mathews’ account of this is undoubtedly correct in Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 20-22.

<sup>22</sup> *JL*, November, 1790, 1:655-56. There are many more incidents described in Asbury’s journal that show racism as a factor in opposition to the Methodists.

<sup>23</sup> *JL*, November 1794, 2:31.

<sup>24</sup> *JL*, August [30], 1802, 2:360.

<sup>25</sup> *JL*, December 12, 1794, 2:34.

<sup>26</sup> *JL*, December 11, 1794, 2:34.

<sup>27</sup> *JL*, August [30], 1802, 2:360.

<sup>28</sup> *JL*, June 6, 1783, 1:442.

Sometimes it is unclear whether harassment is due to Methodism's message or to its effect on women. In 1795, he wrote: "When I pray in my room with a few poor old women, those who walk the streets will shout at me."<sup>29</sup> At other times it is clearly due to both: "At night a drunken man applied to have his wife's name blotted from the class paper . . ."<sup>30</sup> On one occasion, a patriarch's death freed a widow and her slaves to practice religion: "here is a change; the man is dead: the widow was attentive, and the blacks crowded to prayers."<sup>31</sup>

Despite what these incidents suggest, Asbury was hardly calling for an end to patriarchy, yet we can easily imagine the marital tension that might result between a converted wife and her unmoved husband. And Asbury did urge women to exert themselves for the gospel, as in this exhortation to a female member: "I fear you will slack your hands, watch on, pray and suffer on, believe on, fight on, like a woman! *Like a man for God*."<sup>32</sup> Such appeals show how Asbury addressed women directly, considered their work in the new church vital, and encouraged their efforts. For people shut out of other public arenas such words must have been empowering.

Asbury had a tremendous effect on his female members. He related one instance where a woman "was watching for me, and when I came she could hardly bear my presence; she seemed as deeply affected as if I had been her father."<sup>33</sup> This greeting parallels the scenes that occur time and again inside the churches. Under Asbury's charismatic preaching, members of both sexes shouted, stomped, wept, and cried out, at times uncontrollably." Alice Woodward especially was so deeply affected," he wrote of another woman, "that she had scarce power to contain herself."<sup>34</sup> Not only did this violate the era's norms of appropriate behavior in services, but it also violated norms of appropriate behavior for women.

The final evidence that Asbury and his ministers were challenging gender relations was his constant reliance on widows. They housed and fed him, gave him a place to preach, nursed him when he was ill. In 1797, he remarked that "we have been fed by the widows more than Elijah."<sup>35</sup> In 1809, he wrote: "I am most at home when I am housed with the widow and the orphan."<sup>36</sup> Similar references are found throughout the journal. Of his vast

<sup>29</sup> *JL*, February 1795, 2:41.

<sup>30</sup> *JL*, September 5, 1782, 1:431.

<sup>31</sup> *JL*, January 24, 1805, 2:457. For a discussion of the evangelicals' threat to men in a broader context, see Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1977), 103-105.

<sup>32</sup> *JL*, September 7, 1812, 3:465, letters to Mrs. Ann Willis. Asbury's version of the model wife shows how traditional he indeed was: "a mother, mistress, maid, and wife, and in all these characters a conversable woman; she seeth to her own house, parlour, kitchen, and dairy; here are no noisy Negroes running and lounging." He wrote this about New England women in general (*JL*, July 11, 1800, 2:239).

<sup>33</sup> *JL*, July 7, 1796, 2:91.

<sup>34</sup> *JL*, March 13, 1777, 1:233.

<sup>35</sup> *JL*, November 13, 1797, 2:139.

<sup>36</sup> *JL*, January 11, 1809, 2:590.

female following, widows were the most independent and free to welcome him.

Another aspect of Methodism that prompted criticism has already been touched upon—passionate and enlivened worship services that by implication suggested the lifelessness of many other churches. Asbury felt that some of the vandalism was due to this: “Came to Broad Creek Chapel, where some of the wicked had broken the windows. There had been a stir at the quarterly meeting, and a testimony borne against their revellings, and it was judged, that on this account the injury was committed on the house.”<sup>37</sup> In New Jersey he wrote, “we had a shout-then came the bulls of Bashan and broke our windows.”<sup>38</sup> In Philadelphia he reported that “the *mobility* came in like the roaring of the sea: boys were around the doors, and the streets were in an uproar. They had been alarmed by a shout the night before . . .”<sup>39</sup>

Camp meetings could be especially raucous, and thus provoked more ire than usual. At a camp meeting in New York, a fight broke out when an elder tried to remove some “intoxicated young men” from the audience.<sup>40</sup> Occasionally, authorities merely posted guards at the meetings, at other times they more actively intervened. In 1807, Asbury noted that opposition to these gatherings were stiffening: “It is but too manifest that the success of our labours, more especially at camp meetings, has roused a spirit of persecution against us—riots, fines, stripes, perhaps prisons and death, if we do not give up our camp meetings . . .”<sup>41</sup> Asbury’s perception of persecution here may include hyperbole and may be based on rumor, but it was not totally fabricated.

Not all opposition was due to evangelical enthusiasm in services. On January 23, 1782, Asbury preached a sermon based on the Bible verse: “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” As is common, he recorded a brief summary of his application of this text, which this day included an important message: “to cleanse ourselves from these, every means of self-denial and spiritual mortification is necessary . . .”<sup>42</sup> At the core of Asbury’s Methodism was a willingness to renounce the world and to deny the self in order more fully to emulate Christ.

Perry Miller identified the two strains in the Puritan inheritance as “mysticism,” exemplified by the passion and theology of Jonathan Edwards, and “decorum,” typified by the “caution,” “sobriety,” and “selfcontrol” of the Unitarians.<sup>43</sup> Methodism, particularly in the south, exhibited both of these elements. Although passionate in worship and committed to a divine and mysterious metaphysics, discipline—both in the church body and in individ-

<sup>37</sup> *JL*, November 13, 1789, 1:613.

<sup>38</sup> *JL*, September 28, 1790, 1:651.

<sup>39</sup> *JL*, September 9, 1792, 1:729.

<sup>40</sup> *JL*, July 12, 1807, 2:546.

<sup>41</sup> *JL*, July, 1807, 2:551. For the posting of guards, see *JL*, May 11-12, 1806, 2:505.

<sup>42</sup> *JL*, January 23, 1782, 1:418, 2 Cor. 7:1, King James Version of the Bible.

<sup>43</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1956), 196-197.

ual lives—was an integral part of the Methodist experience.

It was a curious and sometimes vexing marriage, yet resistance to Asbury and his ministers cannot be understood without considering both strains. We have seen how emotionalism played a role in persecution. The doctrine of self-denial met with equal protest. In direct proportion to the passion allowed and expected during meetings was the restraint of passion demanded in all other aspects of a member's life. Witness the following account of a Virginian's conversion:

I rode home with John Ryall Bradley . . . he was strangely brought to God. He was alone on a *Sabbath day* and was reading, what he indeed seldom read, his *prayer book*; suddenly he was powerfully struck with keen conviction; he began to pray without book, and with all his might: what followed came of course. At his conversion he had a stud of race horses to part with.<sup>44</sup>

Not all members so sanguinely renounced their former "worldly" ways. Asbury related how he "found it necessary to deal plainly" with a member who had a distillery.<sup>45</sup>

A host of worldly ways were considered sinful, including dances, strong drink, horse racing, gambling, working on Sunday, and less bounded evils such as finery, effeminacy (for males), or pride.<sup>46</sup> Sometimes Asbury was able to persuade converts to give up these pursuits. At other times, his condemnations closed the door on a potential member:

We came back to Amis's—a poor sinner. He was highly offended that we prayed so loud in his house. He is a distiller of whisky, and he boasts of gaining £300 per annum by the brewing of his poison. We talked very plainly . . . He said, he did not desire me to trouble myself about his soul. Perhaps the gravest offence was given by my speaking against distilling and slave holding.<sup>47</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to describe Asbury as tirelessly confrontational, for he was not. Another incident is illuminating: ". . . we lodged where there were a set of gamblers: I neither ate bread nor drank water with them. We left these *blacklegs* early next morning . . ." <sup>48</sup> Whether the gamblers were aware of this disapproval is not revealed, but Amis's rebuff gives us some idea of the way Asbury's aloofness and his condemnations might have been received. The policy of neither eating nor drinking with some "sinners" satisfied Asbury that he had not corrupted himself.

<sup>44</sup> *JL*, February [18], 1809, 2:592.

<sup>45</sup> *JL*, March 1795, 2:45.

<sup>46</sup> Asbury felt himself guilty of some of these. In September, 1797, he wrote: "I have been most severely tried from various quarters; my fevers, my feet, and Satan, would set in with my gloomy and nervous affections. Sometimes subject to the greatest effeminacy; to distress at the thought of a useless, idle life . . ." (*JL*, 2:132).

<sup>47</sup> *JL*, April 13, 1790, 1:632-3. On at least one occasion, Asbury's exhortations worked to his immediate disadvantage: "After dinner I met with — who offered to be our guide; but when I began to show him his folly and the dangerous state of his soul, he soon left us, and we had to beat our way through the swamps as well as we could" (*JL*, February 1793, 1:747).

<sup>48</sup> *JL*, January 1786, 1:507.

A belief in divine intervention could become a justification for not acting. In another incident, Asbury once again left “sinners” rather than confronting them: “I called at a certain house—it would not do—I was compelled to turn out again to the pelting of the wind and rain. Though old, I have eyes. The hand of God will come upon them: as for the young lady, shame and contempt will fall on her; mark the event.”<sup>49</sup> The journal gives no formula to determine which sins called for fight and which for flight, yet by denying himself communion with “worldly” people, and by leaving the punishment to divine authority, Asbury could do either without fear of contradiction. His withdrawal from “sinners” might account for some of the opposition he encountered. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that he “reproved” often enough to provoke hostility from a number of quarters.

Methodism was a revolutionary movement without a social agenda. Asbury sought to change individuals and not society as a whole. The movement had a cumulative social effect, however, the more converts it attracted. Outsiders perceived the threat to established ways on many levels. Viscerally, the mixing of races, the participation by women, or the emotional outbursts in meetings were provocative. Structurally, the challenge to institutions—slavery, patriarchy, the established church, traditional entertainments—undermined them. Psychologically, the calls for self-denial and the renunciation of former ways were threatening to outsiders’ sense of self-worth.

In another context, historian John Boles wrote that “with their different perspective, Baptists implicitly challenged the all-inclusive hegemony of the ruling establishment by offering alternative measures of the good (and the bad) life.”<sup>50</sup>

I would expand this to include the Methodists and to say that the challenges were often explicit and extend it to include the challenge to lower-class tradition as well as elite hegemony. Donald Mathews hypothesized that, “. . . Evangelical attempts to set themselves off from others of their own class and background appeared to push the latter [non-evangelicals] farther down the scale of power, status, and prestige.”<sup>51</sup> Mathews’s insightful analysis could just as easily be inverted.

The “alternative measures of the good” allowed the powerless—women,

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<sup>49</sup> *JL*, July 21, 1809, 2:610.

<sup>50</sup> John B. Boles, “The Discovery of Southern Religious History,” in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds. *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higgenbotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), 528. The context of this quote is Boles’ discussion of Rhys Isaac’s *The Transformation of Virginia*, Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery-American Freedom*, and an article by cultural anthropologist Keith Thomas, and focuses specifically on the Baptists.

<sup>51</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1977), 36. That Mathews intended this as an educated hypothesis is clear. The part of this statement in ellipses above reads in his text: “Often those at the lower ranges of society attacked Evangelicals with brickbats, stones, and curses, as if these passionate and aggressive religious folk were as much a threat to the peace and well-being of the lower classes as they were perceived to be to the aristocracy. Why this should have been true is something of a mystery, unless Evangelical attempts.”

blacks, and the poor—to achieve status, power and prestige way beyond their socio-economic position. The dynamic which Rhys Isaac saw between “the humbling, soul-searching culture of the New Lights and the proud assertive culture of the gentry”<sup>52</sup> could be expressed for this later period as the dynamic of the proud, assertive culture of the Methodists against that of the gentry. How else can we explain why sister Jones “reproved with pointed severity” and not with *humility*?

The success of Methodism was staggering. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the changing character of Asbury’s concerns. In 1794 and 1795, he had anguished over the dearth of converts. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, he had different anxieties. In 1811, he would write: “Methodists are becoming great on this shore: Ah! let them take heed. *The respectable society of people called Methodists*. ‘Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you.’”<sup>53</sup> His choice of the word “respectable” is key, for he most often used it as a pejorative to describe members of other sects who were too “worldly.” That same year he was to worry when told that two ministers had become chaplains for the government; one to the South Carolina legislature, the other to Congress. On this occasion he fretted in his journal: “So; we begin to partake of *the honour that cometh from man*: now is our time of danger. O Lord, keep us pure, keep us correct, keep us holy!”<sup>54</sup> Methodism had become so widespread that Asbury’s thoughts had turned from fear of persecution in the early years to this new fear of becoming corrupted by success.

Few other movements have so quickly and definitively silenced their opposition. The Methodists, like the Baptists and other evangelicals, moved from the fringe to the mainstream of American religious life, converting many of those who had previously been against them. Historians have documented how ideas held by elites filter in time down to the masses. The experience of movements like Methodism in America show that ideas and values can also filter up—from non-elites to the powerful—to become the standard

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<sup>52</sup> Rhys Isaac quoted in Boles, 529. Isaac’s pivotal study *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (New York: Norton, 1982) was crucial to my understanding of the broad social impact of religious dissent.

<sup>53</sup> *JL*, April 9, 1811, 2:668. In his new study of early Methodism, Russell E. Richey makes the insightful analysis that the church leaders seized upon camp meetings as a way of preserving the original zeal, community, and freshness of the early decades at a time when the church was becoming more and more like an institution. The revivalistic atmosphere previously exhibited at the conferences shifted to the camp meetings as the conferences themselves became more administrative. *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991). This shift is paralleled in Asbury’s concerns about the perils of success.

<sup>54</sup> *JL*, November 9, 1811, 2:687.

to which men and women of different classes, races, and regions aspire.<sup>55</sup>

As we have seen, this transformation in values was contested by elites and by the lower classes for a variety of reasons. By looking at the sources and contexts of opposition, we see in bold relief the challenge the Methodists made to the existing order. From today's vantage point, the early Methodist agenda does not seem revolutionary or radical. To the society that Asbury initially confronted, however, his values and methods were radical enough to provoke a pointed reaction.

On an 1810 trip to Maryland, Asbury remarked with both pride and reticence, how the "rich, too, thirty years ago, would not let me approach them; now I must visit and preach to them . . . ."<sup>56</sup> Francis Asbury and the early Methodists had helped change American values. Ironically, in so transforming their society, the Methodists themselves would also be transformed.

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<sup>55</sup> This concept of ideas moving from the lower to the upper classes was put forward in John B. Boles, "Revivalism, Renewal, and Social Mediation in the Old South," in Randall Balmer and Edith L. Blumhofer, eds. *Modern Christian Revivals: A Comparative Perspective*, forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. For a broader survey of southern evangelicals, see John B. Boles, "Evangelical Protestantism in the Old South: From Religious Dissent to Cultural Dominance," in Charles Reagan Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1985).

<sup>56</sup> *JL*, April 11, 1810, 2:635.