

## **Methodism : The Voice of Oppression or Liberation?**

Jean-Pierre van Noppen

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium.

Methodism originated as a religious movement in the 18th century under the impulse of men like John Wesley and George Whitefield. At the dawning of the Industrial Revolution, the Methodists sought to address the masses of underprivileged workers who had fled their original countryside and village lives to seek employment in the large mining and industrial centres, and who found themselves relegated to a sordid existence at the margins of society. To this audience, for whose needs the established church largely failed to provide, Whitefield and the Wesleys sought to deliver a gospel of universal salvation, and hence a message of the dignity of all men and women without distinction of class or fortune. The movement met with remarkable success in terms of growth; but the nature of its impact on the working classes (and hence, on the course of history) has been subject to considerable controversy.

Among historians, it has long been assumed that there is a link between Protestantism and the emergence of capitalism; it has been remarked that among the Protestant denominations, Methodism made its greatest advances at the time and in the places where industrial developments were the most notable, and critics have claimed that it delivered a religious message (and notably, an ethic of obedience and industriousness) which in many respects tied in successfully with the changing social and moral environment, i.e. that it conformed with, rather than opposed, the demands of an economy which entailed a new division of labour, and which therefore required different control structures. It is in this sense that Methodist discourse has been decried as manipulative, most virulently so, albeit not exclusively, by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Critical Discourse Analysis traces (and often denounces) discourse processes whereby ideological contents (i.e. belief systems or world-views which come to be taken for granted in a community) are conveyed, often in a covert or otherwise surreptitious

manner, by wielders of power to condition or influence people's thought and action for the sake of vested class or party interests when, in Fairclough's terms, "institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking [...] embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimise existing power relations". This critical perspective may constitute a useful instrument in the assessment of the different accounts of Methodism.

It is not the discourse linguist's priority to decide: i. whether the view of man conveyed by Methodism and the resulting work ethic were (as Thompson suggests) the result of a deliberate scheme to blunt political consciousness, which "weakened the working classes from within by internalising capitalist demands", which "fostered within the Methodist Church those elements most suited to make up the psychic component of the work discipline of which the manufacturers stood most in need", which "discouraged any sedition and rebellion" and thus hindered the emancipation of the proletariat; ii. whether, on the contrary, Methodism exerted a "progressive, modernising and revolutionary" influence and eventually "leavened the labour movement"; iii. whether the favourable perception of the Methodist message and ethic by some sectors of the population was itself a symptom of a changing ideological paradigm; iv. whether, as for its defendants, Methodism was a social religion par excellence, "a hint of daybreak in the national darkness", "the greatest friend the working masses had in the 18th century", a movement which "denounced social injustice" and "gave a sense of decency, morals and religion to the lowest classes of mankind in a time of manifold disorders and widespread distress"; or whether, finally, v. the case has been overstated, because one cannot build a large-scale social theory on the relationship between popular evangelicalism and industrial capitalism on evidence from what may after all have been a phenomenon with a limited scope: "Even according to the most optimistic figures, evangelical nonconformism comprised only a small minority of English workers"; "Methodism never became the religion of the proletariat", and thus proved "unable to dominate or alter the political moods and methods of the workers".

Even for historians, the answer to questions like these is likely to be conditioned by their own ideological premises as well as by the nature and number of documents subjected to scrutiny. What can, however, be investigated in objective terms by the student of discourse is whether the "success" of Methodism in terms of popular following can be to any extent explained in terms of the features of its discourse. This paper, and the larger study on which it draws, seek to voice and support the thesis that the question is to be answered in the affirmative - albeit not necessarily in terms of "manipulation" - but that the answer cannot be boiled down to a mere matter of linguistic explanations in a limited sense, i.e. framed in terms of a discrete set of lexical items, grammatical choices, rhetorical devices or whatever. A descriptive or taxonomic account of the Methodists' recourse to particular lexical, syntactic, rhetorical or other devices would reduce the scope of the study to a level where the data are undoubtedly characteristic and relevant; but it would not allow one to define, or a fortiori to interpret or explain, a type of discourse in terms of its rationale or of its impact on a given target audience. Even an account in which the observed surface features are correlated with the purposes, expectations and conventions underlying one or several discourse genre(s) would take us only part of the way: the genre analyst's insistence on the question of how these constraints are textualised might divert attention from conditions which contributed to the impact of the discourse, but which are not directly marked at the verbal or textual level. Of course, text content and structure are bound to enter into the total picture, and even to play a crucial role; but even so, they constitute only part of the explanation. The critical account must endeavour to show how all aspects of Methodist discourse, including "exogenous", non-textual ones, coherently concurred to achieve its communicative aims, whether religious, moral, or social. Methodist discourse seems to have taken many forms and to have pursued a fairly wide range of objectives, whose actual constructive impact (i.e. the way in which the messages affected people's belief system, world-view and patterns of behaviour) may, however, have changed significantly with time.

It is wise to keep description and critical interpretation in separate compartments to avoid circularity in the constitution of one's documentation. All too often, the critics of

Methodism seem to have hand-picked the evidence which suited their purposes rather than considered the data as a corpus to be approached as a whole. Evaluations of the role of Methodism in early industrial England have differed significantly because historians have been impressed by different aspects of the same social or ideological functions. Differences in perspective and emphasis cannot be regarded as inherently right or wrong, but they must be challenged if they become misleading. The issue whether Methodist discourse was used, unwittingly or deliberately, as a vehicle of industrial, capitalist ideology - whether it offered "pie in the sky" as a "soporific of the poor", is no longer a strictly linguistic question, but one so closely connected with the discourse practices of Methodism that the linguist cannot ignore it. The eventual interpretation of the role of Methodism as an ideological force remains the historian's task; but here as elsewhere, critical awareness of the workings of discourse process, at all its stages, may contribute precious insights on how and why Wesley's message achieved the resonance it eventually proved to enjoy, and thus inform the historian's decision.

### **A successful form of discourse.**

From our analysis (van Noppen 1999), Methodism emerges as a movement remarkably efficient in developing a multi-modal discourse which managed to reach the underprivileged working classes and to respond to their needs and aspirations. Charismatic preachers, assisted by laymen who were close to the audience and spoke their language, went out to seek the men and women of England where they could be found, and delivered to them a message of love and hope for a better existence, not just in the hereafter, but in the present as well. The Methodist anthropology, which viewed humanity as inherently sinful and depraved, but also as eminently perfectible and redeemable through divine grace regardless of class or fortune, proclaimed the value and dignity of every individual, man, woman or child, in the sight of God and of their fellow creatures.

This message was conveyed through discourse media adapted to the purpose and the situation - initially, through the outdoor sermons and the hymns; and subsequently also via the well-structured societies, which catered for the associative needs of many uprooted people, which invested them with responsibilities through which they could regain an identity, and substituted a religious nomos for their moral anomie; through the Sunday schools, which provided instruction conducive to upward social mobility as well as gospel-inspired moral standards; and through publications (tracts, magazines and books) which offered the Methodist men and women a rich and varied language allowing them to explore a new, profounder dimension of existence and gave them a chance to express themselves and "find their voice".

The widespread popular response to the message may be explained in terms of natural audience motivation. Wesley's key-word was Love, and a gospel of love was what the unloved, underprivileged masses at the margins of society craved for. John Wesley and George Whitefield were skilful and effective speakers, and Charles's hymns provided John's messages with a highly effective medium, which by virtue of its pleasant (albeit rather difficult) poetic form, rhythm, rhyme and music, allowed easy memorizing of key concepts. Admittedly, the preachers did resort to clever rhetorical devices in seeking to convince their audiences, and occasionally appealed to scriptural authority or divine inspiration to add weight to their own views; but one need not postulate any insidious manipulative procedures to explain the transforming impact of the words on individual lives and on society as a whole.

The secondary effects of Methodism - increased self-respect, a sense of belonging to a community, improved family lives and the secular rewards of upward social mobility - seem to have contributed substantially to the success of a message which at the outset was intended to be primarily spiritual, though not exclusively so: while Wesley's religion of the heart preached conversion of the individual and scriptural holiness, he insisted that this holiness must manifest itself in the social realm, in a life of stewardship and sharing

with the poor. The gospel of universal salvation, then, cannot be divorced from a gospel of social commitment and service.

## **Reception**

As a movement, Methodism proved to be successful in terms of adhesion and growth. From Wesley's own perspective, however, i.e. as the implementation of the ideal of worldly holiness manifested in a social programme of redistribution of wealth to the poor, the revival succumbed to an unexpected side-effect of embourgeoisement. The discourse did, indeed, contain the seeds of a work ethic which, for rhetorical and semantic reasons as well as for social, audience-related ones, laid the message open to subsequent misunderstanding and misuse. Once its content became truncated and divorced from its spiritual rationale, it could be read as an incentive to economic enterprise and the pursuit of gain, an interpretation which unwittingly played into the hands of industrial interests. This reorientation of the religious discourse content was obviously welcomed by the industrialists, who encouraged the spread of a religion which turned its adherents into model workers.

But there is little ground, notwithstanding Wesley's explicitly conservative attitude, to hypothesise a deliberate manipulative socio-political intent on the part of the Wesleyans. Much of the criticism which has been levelled at the revival has been grossly overstated and documented with data foreign to this policy and wrested from their original contexts. The conservative discourse was part of a deliberate attempt to lend credibility and respectability to Methodism, which was widely perceived by the religious and civil establishment as a challenge to their traditional values. While Wesley's royalist sayings and writings were rooted in his Biblical view of authority, his conservative, anti-democratic ideas, disturbing as they may sound today, partook not of his preaching, teaching and doctrine, but of a campaign to stave off charges of sedition, separatism and subversion at a time when widespread fears of radical upheavals in matters religious as well as social could spark a reaction which might have led to a curtailment of religious

freedom. In practice, however, the structure, organisation and management of the Methodist societies struck a fair balance between authority on the one hand and participatory, integrated democracy on the other.

### **Was Methodist discourse manipulative?**

Critics of Methodism have suggested, albeit on the basis of highly selective corpora, that by a skillful use of language, the preachers of the Revival engaged in a form of "brainwashing" or even "evangelic aggression", and that "Present-day manipulation of the masses by means of advertising and TV is nothing compared with the insidious indoctrination carried out by Methodism". The procedure at the gatherings, it has been alleged, was to whip the audiences into hysteria by means of rhythmic hymns fraught with a heavy dose of sexual imagery, thus to heighten emotional tension and lower their critical threshold; and subsequently to unsettle them nervously by projecting fearful pictures of the hellfire punishments which awaited the unrepentant sinner. Thus conditioned, the listeners were then persuaded, by dint of "Taylorised" repetition, that failure to achieve salvation would necessarily condemn them for ever; that anybody who left the meeting "unchanged" and met with a sudden fate before they had accepted salvation would pass straight into the fiery furnace; and that such a ghastly destiny could be avoided by immediate conversion. This sense of urgency increased anxiety in the audience, and led to spectacular emotive side-effects like shouting and fainting, but also, we are told, to sudden conversions which were, however, short-lived; hence the need for the class meetings, which encouraged the practice of mutual policing to maintain the newly-gained converts inside the sphere of Methodist influence.

The account is a clever collage of elements which, in isolation, enjoy a certain degree of truth-value, but which were neither as systematically combined nor as representative of Methodist discourse as has been insinuated. The guiding hypothesis which underlies the critics' analysis seems to be that the success of Methodism, if any, was not a natural and voluntary response to a message, but the effect of a deliberate, manipulative process

which cynically sought to trick people into a belief system which would condition their world-view and behaviour patterns, presumably on behalf of industrial interests which required an obedient and submissive work force.

It must be granted that both Wesley and Whitefield used hymns to attract their outdoor audiences, not unlike the way in which the Salvation Army today still exploit the natural curiosity of marketplace crowds with their brass bands. It is true that Wesley taught his Methodists to sing German tunes in double-quick time, not like a Bach chorale, and hymn-singing in the societies and preaching-houses could be a hearty, stimulating and emotionally moving experience - not only in terms of exciting participation in a rhythmic phatic activity, but also because of the message of hope conveyed by the lyrics, whose memorisation was facilitated by the musical medium. But it seems unlikely, as a matter of common sense, that crowds of godless labourers could be immediately swept into hysteria by the open-air a capella performance of a few hymns to which they had never been exposed before.

It is also a recognised fact that at one time, some of the hymns in the Moravian tradition were charged with suggestive amatory imagery, and that some of the other 18th-century language jars on present-day ears. But Wesley censured the indecency of Moravian hymnody, and Charles's "blood and wounds" hymns were profoundly steeped in the Biblical vocabulary of atone-ment with its metaphors of sacrifice, oblation and ablution. Nor was "blood", admittedly a fairly frequent term in the hymns, always charged with suggestive physical connotations.

Again, it must be conceded that Methodist preaching, especially in its more popular lay and "ranting" forms, resorted, and sometimes excessively so, to "rapturous expressions, high flights of piety which soar beyond reason and common sense", and to lurid representations of hellfire and of the immediate effects of divine wrath. As a matter of fact, the suggestion of instantaneous retribution for one's trespasses (such as being struck dead by lightning for a swear-word) was one of the more criticisable simplifications in

Methodist pedagogy, a concession to popular superstition, and a welcome source for satirical comedy; but with regard to the corpus of Methodist preaching we have inherited, albeit limited, it is an arbitrary reduction to represent all of Methodist homiletics in just those terms.

The proverbial simplicity, directness and even repetitiveness of Methodist sermons does not necessarily lay its preachers open to criticism. As regards simplicity, it has been one of the aims of a study carried out in my department (Sermoquest) to show that the Wesleyan corpus displayed more conceptual and lexical sophistication than John's reputation usually acknowledges. With regard to lexical and thematic recurrence, the rhetorical repetition of key concepts does not necessarily mean slogan-mongering, but may reflect good communicative sense when a speaker is faced with large, little-educated, outdoor crowds like those which constituted the early Methodist audiences.

The emotion sparked by participating in collective social and ritual activities undoubtedly played a part in the attraction which Methodism exerted on its popular audiences; but it would be erroneous to suppose that the movement derived its success only or mainly from "rollicking revival services" or "informal group membership". Original Methodism was a re-ligion of strict discipline, and Wesley exhorted his preachers to encourage austere devotion . The satisfaction of belonging to a closely-knit society within which each individual was entitled to respect and brotherly love undoubtedly played a role; but once again, this gratification of a natural human aspiration for social acceptance and recognition need not be viewed as manipulative; it did not necessarily mean bribing the working classes to accept the miseries of the present with the promise that Heaven would show an improvement, but be viewed, rather, as the concrete, and more immediate, reward of conversion to a faith which offered the desirable advantage of integration into the community of the local chapel, where individuals could find peace and security after the torment and suffering of their weekday lives.

Finally, the presumed short-livedness of conversions based on a mere superficial emotive appeal was not a general phenomenon. Of course, converts who had flocked into the society in the rapturous early days often recanted under pressure from their social environment, and it must be conceded that not all names on the Methodist membership lists represented permanent adherents. A considerable number of people enjoyed only a passing acquaintance with the revival: it is a fact (attested notably by working-class autobiographies) that many children attended Sunday school but never became pious society members, and preferred to follow the secular path of labour activism when they grew up. But here it must be kept in mind that 1) Sunday-school attendance often responded to non-religious motives like the desire for instruction and the resulting social improvement, and 2) that society members were not held against their will. On the contrary: unrepentant sinners, doubters and backsliders were refused renewal of their tickets. The moral "policing" practised in the classes did, indeed, seek to ensure that the members' contrition and conversion were sincere; originally, this supervision by class leaders was purely spiritual. Only much later did the expulsion from certain societies take on a more anti-radical character. Another significant argument against the coercive representation of the revival is the sort of response it produced in its adherents - no opiate resignation or indifference, but people interested "not only [...] in preparing men and women for another world, but also impassioned in their determination to alleviate their physical and economic distress in this". It would undoubtedly be rash to assert dogmatically that emotional pressure on the individual never occurred in the Class meetings, even in the early days; but the nature of the movement as a whole, the contemporary descriptions and the character of the people would all seem to indicate that emotional coercion, when it occurred at all, was exceptional. Members were not locked into the societies; and despite this openness, the movement kept growing.

### **Was the Methodist message reactionary?**

There is little agreement on the kind and degree of influence that Wesley and the Methodists after him exerted on the political awareness of the working classes and on

society as a whole. The belief, epitomised by Halévy, that the Methodist Revival generally acted as an instrument supporting industrial interests by manipulating the working masses into industriousness, diligence, thrift and obedience, and that it thus contributed to the consolidation of capitalism, has been increasingly called into question, notably on grounds of the partiality of the documentation offered in support; but the thesis still enjoys a certain following - possibly because of its apparent simplicity, which brings it into line both with Weber's historical sociology and with the popular Marxism that sees religion as the opiate of the people. The opposite view claims that Methodism, far from stifling revolutionary thought, actually fostered it. It is a fact that Methodism was perceived as a potentially subversive force by the Church, the gentry and the political establishment, and that the act of joining the Methodists was often interpreted as one of social defiance and exerted a progressive, modernising and revolutionary influence - if not by preaching radical action, at least by proclaiming the equality of all men and women - but that this revolution took place in people's souls, rather than in the streets.

As part of a carefully qualified answer to the questions raised by different historians' contradictory claims, it has recently been shown how local research, which underscores the existence of "many Methodisms in many places at many times" should foster wariness of all too comprehensive social or political interpretations of the role of Methodism. While the critics view the movement in an almost exclusively political perspective, the claim that "the Methodist Church never attempted to formulate a political and economic policy" may force the proverbial pendulum a little too far back in the opposite direction. Methodist discourse as a whole did contain political messages as well as economic and religious ones, and it would be short-sighted to view the movement as concerned only with personal redemption.

It may be useful, however, to separate Wesley's political utterances from his religious, social and economic ones, and to replace them within their respective discourse contexts, in order to avoid that our judgment should be fraught with a bias shaped by twentieth-century norms of interpretation. In our present-day perception of reality, we easily lump

together political, social and economic issues in one sector, and relegate religion to another, which bears only a peripheral relationship, if any, to the first. Wesley has been much maligned for his conservative and anti-democratic sayings and writings. From our present-day perspective it is difficult to reconcile Wesley's reactionary political statements with his concern for the poor and the oppressed; but the two cannot and should not be judged on the same terms, as the relationships of coherence and separation between different discourse contents do not lie where we expect them.

The indictment of reactionary conservatism rests on four charges: Wesley's monarchism, his criticism of the American rebellion, his explicit rejection of democracy, and his antiradicalism - a policy followed and strengthened by the Methodists who were to succeed him at the head of the movement. Each of these themes deserves our brief attention here.

- i. From its very beginnings, both the church and the state establishment as a potentially revolutionary force perceived Methodism. "Wesley's evangelical Arminianism [...] preaching spiritual equality, launching a campaign against clerical indifference [...] and tapping strong emotions, had genuinely incendiary possibilities. [...] This outpouring of religious sentiment with its anti-establishment, even revolutionary implications, made many in both Church and state tremble". In order to allay these fears which might - and did - spark off attempts at persecution, Wesley sought by different means to affirm his faithfulness to the Church. It thus became his practice to defend Methodist doctrine as the true teaching of the Church of England, as it was formulated in the Book of Common Prayer, the Articles of Religion, and the Homilies. As a result, the political theology of the Anglican Church, with its overtones of loyalty, obedience and the impiety of rebellion played a privileged role in the articulation of his own political views, and the Methodist project was explicitly equated with support for the King, whose power the Wesleys believed, as a matter of biblical conviction, to be divinely ordained. The scriptural argument stems from Romans

13:1; but John Wesley made it clear that "the will of the king is no law to the subject, unless it is laid down in the law of the land, and that the law of God remains supreme".

Wesley was originally a Jacobite and delivered a Jacobite sermon at Oxford as late as 1734; but he began to preach absolute loyalty to George II and his divine right when he realised that restoration of the Stuarts could occur only as the result of a violent upheaval . His strategy of affirming the Methodists' faithfulness and obedience to the Crown was to pay off eventually: when George II was solicited to "take a course to stop these run-about preachers", he answered "I tell you, while I sit on the throne, no man shall be persecuted for conscience' sake", thus granting the Methodists equal protection under the laws. Thus convinced by experience that the king advocated religious liberty, Wesley gave his wholehearted support to George III as well, and at one point actually offered to raise a small militia to help defend the kingdom. His allegiance to the monarchy and the government as a spiritual imperative was taken over by the post-Wesleyan Methodist Societies who, at a time when popular radicalism became increasingly vocal and powerful, renewed the strategy of reassurance by continually urging their members to "Fear the Lord and King and meddle not with them that are given to change".

- ii Wesley initially supported the American colonists' grievances, but changed his mind almost overnight after reading Johnson's *Taxation no Tyranny* (1775), a tract, incidentally, which he paraphrased and published under the title *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*, a pamphlet which was widely distributed. The rebels, he felt, were not runaway slaves or poor people driven to insurrection by exploitation - in that case, Wesley would have rallied their cause as he had done with others - but wealthy tradesmen and propertied merchant princes seeking to defend their own financial and commercial interests, that is, the very sort of people whose injustice to the poor Wesley denounced in England. The defense of the rights of the poor, the weak and the oppressed chimed in with his theology of

universal grace and the ultimate worth of each person in the sight of God: that was why Wesley opposed slavery, religious persecution and press-gangs. The cause of the American rebels, however, did not fit into this category: John Wesley felt it was not concerned with liberty or human rights, but with self-interest dressing up as a fight for freedom.

- iii Wesley's explicit rejection of democracy may be boiled down to a crucial semantic issue - the interpretation of an abstract polysemic noun. The Methodist attitude towards democracy is, in fact, a telling example of how denotation and connotation as well as theory and practice may come apart.

In his political options Wesley worked and thought within the mainstream political theory of an age haunted by the spectre of a popular revolution, and rejected democracy lest it should establish a "dictatorship of the mob", in which civil and religious liberties (i.e. the rights of the free-born Englishman) would be jeopardised. Wesley was persuaded that as a form of government, democracy was an unworkable, dangerous and impious aberration, since according to his own premises man was viewed as inherently sinful and depraved, and the power of kings was divinely ordained. He denounced the idea that the people might be the source of power as "in every way indefensible", and attacked the notion of universal suffrage .

Similarly, in the Methodist societies, Wesley felt that he, and not the people, should choose the stewards and leaders: "We are no republicans, wrote he, and never intend to be"; Jabez Bunting is reported to have said that "Methodism hates democracy as much as it hates sin" - a statement typical of an age which identified the democratic revolution with anti-Christianity. Yet in its everyday practice, Methodism turned out to be more democratic than clerical. It was much more a layman's movement than a minister's, and by offering opportunities for service created a sense of individual and communal responsibility: "ordinary men and women were given the religious franchise and learnt the art of local

government. Approximately one in every five became a member of the governing bodies such as the Leaders' and Circuit Quarterly Meetings", and important matters were subjected to a general vote). But "democracy" here should not be held to be synonymous with an individualistic philosophy. The importance of the individual was secondary to that of the movement, and individualism in thought and deed was viewed as spiritually disruptive.

On the other hand, if by "democracy" one means egalitarianism and the abolition of class barriers and privileges, it is useful to remember that Wesley's Methodism proclaimed that "the poorest and the weakest have the same place and authority which the richest and strongest have", and spread the idea of universal redemption and the preciousness of all men before God: he denied that wealth and privilege were tokens of divine favour, and made concern for the poor the touchstone of Christian action. Wesley was committed to the freedom and safety of each person, to their liberty of religion, life, body and goods, regardless of wealth or class in this respect, he might have been called a democrat. This message, however, was obviously more congenial to the poor than to the wealthy, the noble and the powerful, who were horrified at what they saw as a process of levelling down or Gleichmacherei.

- iv Within this gospel-based logic of egalitarianism, two obvious corollaries were the refusal of exploitation and the demand for equitable remuneration. As Coleridge put it, "If Methodism produce sobriety and domestic habits among the lower classes, it makes them susceptible of liberty. [...] Men can hardly apply themselves with such perseverant zeal to the instruction and comforting of the poor, without feeling affection for them; and there feelings of love must necessarily lead to a blameless indignation against the authors of their complicated miseries".

It would, indeed, be short-sighted to argue that Methodism was nothing but a conservative force, which acted as a controlling agent stifling radical and revolutionary tendencies. The Methodist message of reform and regeneration did foster progressive thought and revolutionary attitudes - but surprisingly, rarely within its own ranks. In Wesley's lifetime, the Methodists were never called upon to take sides in political conflict except (as pointed out already) in defense of the monarchy. After Wesley's death, however, the picture was to change. Many individual members subscribed to radical sympathies, and many breakaway Methodists stood for freedom and democratic government in matters religious and secular. It was the policy of mainstream post-Wesleyan Methodism to evict these members from the societies, where the "no politics" rule inherited from Wesley provided a logical and pious answer to the problem of the developing labour unrest. At the Conference of 1839, Dr. Beaumont declared that "Methodism ought to have no political line, Whig or Tory. Our mission is chiefly to the poor. [...] I am jealous for the high spiritual character of Methodism. Every step we take towards politics reduces our character for high spirituality". Thus, the motive for neutrality seems to have been spiritual, not political; but the price to be paid for this attitude was an increasing loss of contact with the labouring classes.

The sermons and tracts contain evidence of some preachers' egalitarian and libertarian leanings, even in the years immediately after Wesley's demise. Samuel Bradburn, for instance, developed the argument of the equality of all creatures with respect to God, sin and the need for salvation, and on this basis inferred that all men have an equal right to justice and liberty of conscience. He observed, however, that this equality was not a fact, and that laws and governments were often the instruments of inequality (especially in terms of property). He felt that resignation, submission and obedience to secular authority were tantamount to "treason" when they required anything contrary to the commandments of God (like the slave-trade and the curtailing of freedom of conscience). But even so, Bradburn kept adhering to the Pauline order "fear God and honour the King", notably with respect to King George's defense of religious liberty . Alexander Kilham's cause was the Progress of Liberty (1795), but his sphere of action was Church

polity rather than worldly politics. His argument for equality (and hence, his rejection of the Conference's authority) was grounded in the idea of universal salvation. His interpretation of equality before God as the premiss of individual rights and liberty caused him to confront the Conference on the issues of freedom of worship and expression, which the post-Wesleyan connexional establishment was seeking to restrict and regulate. The secession between the Methodist Conference and the Kilhamite New Connexion, whose members were at one time branded "Tom Paine Methodists", drained the Methodist Conference of its more democratically-minded elements, and this was to determine much of the later climate. Indeed, in 19th-century Methodism, we note complaints that the Chapel had drifted away from its original calling to cater for the underprivileged laborious classes, "a mighty power" whose esprit de corps, interest in politics and tendency to act and move in masses were a cause of concern to the public of established religion: "If the masses do not come to us, we must go to them". The discourse data congrue with the historians' indications of radical activism, disobedience and even threats of violence within some chapel societies as mainstream post-Wesleyan Methodism published its open support to the cause of conservatism, and strongly inveighed against revolutionary ideas. "It was not strange that by the period of Chartism, Wesleyan Methodism, shaped in its birth as the religious society of the poor, should have lost the confidence of the intelligent working man". Indeed, the workers became gradually frustrated with Methodism. By 1821 Wesleyanism had eliminated most of its radical elements, but in doing so had also changed the whole relationship between the Chapel and the working class. Methodism may have been "the church of the Industrial Revolution", but "it never became the religion of the factory proletariat" and as a result, secular radical politics became a real alternative to the essentially eschatological rewards of the Methodist Church. Eventually, the terrors of hell came to be seen as "nothing compared to the sins of social inequality". For the Radicals, human destiny could be shaped by Man himself; but for the mainstream Methodists, Man's life remained in the hands of God. Jabez Bunting and his peers (including wealthy laymen) were sympathetic to Toryism, and regarded socialism as anti-Christian.

Unlike Bradburn and Kilham, Bunting preached passive obedience and non-resistance - a recurrent position triggered not only by religious motives, but also by the need to display sympathy with the establishment in order to safeguard the Methodists from charges of sedition and radical subversion. He urged all those in want and distress to seek their deliverance from God rather than from men. The Wesleyan Conference regularly sent out circulars to all members of Methodist societies urging them not to become involved with revolutionary thinkers and radicals . The very number of these circulars suggests their ineffectiveness, and Hempton points out that in many places, Wesleyan discipline came under heavy pressure from popular radicalism. Those who took part in the agitations received no mercy: Bunting's policy was to censor liberal elements, and to recommend that they should be "forthwith purged" from the societies. But more radically-minded Connexions were prepared to welcome the "insistent democrats" rejected from Wesleyanism, and in some of the manufacturing districts their competition caused a halt, and even a temporary decline, in the growth of Methodism . Bunting was aware of this, but felt that this was the price to be paid for the connection's respectability.

As in Wesley's time, the conservative attitude on the part of the Methodist Conference can be explained as a strategic move to ward off criticism and action from an establishment which remained basically hostile to the revival; but however conservative and politically correct they claimed to be in social and political terms, the Methodists were still perceived, feared and resented by both Church and Government as a radical challenge to their control.

In response, both Jabez Bunting and Thomas Allan (the London-based connectional solicitor) sought to reaffirm the credibility and respectability of the movement. His portrayals of Methodism as disciplined in ecclesiastical organisation, and sustainer of a stable order, show how persecution forced its leaders into a conservative posture in order to obtain a liberal measure, i.e. the application of the new Toleration Act. In view of these relentless affirmations of the movement's conservative political options, and the systematic rejection of radical elements, one may better understand the reproach that

Methodism, though hailed by some as a social religion par excellence, ended up opposing social progress. The issue, once again, deserves some semantic qualification. If by "social progress" one means increased affluence and comfort, there are indications that parts of the population at least enjoyed a higher standard of living as the 18th century wore on, and that the labouring classes who adopted frugal and thrifty habits could claim their share of these secular blessings. Methodism and its work ethic must have played some role in this process, as is reflected in John Wesley's own complaints about the disastrous effects of growing wealth on Methodist spirituality; but evidence for the movement's eventual impact on the social behaviour of the working classes as a whole is circumstantial at best.

"Social progress", however, may, also be interpreted as the response to demands for just wages and decent working conditions on behalf of tens of thousands of Englishmen who even in the 1830's had to struggle night and day to keep their families above starvation levels; and it is an observable fact that the struggle for the respect and protection of the emerging industrial labour force, and for human rights in general, were not a priority in Bunting's Methodism. Social issues were to become explicit tenets of the Methodist creed only at a much later stage. In the 19th century, however, Methodism was still marked by a recurrent tension between authoritarian and democratic trends; yet the description of the various Methodist Connexions' attitudes towards working-class aspirations, and their different commitments to labour issues at a time when the whole movement was in turmoil (not only over political issues but also about questions of church management and polity under Jabez Bunting's autocratic rule) cannot be cast into a simple binary contrast between countervailing "progressive" vs. "conservative" forces.

The question of the social and political impact of Methodism would warrant a full-fledged study in its own right, in which the linguist would have only a limited say. The decision whether Methodism exerted an influence on working-class behaviour decisive enough to avoid a hypothetical revolution, and whether such a revolution might have taken place had Wesley and Whitefield not taken to the fields to preach their gospel to the

poor, is an issue for the historian, and not primarily for the linguist. The discourse linguist's role is not to indulge in historical what-if projections, but to show, analyse and explain how language, functioning in various discourse situations, contributed to the total impact of the message.

## **Conclusion**

A comprehensive view of Methodism, which takes into account parameters like discourse genre, medium, purpose and reception as well as chronology, does not vindicate the indictment that the revival generally acted as a handmaid in the service of industrial interests by manipulating the working masses into industriousness, diligence, thrift and obedience. Far from being a lackey of capitalism, Wesley spread a gospel of social holiness and advocated a kind of evangelical economics which were fundamentally anti-capitalistic inasmuch as they inveighed against property and the accumulation of wealth. He delivered this message in good faith, but was not necessarily realistic with regard to the spirit of his age. Although he was not concerned exclusively with personal salvation, he focused more on spiritual effects than on material causes, and his limited perception of structural relationships in society may have made some of his solutions appear courageous in their practice, but near-sighted in their scope, and others, like his condonement of child labour, embarrassingly misdirected.

It must be conceded that the later, 19th-century phases of Methodism can not be totally exonerated from the charge that the movement eventually came to sympathise with the bourgeois establishment. While some Connexions displayed explicitly progressive and even radical sympathies, others came to adopt policies congruent with conservative and industrial interests, and eventually lost touch with the working masses; but the wholesale rejection of the Methodist movement as oppressive rather than liberating can be explained only as the result of a partial (i.e. incomplete and biased) representation, which fails to highlight the substantial positive contribution of Methodism to English society as a whole. At a time when England and its Church seemed to be morally crippled,

Whitefield and the Wesleys managed to restore religion to life and activity, to give it a central place in people's existence, and thus to transform the lives of both communities and individuals; not only by seeking to redeem them from fear, guilt and loneliness; not only by encouraging charity and social solidarity, not only by promoting education and developing community life; but also, and more importantly, by standing up for the underprivileged and giving meaning to their lives - a sense of the responsibility, value and dignity of every human being, to be realised in the practical circumstances of everyday life, and accessible to all. In this sense, by projecting the image of a perfectible humanity, and infusing in the hearts of people a new spirit of love and hope, Methodism tried, despite the difficulties and imperfections inherent in all human endeavour, to live up to the gospel calling to be the salt of the earth.

## **References**

- Thompson, E. P. [1963], 1991: *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Gollancz (Pelican edition, 1991).
- van Noppen, Jean-Pierre, 1999. *Transforming Words. The Early Methodist Revival from a Discourse Perspective*. Bern : Peter Lang (Religion and Discourse, 3).