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**The Revival of the Common:
Spiritual Revival and Political Revolution in the Wesleyan Movement**

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Abstract

This essay offers a reading of Elie Halévy and E.P. Thompson's theses according to which the Methodist revival stifled the revolutionary fervor of the English working class and is, at least in part, responsible for the lack of a political revolution in England. With attention to the case of the Kingswood colliers, I suggest a reassessment of this argument by looking at the practice of field preaching, which I portray as a public performance that ties the revival with the political agitation of the period. I propose that field preaching is an entryway to the political theology of the Wesleyan movement, a theology here envisioned as a theology of the commons.

In October 1738 in the coal mining town of Kingswood, a price dispute broke out between mine owners who decided to cut the salaries of the colliers to offset their financial losses. The response was immediate: local newspapers report that colliers performed a "general rampage through the neighbourhood which lasted for four days."¹ This was a recurring scene in Kingswood, a town known for its "ungovernable" atmosphere and for numerous uprisings like this. Not many weeks after this incident, a young preacher arrives in Kingswood and gathers the colliers in the open fields. George Whitefield, who had "long since yearned toward the poor colliers," sees the crowd as "sheep having no shepherd" and stands upon a mount to

¹ Robert Malcolmson, "'A Set of Ungovernable People': The Kingswood Colliers in the Eighteenth Century," in *An Ungovernable People: The English and Their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. John Brewer and John Styles (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 116.

address them.² The town, so accustomed to the collier's riots, becomes the epicenter of a revival that grows out of the experience of field preaching.

It is customary in Methodist studies to present political riots and the Methodist revival as running in opposite directions. The French historian Elie Halévy gave classic contours to the thesis when he defended that the Wesleyan movement precluded a violent revolution in England and, instead, allowed for a peaceful transition to the industrial age. The consensus in studies gravitating around Halévy is that the "enthusiasm" of the Methodist revival interrupted a seemingly imminent social revolution.

This essay seeks to offer a different perspective into Halévy's hypothesis by contrasting the political energy of protest movements in eighteenth-century England with the practice of public preaching. In other words, I want to investigate the possible continuity between the colliers' riots and the scene of field preaching in Kingswood while indicating that political agitation and religious revival form an intriguing and politically charged pair.

This essay is divided in three sections. First, I introduce and assess Halévy's thesis along with E.P. Thompson's similar argument, namely, that the Methodist movement had a counter-revolutionary effect in the English context. Second, I situate the practice of field preaching at the center of the Wesleyan revival and propose that we think of this category alongside—and not opposed to—the political agitation that marked the period of the Industrial Revolution. Finally, I offer some

² George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals: A New Edition Containing Fuller Material than Any Hitherto Published* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 216.

theo-political considerations about the force of assemblies of people as gatherings that ultimately reclaim access to the common space. I propose that field preaching constituted Methodism as a revival of the common.

1

Halévy offered the initial articulation of his thesis in the 1906 essay, “The Birth of Methodism in England,” where he engages the critical question: why the labor agitations of 1738 did not culminate in a political revolution? For Halévy, the evangelical revival of the period is the key to the puzzle. He believes that the social malaise of the 1730s heavily impacted the English working class and its “despair... was the raw material which Methodist doctrine and discipline gave shape.”³ In the context of the social displacement generated by the Industrial Revolution, the Methodist revival offered a new sense of self and community. Moreover, the Methodist system of governance and its supervision over people’s morality offered an open path for social conformity “making increasingly possible the relatively orderly social transformation to a modern, individualistic society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”⁴ In short, Methodism turned despair into accommodation to a peaceful transition to a new model of society.

Throughout the twentieth century, Halévy’s hypothesis stirred historical studies of the Methodist revival.⁵ Standing in a somewhat ambiguous relation to

³ Elie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, trans. Bernard Semmel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 70.

⁴ Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 171–72.

⁵ See, Wellman Joel Warner, *The Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution* (London ; New York [etc.]: Longmans, Green and co, 1930); Robert Featherstone Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working-Class Movements of England, 1800-1850* (London: The Epworth press (E. C. Barton), 1937);

Halévy is the classic presentation given by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*. For him, the Methodist movement historically coincides with the period wherein workers in England came to “feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers.”⁶ Notably, the “minds” that became conscious of class relations had been “molded” by Methodism.⁷

For Thompson, this is a socially ambiguous process.⁸ Religiously, Methodists resembled non-conformist movements while officially espousing the Church of England. Socially, they generally did not endorse revolutionary politics while being complete strangers to the establishment.⁹ Thompson concludes that the revival served *simultaneously* as “the religion of the industrial bourgeoisie... and of the wide sections of the proletariat.”¹⁰ If, on the one hand, the poverty of the Methodists makes them an anti-establishment movement, the revival’s religious tenets closed the path for a social revolution. Furthermore, Wesley’s emphasis on a gradual dimension of the *via salutis* encouraged a submissive attitude that gradually led

Robert Featherstone Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Struggle of the Working Classes, 1850-1900* (Leicester [Eng.]: E. Backus, 1954); E.J. Hobsbawn, “Methodism and the Threat of Revolution in Britain,” in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (New York: Basic Books, 1964); W. Reginald Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (London: Batsford, 1972); Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*; David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1984); David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996). For a summary of Halévy’s impact on the study of the history of Methodism, see: Bernard Semmel, “Introduction,” in *The Birth of Methodism in England*, by Elie Halévy, trans. Bernard Semmel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Elissa S. Itzkin, “The Halévy Thesis: A Working Hypothesis? English Revivalism: Antidote for Revolution and Radicalism 1789-1815,” *Church History* 44, no. 1 (1975): 47–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3165098>.

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 11.

⁷ Thompson, 194.

⁸ For a compelling study on Thompson’s ambivalent relationship to Methodism and how it stems from his methodological commitment to dialectic, see Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 169.

⁹ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 351.

¹⁰ Thompson, 355.

workers to accept and adapt to the “industrial wilderness” they were thrown into.¹¹ With a nod to Max Weber, Thompson affirms that the Methodist discipline and work ethic is the bridge connecting religious revival and political assimilation.¹²

Despite different emphases and divergent ideologies, historians of Methodism seem to agree on this basic tenet: the morality engendered by the Methodist revival distanced England from political radicalism. Fairly disappointed by the terms of the debate, historian David Hempton argues that discussion over the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary force of the Methodist revival often obscure the attention to regional and local forms of Methodism.¹³ He correctly suggests that analysts of the Methodist movement too quickly fall into the Weberian hypothesis and its tendency to portray religion as a unilateral force for the status quo. To the contrary, Hempton shows several instances in which “popular evangelicalism had the capacity to act as a radical and unsettling force.”¹⁴ Methodism, in particular, “may be seen more as an expression of social radicalism than a reinforcement of *ancien régime* control.”¹⁵

With this in mind, let us now return to Halévy’s hypothesis by looking at an important concession made by Thompson:

Methodism... did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution some kind of community to replace the older community-patterns which were being displaced... Men and women felt themselves to have some *place* in an otherwise hostile world when within the Church.¹⁶

¹¹ Thompson, 353.

¹² See, Thompson, 401.

¹³ Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850*, 11.

¹⁴ Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 6–7.

¹⁵ Hempton, 8.

¹⁶ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 379. Emphasis in the original.

And so, what *place* is this? What space did Methodism offer to the uprooted workers of the British Industrial Revolution? The historians of Methodism seem to direct our attention to one place—the open fields. Halévy, offering what to him is the cabal proof of the Methodist conservative bent, takes us there:

Even today, whenever a Methodist preacher brings a popular audience together at a street corner to read the Bible, sing hymns, and pray in common, whenever he induces a “revival” of mysticism and religious exaltation... the great movement of 1739 is being repeated... A force capable of expending itself in displays of violence or popular upheavals, assumes, under the influence of a century and a half of Methodism, the form least capable of unsettling a social order founded upon inequality of rank and wealth.¹⁷

We must pay close attention to the connection Halévy is making: the scene of public preaching is for him a waste of revolutionary energy. A radical movement could not subsist in England because its forces were being depleted by the public gatherings of the Methodist crowds. This assembly could never unsettle the social order of inequality. Halévy’s text, however, points to something else: “At the beginning of 1739, the crisis was raging in [Yorkshire]... and it was the generally prevailing poverty that enabled Ingham, a former Oxford Methodist..., to produce a revival.”¹⁸ Halévy is quick to say: Ingham “preached in the open air,” again centering our attention at the public performance of the revival. But then came the winter food shortage: “Wheat being extremely expensive, the lower orders rose to seize the

¹⁷ Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, 76.

¹⁸ Halévy, 71.

wheat which they were unable to buy.”¹⁹ Halévy’s conclusion is that these “were favorable circumstances for the demonstration of extreme religious ardor.”²⁰

The reader is expected to assume that food shortage and famine are “favorable circumstances” for a religious revival, but Halévy omits how these are also the circumstances that generated the riots and pillaging he describes. Kingswood is the paradigmatic case for him: Methodism found there a “mass of workingmen as savage, as degraded... [and] at the same time accessible to explosions of collective enthusiasm.”²¹ The widespread social malaise is both the cause for the riots and for the revival, but why does one mode of public gathering lead to social unrest while the other to accommodation?

Halévy has an answer: the masses that “huddled about industrial centers” were an “ignorant mass, not capable of foreseeing and, by themselves, deciding the direction in which their enthusiasm will go.”²² These crowds of workers were no doubt restless, but their ignorance was maneuvered and took the content the bourgeoisie wanted to give it: “a religious and conservative form.”²³ At this stage, Halévy has entirely neglected how field preaching was feared by the bourgeoisie, a statement he makes not long before reaching this conclusion.²⁴ He has embraced the thesis that field preaching came to appease the masses while neglecting that the very crowds that gathered for the Methodist revival were rioting for food in 1739. Is

¹⁹ Halévy, 71.

²⁰ Halévy, 71.

²¹ Halévy, 71.

²² Halévy, 75.

²³ Halévy, 75.

²⁴ Halévy, 72–74.

the “violence” of “popular upheavals” generated by the revival that much different from the crowd rising up to “seize the wheat which they were unable to buy”?

Thompson too directs his attention to the scene of public preaching at his closing remarks about Methodism. On his case, the scene offers the most “interesting” reason as to why the working class was so attracted to Methodism:

Charles Kingsley’s epithet, “the opium of the masses”, reminds us that many working people turned to religion as a “consolation”, even though the dreams inspired by Methodist doctrine were scarcely happy. The methods of the revivalist preachers were noted for their emotional violence... And the open-air crowds and early congregations of Methodism were also noted for the violence of their “enthusiasm”... Southey, indeed, suggested that revivalism was akin to Mesmerism: Wesley “had produced a new disease, and he accounted for it by a theological theory instead of a physical one”.²⁵

One more time the “violence” of the revival is contrasted with political radicalism. In a paragraph that speaks of opium and disease, an intriguing symptom in Thompson’s statement is the association between “violence” of the revival and social conservatism.²⁶ Like Halévy prior to him, Thompson thinks that enthusiasm is anemic to revolutionary fervor. Field preaching offers the most “interesting” explanation for the appeal that Methodism had for the English working class and yet, the *violence* of the enthusiasm displayed therein is just another proof of the revival utmost *pacifying* force.

As historians of Methodism converge at the scene of field preaching, it begs the question: might this be the place where Halévy’s thesis encounters its moment of instability? Might the scene of field preaching help us see the Methodist revival

²⁵ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 380.

²⁶ In fact, the images collected by Thompson seem to disagree: if revivalism was in fact opium (a pain killer), Wesley could not have produced a new disease, only helped spread its relief.

not as the antidote for a social revolution but as the very public performance of revolutionary fervor?

2

Let us now return to the scene of the riots in Kingswood. Historians of the period agree that government presence and law enforcement was scarce in several regions in England, particularly in and around forest areas. Kingswood was exemplary of this, a place with a reputation for “independence and rebelliousness,” possibly the most riotous laboring group between the 1720s and the 1750s, according to historian Robert Malcolmson.²⁷ For him, the town was decidedly ungovernable.²⁸

In the autumn of 1738, a direct labor dispute emerged in Kingswood. The owners of the town’s coal mines entered into a price war and as a result colliers’ wages went down. “Many of the colliers... were determined to resist this reduction... [and] combined together and forced others to join them in a general stoppage of work.” Authorities acted fast to fortify the city and collect incriminating evidence against the rioters. Results of the uprising are hard to gauge, Malcolmson points out, but it is certain that the repercussions of the strike lasted until April 1739.²⁹

In the midst of all this controversy, George Whitefield arrives in Bristol on February 1739 and shortly after preaches for the first time in the open fields of

²⁷ Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 89. For staggering numbers of the coal business operation in Kingswood, see pp. 90-91.

²⁸ Malcolmson, 93. For further information on riots taking place in Kingswood, see Malcolmson, 94ff. And for a general analysis of the role that political riots had on English politics in this period, see Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 114-16.

Kingswood: “Blessed be the Lord that I have now broken the ice! I believe I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields.”³⁰ In the ensuing weeks, Whitefield preaches to several societies in the region, but whenever he is in Kingswood he is in the open fields. His journal from the period closes with the following statement: “I hope a reformation will be carried on amongst [the colliers]. For my own part, I had rather preach the Gospel to the unprejudiced, ignorant colliers, than to the bigoted, self-righteous, formal Christians. The colliers will enter into the Kingdom of God before them.”³¹

Wesley reached Bristol on 31 March in time to attend Whitefield’s preaching.³² His reaction is famous: “I could scarce reconcile myself to this *strange way* of preaching in the fields... having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls *almost a sin* if it had not been done *in a church*.”³³ That evening, Wesley preached on the Sermon on the Mount to the Nicholas Street society and was startled by the irony that Jesus’ sermon was, after all, a “remarkable precedent of *field preaching*.”³⁴

³⁰ Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Journals*, 216.

³¹ Whitefield, 243.

³² There was some hesitation about Wesley’s journey to Bristol and it was only after casting lots that he and his friends at the Fetter Lane society agreed about the trip. See, John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 19, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 37 Cf. n. 64. Wesley’s *Journal* prefaces the importance of this event by referencing a letter written to his father on the occasion of his decision to pursue a “university life” in Oxford as opposed to moving back to Epworth. This indicates that Wesley thought of his journey to Bristol as yet another decisive moment in his ministry. Wesley, 19:38. See, also: Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 191.

³³ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1984, 19:46.

³⁴ Wesley, 19:46.

So, on 2 April, Wesley “submitted to ‘be more vile,’ and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people.”³⁵ By the end of that month, Wesley had preached to an estimated crowd of 47,500 people in the Bristol area. His *Journal* gains intensity as he narrates the experiences of people falling to the ground and crying out to God in loud voice. These “violent” demonstrations—to recall the expression from Halévy and Thompson—already raised mistrust and suspicion about the revival.³⁶

Did the arrival of Methodist preachers signify the end of the revolts of the Kingswood colliers? In fact, as Malcolmson observes, their riotous nature seems to have waned in the second half of the eighteenth century. He suggests that “Methodism may have introduced into Kingswood a new form of authority,” which led to “Kingswood [being] tamed, and its eighteenth-century turbulence... succeeded by quiescence during the nineteenth century.”³⁷ Halévy’s thesis is thus vindicated: Methodism functioned in Kingswood to appease the crowds. Wesley apparently shared this vision as he declared, in 1768: “no Indians are more savage than were the colliers of Kingswood; many of whom are now humane, hospitable people full of love of God and man; quiet, diligent in business; in every state content; every way adoring the gospel of God their savior.”³⁸

³⁵ Wesley, 19:46.

³⁶ See, for example, Wesley’s entry for 30 April, 1739, where he describes how many were “offended” by these signs, including a “physician, who was much afraid there might be fraud or imposture in the case.” Wesley, 19:52.

³⁷ Malcolmson, “A Set of Ungovernable People,” 127.

³⁸ Cited in Malcolmson, 125.

But Wesley may have overlooked how much he had been transformed by field preaching and how “savage” the practice was to so many of the critics of the revival. It bears noting that the decision to confront the colliers in the open fields proved transformative to Wesley. Richard P. Heitzenrater makes the intriguing, though brief, suggestion that it was the experience of field preaching that shifted Wesley’s focus away from his personal anguish around assurance of faith to a “more public and evangelical sense of vocation.”³⁹ On 4 April, 1739 Wesley writes in his journal what amounts to a theological defense of field preaching: “How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God?”⁴⁰ Heitzenrater’s suggestion seems all the more valid in light of this: within days of his first contact with the open fields of Kingswood, Wesley was thinking of field preaching along the category of means of grace.

Wesley’s shift towards a more “public” understanding of his ministry immediately placed him in the middle of England’s deep social tensions. Field preaching was not illegal in England, but it was irregular.⁴¹ While legal disputes were intense, much of the opposition to field preaching exposed class bias against Methodism.⁴² To audiences accustomed to seeing assemblies of the working-class people as a sign of rebellion, the crowds assembled by the Methodist revival seemed just another threat to established authorities. Historian John Walsh highlights that

³⁹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd rev. ed (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 102; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville, Tenn: Kingswood Books, 1989), 133.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1984, 19:47.

⁴¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 109.

⁴² See, Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, 149.

The resentment of gentry and clergy [against Methodism] is not hard to explain... They feared it as a challenge to public order and to the authority of their class. Two aspects of the movement gave especial cause for alarm. First, in an age when the agencies of government were decidedly weak and decentralised, Methodism looked the more sinister because of its highly articulate and nation-wide organisation. Secondly, it addressed itself primarily to the poor, whom it drilled into disciplined cadres which owed their allegiance to leaders far beyond the reach of any local authority.⁴³

Henry Rack reiterates Walsh's observation: "Whatever the truth of... speculative Weberian notions about the effects on the capitalist spirit, contemporaries saw [Methodists'] social disruptiveness."⁴⁴

This must be clear: field preaching exposed class tensions and disrupted the established order of English society. Historian Nicholas Rogers confirms that "crowd interventions were a constituent element in the rich and ramified demotic political culture of the Georgian era [c. 1714-1830]" and that these interventions occupied a "contested terrain in which power, ideology, and class interest intersected."⁴⁵ Field preaching placed the Methodist revival right at the center of this terrain. Even as he endorsed the theory that the colliers had been appeased by the Methodist revival, Wesley still had to confront the enormous tensions created by field preaching, tensions that the Methodist movement only intensified.

Field preaching indelibly links the Wesleyan revival to the political agitation of the Industrial Revolution. Crowds of riotous workers and crowds of enthusiast believers performed the same act of *placement* for a *displaced* population. To recall

⁴³ John Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob in the Eighteenth Century," in *Popular Belief and Practice: Papers Read at the Ninth Summer Meeting and the Tenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Studies in Church History, 8 (Cambridge [Eng.] University Press, 1972), 218.

⁴⁴ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 280.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press & Oxford University Press, 1998), 17-18.

Thompson's thesis: "Methodism... did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution... some *place* in an otherwise hostile world."⁴⁶ Yet, it is not just that workers found their place in the Methodist revival, but fundamentally that the Methodist revival found its place in the common space already opened up by the political riots of the emerging working class.

Kingswood had a place for the Methodist preachers because the open fields had been the place of the colliers. What many perceive as the sign of the colliers' accommodation to the status quo may well have been their ongoing resistance to the establishment as they continued to claim the open fields as their field of action. What some see as the success of Methodism in taming the colliers might have been the success of the colliers in making Wesleyan theology a true form of *political* theology of the commons—a theology of the open fields.

3

The Methodist experience is entangled in the movement of the crowds. In his *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley takes on a critic of Methodism who is especially concerned about the tumult generated by field preaching. Wesley rejects the legal argument against the practice, but his adversary presses on suggesting that field preaching is not only illegal—it is also dangerous. The charge is openly political: "[Field preaching] may be attended with mischievous consequences. It may give advantages to the enemies of the established government.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 379.

It is big with mischief."⁴⁷ Even if "Methodists themselves are a harmless and loyal people," field preaching remains a useful site for "disloyal and seditious persons."⁴⁸

The argument is compelling, and Wesley must concede that crowds might become tumultuous. He is, however, willing to say that the revival may in fact be an agent of public disruption. Wesley grants that field preaching is a disturbance of public order much like the apostles disturbed the peace of the Roman Empire. We start to glimpse Wesley's theological understanding of the politics of the assembly: "Although what we preach is the gospel of peace, yet if you will violently and illegally hinder our preaching, must this not create disturbance?"⁴⁹ Wesley is turning the table: the disturbance generated by field preaching is a fruit of his adversary's own incapacity to witness the public appearance of the gospel. Field preaching will indeed destabilize the unjust order of society.

To address criticisms against the "manner of our preaching," Wesley uses all sorts of explanations, from doctrinal issues to climatic factors.⁵⁰ But Wesley's meticulous reasoning comes to a halt when he introduces his adversary to the "awful sight" of a multitude gathering in the open fields of Kingswood. The prose of the *Farther Appeal* breaks up to give room to hymnody: "[The crowds] were waiting upon God, while

They stood, under an open air adored
The God who made both air, earth, heaven, and sky."⁵¹

⁴⁷ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 115.

⁴⁸ Wesley, VIII:115.

⁴⁹ Wesley, VIII:121.

⁵⁰ Wesley, VIII:112.

⁵¹ Wesley, VIII:112.

A dreaded Wesley says in his heart: “This... is no other than the house of God! This is the gate of heaven!”⁵² I suggest that Wesley’s awe before the crowds bespeaks his realization that the revival was politically disrupting and that this disruption was significant to the revival’s understanding of the work of God.

The perspective on the political impact of the Methodist revival afforded by the scene of public preaching gains force when one considers crowds as political agents and not mere spectators. In her latest book, theorist Judith Butler suggests that the gathering of bodies—the *assembly*—is politically meaningful: they signify something, even when nothing is said: “acting in concert can be the embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political.”⁵³ For Butler, there’s something transgressive—*sedition*, to recall Wesley’s opponent’s term—about the apparition of these bodily assemblies in the public scene, particularly when the bodies that show up are those that often *disappear* before the public eye:

[W]hen bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising the right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which... delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity.”⁵⁴

The apparition of precarious bodies in the assembled crowd exposes the injustices of the system. These spontaneous gatherings constitute a political irruption of a power that has been repressed.

⁵² Wesley, VIII:112.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 9.

⁵⁴ Butler, 11.

Reflecting on this context, theologians Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan affirm the theological depth of the concept of the multitude and its affinity with the biblical categories of *laos* and *ochlos*, both Greek terms used by New Testament writers to designate the common people that constituted Jesus’s movement.⁵⁵ According to Rieger and Kwok, one does not simply join a multitude, but rather one *makes* the multitude.⁵⁶ Butler supplements this when she indicates that the common space is not a given, but rather constituted as such as people assemble there: “collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture.” The assembly of people *makes* the space into a common space. It “reconfigure[s] the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment.”⁵⁷

The consideration of the political force of crowds puts in check the traditional position that masses of people are often “blind”—as Halévy insisted—or reactionary—as Thompson implied. With Butler’s analysis of the performative power of the assembly, it is possible to suggest that political transformation is not engendered simply by the morality espoused by a movement. More than simply shaping a discipline favorable to the creation of a submissive worker, the Methodist revival helped to create a common space that offered home to those who had been displaced. The occupation of the commons by the crowds of Methodists “create[ed]

⁵⁵ Joerg Rieger and Pui-lan Kwok, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, Religion in the Modern World (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 32.

⁵⁶ Rieger and Kwok, 32.

⁵⁷ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 71.

psychical and imaginary spaces so that an alternative world can be thought and experienced.”⁵⁸

Rieger and Kwok justly say: “God will not be found... where God can be controlled.”⁵⁹ Indeed, the Methodist revival found its way to God in the uncontrollable crowds gathered in the open fields. Along with other movements, the Methodist revival reclaimed, occupied, and ultimately *revived* the commons. Field preaching, one could say with a nod to David Harvey, “delineate[d] liminal social spaces of possibility where ‘something different’ is not only possible, but foundational for the defining of revolutionary trajectories.”⁶⁰ By occupying the open fields and public squares of Kingswood and beyond, the Methodist revival offered something different to the dispossessed crowds. The revival was decidedly constituted through these gatherings. The crowds that gathered around field preachers did not simply join the Methodist movement, but rather constituted Methodism as a movement of the multitudes. The people called Methodists was assembled as a people in the public space. In a foreign territory where there is no room for public life, Methodism offered a glimpse of life in the commons and, there, it found its God.

⁵⁸ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 5.

⁵⁹ Rieger and Kwok, 108.

⁶⁰ David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, 1 edition (London: Verso, 2013), xvii.