On October 20, 1743 John Wesley rode into the town of Wednesbury in the West Midlands. As was his custom, he proceeded to the middle of the town and began to preach in the open air. On this particular occasion his text was Hebrews 13:8 (Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever) and he remarks in his journal that there was a “far larger crowd than expected.” After preaching, Wesley retired to a local Methodist’s house. There he was engaging in his endless correspondence when a mob beset the house and forced Wesley to come with them to the local magistrate. This is how Wesley describes the scene in his Journal:

To attempt speaking was vain; for the noise on every side was like the roaring of the sea. so they dragged me along till we came to the town; where seeing the door of a large house open, I attempted to go in; but a man, catching me by the hair, pulled me back into the middle of the mob. They made no more stop till they had carried me through the main street, from one end of the town to the other. I continued speaking all the time to those within hearing, feeling no pain or weariness. at the west end of the town, seeing a door half open, I made toward it and would have gone in; but a gentleman in the shop would not suffer me, saying they would pull the house down to the ground. However, I stood at the door, and asked, “Are you willing to hear me speak?” Many cried out, “No, no! knock his brains out; down with him; kill him at once.” Others said, “Nay, but we will hear him first.” I began asking, “What evil have I done? Which of you all have I wronged in word or deed?” And continued speaking for above a quarter of an hour, till my voice suddenly failed: then the floods began to lift up their voice again; many crying out, “Bring him away! bring him away!” (5:418).

What is remarkable about this story is that 1. Wesley was an ordained Anglican priest who always preached (even in the open air) in his cassock and bands, 2. The text and message he presents are completely orthodox – in complete agreement with the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles, and 3. the vehemence of the mobs reaction and their willingness to use physical violence against the famous John Wesley.

Such incidents were by no means isolated in the early years of Methodism. Methodists, though legally still part of the established Church, were routinely harassed by fellow citizens who looked upon them with suspicion and contempt. Riots regularly broke out at Methodist meetings, chapels were vandalized and destroyed, preachers were attacked and/or pressed into the army and navy and Charles Wesley was brought before the magistrates on charges of Jacobitism. Clearly toleration had its bounds even within the establishment.

What these brief examples clearly illustrate is that “toleration” and indeed intolerance took on a very different cast in Britain during the years following the Toleration Act of 1689. Though the state officially tolerated religious difference – opening the way for a more individual system of
Bearing this in mind, I want to do two things. First, I will lay out some basic background on the controversy over Methodism. Specifically, I will use the complex interplay between orality and print to illustrate how the movement disrupted public space and created what became a developed evangelical public sphere by century's end. Secondly, I will turn to the question of Methodism and gender as a lens through which to interpret the intolerance that Methodists faced — by examining this potent socio-cultural issue I will thus be able to illustrate that the objections to Methodism by the general public had little to do with doctrine and everything to do with the evolving definition of the religious self.

It has long been assumed that the evangelical religion that arose and spread during the Evangelical Revivals in England and America was diametrically opposed to Enlightenment. However as Michael Warner has recently pointed out, “Far from being simply a reaction against an already congealed ‘Enlightenment,’ eighteenth-century evangelical practices came into being through many of the same media and norms of discourse” (Preacher’s Footing 368). Thus evangelicism is in fact participated in the same norms of discourse that created what Warner has termed an “evangelical public sphere” during the eighteenth century. This evangelical public sphere operated alongside the secular in ways that “required the space of controversy afforded by competing printers, the compressed and progressive temporality of news, awareness of translocal fields of circulation, and a semiotic ideology of uptake” (Freetought and Evangelicalism 11:00). Thus the Evangelical Revival was in large part made possible by the expanding technologies of print and the increased venues for circulation that the developing capitalist economy produced. It is to these technologies and products of mediation that we must attend if we are truly to understand the discourse of popular evangelicalism and how this discourse interacted with society at large.

In the case of the discourse culture of Methodism that was fostered by John Wesley there was an inherent relationship between circulating orality, manuscript culture, and print that came to define the Methodist media environment. As Warner puts it, “In a movement context that mixes printed and preached sermons with pamphlets and newspapers, performance and print were densely laminated together” (Printing and Preaching 42:00).

In his published Journal, for example, John Wesley not only records his extensive travels, but also details the sermons he preached — many in the open air to thousands of listeners. However, in contrast to his printed sermons which are composed and arranged specifically for publication, in the Journal Wesley usually only recounts the Scripture passage he preached on and the number of people he preached to. These mostly ext tempore public sermons were shaped by his context and his public audience, and the account of them in the printed journal thus highlights the unbounded nature of his audience and his text and the close relationship between orality and print that defined early Methodism.

However it was this unbounded nature of open air Methodist itinerant preaching that was perceived as the greatest threat to the established social norms. Anglican parish preaching was directed in mostly set language (The Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies) to a very specific and set group of people within a sanctioned public space by an ordained priest — itinerant Methodist preachers, on the other hand, openly operated outside of this established structure. Mostly un-ordained and uneducated, and thus outside of the established structure, they circulated from town to town preaching ex tempore in the open air or unsanctioned chapels. Many of their sermons were never printed, nevertheless the storm of controversy they stirred up (both for and against) clearly made its way into print and informed the national conversation on the Revival. Thus it was this “unauthorized” entrance into the public space of preaching — the claim to be able to address an unbounded audience — that caused much of the animosity towards Methodism. In other words it was the discourse not the doctrine of the revival that was at issue.

An example of this can be found in the Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers. Towards the beginning of her narrative Rogers relates her reaction to the new Methodist preacher in Macclesfield, Mr. Simpson:

I heard various accounts of a clergyman whom my uncle Roe had recommended to be curate at Macclesfield, and who was said to be a Methodist. This conveyed to my mind as unpleasing an idea of him, as if he had been called a Romish priest; being fully persuaded that to be a Methodist was to be all that is vile, under a mask of piety…. I believed their teachers were the false prophets spoken of in the Scripture: that they deceived the illiterate, and were little better than common pickpockets; that they filled some of their hearers with presumption, and drove others to despair (15-16).

Thus Rogers’ objection to the Methodist Mr. Simpson has very little to do with anything he actually believes or preaches (she has never even heard him) and very much to do with the way in which he disturbs the order of society. As she writes later, “When I came back to Macclesfield, the whole town was in alarm. My uncle Roe, and my cousins, seemed very fond of Mr. Simpson, and told me he was a most excellent man; but that all the rest of my relations were exasperated against him (16-18). Simply by participating in the discourse of Methodism, then, Mr. Simpson calls up the specter of unbounded enthusiasm and disruption of the social order.

More than that, though, Rogers’ account illustrates how closely intertwined orality and print were in early Methodism. Sprinkled throughout her
To better illustrate how this evangelical public sphere operated and was contested I want to turn to some specific and local examples of the types of intolerance early Methodist converts faced. For, though the generally unbounded (in every sense of the word) nature of the Methodist movement and spirituality was crucial in forming attitudes towards Methodism, these attitudes were shaped and enacted according to local circumstances, customs, and mores. This is especially apparent in the case of Methodist women. Not only do these evangelical women writers illustrate how print could be used to blur gendered distinctions between public and private, they were also the locus for much of the anti-Methodist criticism and satire. In fact the role of gender within evangelical religion and the appeal of evangelicalism to women was one of the roots of the controversy the Revival engendered. Thus the reaction to Methodism was in reality an expression of deeper seeded concerns over the role of marginalized members of society – women, the poor – in organized religion. This anxiety is apparent in Leigh Hunt's *Attempt to Show the Folly and Danger of Methodism* in which he states, “We may see directly what influence the body has upon this kind of devotion [Methodism], if we examine the temperament of its professors. The female sex, for instance, are acknowledged to possess the greater bodily sensibility, and it is the women who chiefly indulge in these love-sick visions of heaven” (55). Thus what is really at stake in the print wars over Methodism is not so much the doctrine of justification by faith but the eroding of social boundaries via spiritual experience.

Hester Ann Rogers, for example, faced intense persecution from her mother and family upon her conversion to Methodism. Swayed by rumors about Methodism and Methodist teaching her mother “threatened, if ever she knew me to hear them… [to] disown me. Every friend and relation I had in the world, I had reason to believe, would do the same” (22). Rogers continues to attend Methodist meetings, however and “when my mother heard of it, a floodgate of persecution opened upon me!” (22). Her mother responds by confining her to the house for eight weeks, bringing in her godmother and the local clergyman to council her, and taking her away from Macclesfield, but to no avail. Upon returning home Rogers told her mother “in humility, and yet plainness,” that she “must seek salvation to my soul, whatever is the consequence” (23). She then says that she will leave and become a servant rather than renounce Methodism and goes on to offer her mother a deal:

> Yet if you will consent to it, I should greatly prefer continuing in your house, though it should be as your servant: and I am willing to undertake all the work of the house, if you will only suffer me to attend preaching. She listened to my proposals; and after consulting with her friends, consented to comply on this last condition (23).

Rogers then proceeds to work for her mother as a servant for over a year before finally convincing her of the authenticity of Methodist experience. What was at stake here clearly had nothing to do with the actual content of Methodist belief – Hester goes to great lengths to articulate its orthodoxy to both her mother and godmother – but the erosion of family and community bonds and loyalties through spiritual experience.

Likewise the intense persecution that Mrs. A.B. experienced following her decision to become a Methodist illustrates the localized nature of Methodist experience and the ways in which persecution was very much tied to the disruption of social and culture norms. Mrs. A.B. was born to a Catholic family on an island of Lough Key in Ireland. Through the influence of an old Protestant woman who boarded with the family during Mrs. A.B.’s childhood, she was convinced of the error of the Catholic Church and the necessity of salvation by faith. When she was fifteen, Mrs. A.B. was sent to the local priest for religious instruction – she refused to take part in Catholic rituals and openly defied both the priest and the Bishop, to whom she was sent to cast the “witchcraft” out of her. When she was twenty-one she came in contact with the Methodists and was sensibly converted. She then publically recanted the Catholic Church, causing the parish priest to say he “would make hawk’s meat” of her. After this she applied to the Rector of the Church of England parish for admittance and protection, but was rejected due to her belief in the ability to sensibly know her sins were forgiven. She then applied to another clergyman, who agreed to receive her into the Church. After this her friends and family attempted to marry her to a Catholic by force – rather than comply she fled, covering over seventeen miles by foot in a single day and contracting a life threatening fever. Eventually she was taken into the house of a local Methodist and eventually married a Methodist man. What is crucial to recognize here is that Mrs. A.B. was an obscure, young woman who dared subvert local cultural norms because of her evangelical conversion. She was willing to stand up to religious authorities up to and including a Bishop and flee her family and friends rather than marry someone against her will.

In becoming Methodists these women were in essence declaring their allegiance to a new spiritual family that was set in direct opposition to mainstream British culture. Henceforth their primary allegiance was to God and the Methodist community and, as Hester Ann Rogers’ and Mrs. A.B.’s testimonies illustrate, they were willing to give up everything to do so. This disruption of social and cultural norms was then reflected in the concern on the part of fathers, mothers, husbands, and communities. By developing a grassroots system of classes, bands, and select bands in order to foster a unique Methodist social community, Wesley created and organization that operated with what Gail Malmgreen describes as a “centrifugal force” which brought individuals together across wide distances and “broke down the narrowness of provincial life” (62). For this very reason, though, these bands were seen as profoundly threatening to existing social and religious structures; thus it should come as no surprise that the early years of Methodism were accompanied by intense persecution in the form of riots, press gangs, and family pressure to renounce Methodism.
What these concerns indicate is that controversy over religious doctrine in eighteenth century England was rooted in the discourses of religion, gender, and publicity. The average layperson may not have understood why Wesley's doctrine of justification by faith and insistence on immediate sensible conversion caused such uproar within the Church establishment, but he or she surely understood that such doctrines threatened social order in radical ways. Implicit in Wesley's assertion that God's grace was a free gift and salvation was available to all was an understanding of doctrine that exploded static categories of rich/poor, male/female, public/private. Furthermore, by emphasizing that the experience of salvation could be sensibly experienced outside of Church walls, Methodism offered a fundamental redefinition of self based on personal experience with God and interaction with a new community of faith. Thus, under the guise of toleration religious belief became individualized, localized, and incorporated into a developing consumerist media culture. Individuals were now free to choose belief from a variety of options, but it was precisely in this move towards general toleration that localized intolerance became tolerable.

Works Cited


Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Writing

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Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Writing

First published in the Arminian Magazine in 1787, it is easy to become captivated by the raw spirituality and genuine piety on display in Rachel Bruff’s conversion narrative. Following the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative form, Bruff lays out what her life was like before her involvement with the Methodists and the goes on the express the profound change that her experiences with God wrought in her sense of self and orientation toward the world. I have written elsewhere about how these spiritual experience came to define a new sense of subjectivity for...
evangelical women, how they incorporated the conventions of the conversion narrative to suit their spiritual goals, and how these narratives entered and interacted with a vibrant evangelical public sphere. Here, though, I want to engage a different set of questions. Specifically I want to look past the blinding white hot piety of these experiences and ask how these seemingly mystical encounters with the divine were elicited. Upon first glance it may seem as if they spring out of nowhere – but a careful study of the language of these texts reveals that this is simply not the case. Instead, these women engaged in systematic spiritual disciplines, what Wesley termed “means of grace,” that helped elicit spiritual experience. In Rachel Bruff’s case, she is engaged in intentional prayer and meditation when she has her experience with the Divine. Instead of an inner act of will eliciting spirituality – external attitude influences internal orientation.

Answering these questions does more than help us understand the nature of women's spiritual experience, however; it also helps us understand how the physical and embodied actions of these women came to shape their subjectivities and in turn their writing. In other words, the question becomes: if women’s inner spiritual experience ends up working outward into the world, what is the role of their writing? Does the activity of writing itself act as a form of spiritual discipline that helps elicit spiritual experience? Or is their writing a result of spiritual experience? I will argue that the answer to these questions is that writing in fact operates in both ways. In fact, analysis of the conversion narratives in the Arminian Magazine reveals that women’s writing participates in a sort of feedback loop of experience, print, orality, and publicity that is both caused by and causes the development of the spiritual subject. In other words, the subjectivity altering spiritual experience is both prior to and dependent upon action – action that is formed by the world of print and the public sphere.

The Means of Grace and Spiritual Experience

At least part of the common misapprehension about the separation between outward act and inner experience can be traced to modern assumptions about the nature of spiritual experience that have their very roots in the evangelical revival. Dissatisfied with what they saw as the dead formality of the established churches, revivalists like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards placed an emphasis on directly apprehended spiritual experience and justification by faith alone as opposed to salvation through adherence to a set of prescribed actions. In this they not only broke from the establishment, but also incorporated Enlightenment notions of the autonomous individual subject into a theory of personal salvation. Though (as I will explore later) none of these men rejected the sacraments and forms of worship as important elements of religion, they nevertheless emphasized belief and personal salvation (being “born again”) as the necessary components of saving faith. This led in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to belief, narrowly defined as assent to a set of principles, becoming regarded as almost synonymous with religion.

Elements of this idea still persist to this day, especially in the west, though in many ways a theory of religion as ideology has come to replace it in many circles (for more on these shifts see Jager 202-207).

This is not to say, however, that men like Wesley neglected the importance of the spiritual disciplines and sacraments. As a young man Wesley was deeply influenced by works like Thomas a Kempis’ Imitatio Christi and indeed, one of the defining conflicts of the early evangelical revival was over whether these disciplines or “means of grace,” were in fact necessary for salvation. The Moravians, with whom Wesley was closely allied at the beginning of his career, held that a human could do nothing for her salvation and instead had to hold herself in “stillness” until God extended His grace towards her. Wesley, as a good Anglican, would have none of this arguing that in fact the means of grace, while not saving in themselves, could nevertheless be used by God to save the individual. This disagreement ultimately led to a split within the early revival – with Wesley going his own way to form Methodism proper while the Moravians formed their own congregations throughout the country.

In his sermon titled “The Means of Grace” Wesley defines the means as, “prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon); and receiving the Lord’s Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.” He goes on to encourage his listeners to practice these disciplines as means to an end and none as ends themselves. Of special interest to Wesley is the receiving of the Lord’s Supper, which had fascinated him since his days at Oxford with the Holy Club. Wesley himself was a frequent communicator – as often as once a week – which was slightly unusual by the standards of the day. He also believed that the Lord’s Supper could in fact be a “converting ordinance,” or the means through which an individual was converted. In fact in his published Journal he includes the account of a woman, believed to be Susannah Wesley, who was converted through communion (see Rack 402-409 for a lengthy discussion of this). All this to say that, however it may have been interpreted in the future, Wesley fully recognized the role of spiritual disciplines in forming the spirituality and subjectivity of his followers – believing that act could form experience just as authentic experience manifested itself in action. As Peter Böhler advised the young Wesley upon his return from Georgia he should “Preach faith until you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith” (82).

It is this disciplinary aspect of seemingly spontaneous religious expression that is most easily overlooked when considering spiritual experience accounts. In part this is because such disciplines can seem conventional or contrived whereas the spontaneous overflow of religious emotion in contrast seems original and deeply felt. Again, though, this critical attitude reflects definitions of religion that originated during this time period in both the evangelical revival and Romanticism that tended to privilege directly apprehended experience above convention. However as Amy Hollywood has pointed out, “for many religious traditions, ancient texts, beliefs, and rituals do not replace experience as the vital center of spiritual life, but instead provide the means for engendering it. At the same time, human experience is the realm within which truth can best be epistemologically and affectively (if we can even separate the two) demonstrated.” In other words, outer discipline forms inner orientation which in turn affects how that orientation is made manifest in the world.
In her book, *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood demonstrates how this outer/inner relationship works in the personal piety of the members of the Egyptian women's mosque movement. These are women who gather together on a regular basis to be taught the practices of piety by (largely) female religious teachers. According to Mahmood, these “women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner states (intentions, movements of desire and thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gestures, actions, speech, etc.).”(31). An example she gives of this is the duty to rise before dawn for morning prayer. In one encounter she analyzes an older Muslim woman is instructing younger in the proper cultivation of the discipline of prayer. Interestingly, she does not recommend “trying” harder or strengthening willpower, but action and emotion:

> Performing the morning prayer should be like the things you can’t live without: for when you don’t eat, or you don’t clean your house, you get the feeling that you must do this. It is this feeling I am talking about: there is something inside you that makes you want to pray and gets you up early in the morning to pray. And you’re angry with yourself when you don’t do this or fail to do this (125).

This linking of emotion and action to spiritual practices thus reverses the liberal Western model of spiritual experience. Instead of the individual deciding to do something through an act of will, she is disciplined in these practices through action.

Interestingly enough, this theory of how action and emotion operate accords with what we have come to know about the neurological mechanisms of emotion and will. As far back as the late nineteenth century William James famously argued that, when it comes to emotion “we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be.” What James realized without benefit of modern neuro-imaging techniques, was that emotion was intimately connected to bodily action and bodily actions were in turn intimately connected to cognition and action. Indeed, in *The Will to Believe* James goes further, arguing that faith is actually synonymous with act: “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance” (524). The example he gives of this is a mountain climber who gets into a position where he/she can only escape by a terrible leap. “Refuse to believe,” James says, “and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself” (500). In other words it is the act of faith that forms the internal disposition and the internal disposition that creates the desired result.

In thus linking body, emotion, and act James anticipates recent developments in neuro-science which have largely confirmed the role of emotion and body in the making of decisions and indeed in the formation of consciousness itself. For example in *Descartes' Error*, neuro-scientist Antonio Damasio details how he used neuro-imaging to examine brain-damaged individuals who seemed to have lost the ability to make reasonable long term decisions or plans. These otherwise healthy individuals seemed to reason and function normally except for the loss of any ability to use reason to prioritize tasks. What Damasio found was that all of these individuals had some type of damage to a part of their frontal lobes that largely controls decision making – in other words they had lost the ability, not to reason, but to use the underlying bodily feedback of emotion to make reasonable decisions. As Damasio puts it in his later *The Feeling of What Happens*, “the presumed opposition between emotion and reason is no longer accepted without question…. emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making, for worse and for better” (40-41). Thus the body and emotions are not inherently “unreasonable,” but are utilized to better help us understand the world around us and make decisions. The damage these patients experienced to their frontal lobes disrupted the bodily systems of reasoning, thus leading them to make unreasonable decisions. This view of the body as an interconnected system or organism not only allows for a more nuanced understanding of emotion, but also calls into question the very structure of the unified subject itself. Furthermore, in the case of spiritual discipines, it bears out the idea that an outward bodily act could affect the inward state.

More importantly for our purposes, however, is what all this tells us about how the disciplinary practices of piety affect women’s formation of a sense of self within a patriarchal structure. Mahmood, for example, argues that “the mosque participants did not regard authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained the individual. Rather, they viewed socially prescribed forms of conduct as the potentialities, the ‘scaffolding,’ if you will, through which the self is realized” (148). In other words these women did not see their adherence to outward forms of behavior as constricting, but ultimately liberating – as a means to becoming God’s agent in the world. This definition of agency, though, requires that we situate agency within the particular discourse in which it operates. In this case that means, as Mahmood puts it, we think of “agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action.” Doing so:

> raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them (157).

In thus situating agency within local discourse and as a “modality of action” we can better understand how religious women view the formation of the self, how spiritual discipline helps form inward orientation, and how this ultimately works its way out into the public sphere. For the women Mahmood studied this sometimes meant going against the wishes of their husbands and fathers when their wishes conflicted with what they saw as God’s calling. In this the women of early Methodism were very similar and it is to them that we must now turn.

**Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Narratives**
As I have already pointed out, the actual experience accounts by women are filled with references to participation in spiritual disciplines – prayer, fasting, scripture reading, attending religious meetings, listening to sermons, taking communion – and these spiritual disciplines are explicitly linked to the spiritual experiences that result. Here, however, I want to focus on spiritual reading and writing themselves as disciplines – disciplines that ordinary lay women used worked to subtly resist these binaries through their writing. In other words, it is both through their writing and because of their writing that the sense of subjectivity women form after conversion fundamentally works to break down binaries between self and other, body and mind, emotion and reason. Thus, in tracing this transformation I will focus on each of these fundamental elements, reading evangelical women's writing in terms of how this inner emotional experience worked outwards into the rapidly developing public sphere – for the two rely on one another and any attempt to read them separately fundamentally misses how evangelical women viewed and wrote the self during the eighteenth century.

By and large very little writing by evangelical women written specifically for publication has survived (see Krueger 69-70). This is in part due to the nature of most of the printed discourse in early evangelicalism. What was valued most was the printed sermon or religious discourse and, though there were female preachers in Methodism, their sermons were not published like men's were. The exception to this is the prolific Mary Bosanquet Fletcher who, though none of her sermons were published, succeeded in getting some of her religious discourses into print. As a result most of the writing by women that we have comes in the form of diary extracts, spiritual letters, or conversion narratives written in letter form to John Wesley or another male interlocutor. In fact the “Letters” pages of the Arminian Magazine, especially during John Wesley's lifetime, are dominated by letters from female correspondents.

What is important about this is that clearly this writing was not necessarily meant for print – though it may have ended up there – instead it was largely devotional in nature. Imitating devotional forms and practices imbibed from works like Wesley's own Journal women clearly used diary and letter writing as a form of spiritual discipline – incorporating scripture passages, hymns, prayers, and sermon notes into their writing as a means of forming spiritual experience. Clearly it was in the act of writing that these disciplinary practices were somehow solidified.

This is especially evident in women's experience narratives, a genre which is itself highly disciplined. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the evangelical conversion narrative relies on a common pattern – evident in works from Bunyan to Wesley to Whitfield – consisting of 1. Consciousness of sin; 2. Acquaintance with Methodism and search for salvation; 3. Justification; 4. Opposition from within and without; 5. Search for “Christian Perfection”; 6. Achievement of perfection; and 7. Evidence of God's grace in life and community. In exhibiting this pattern, these narratives perform the mimetic function that John Wesley hoped to instill through his own Journal. Furthermore, they also indicate that these women saw themselves as part of a larger community of readers and writers, all of whom were pursuing the same spiritual goals. As Hindmarsh has pointed out:

> Through these communal practices they learned what was commonly expected in religious experience, and what was common became, in literary terms, conventional…. In expectation of conversion, evangelical discourse acted like a map, identifying the sort of terrain one might cross and the sort of destination one might arrive at if one chose to venture out (157).

Of course, as Hindmarsh also makes clear, just because these narratives were conventional, does not mean that they lack originality or insight. Instead, Methodist women appropriated readily available genres as a means to relating their own experience in a way that would be better understood by the broader Methodist community. It was precisely by using these conventions that women were able to form a unique sense of identity grounded in the broader religious culture. For, as Somers and Gibson have argued, narrative structures are powerful, illustrating that “stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives” (38). Much like the women of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, these Methodist women found agency within disciplinary structures precisely by using those outward acts to alter the inner sense of self.

Thus it is because of the disciplinary nature of narrative convention that women came both to form a new sense of self after conversion and through them that they were able to reach a wider public through publication in venues like the Arminian Magazine. In this the discipline of writing came full circle – working outward as a result of spiritual experience and in turn working mimetically to form the spiritual experiences of others in the Methodist community. One of the main reasons John Wesley published spiritual experience accounts in the Arminian Magazine was in fact to illustrate that spiritual experience was available to all and that by imitating the examples of pious men and women, others could come to know God as they did. Women's writing was thus crucial to the formation of a developed evangelical public sphere within which the discourses of piety, spiritual discipline, and religious experience interacted powerfully in forming the evangelical subject.

References
In the year 1778, the people called Methodists had been preaching in different parts of the country, sometime before I went to hear them. They were much spoken against. It being much pressed on my mind, in the month of February, I went to hear Mr. Shadford. I liked his doctrine exceeding well; but I had no mind to join the Society, till it was made known to me that they were the Servants of God, sent to shew us the way of salvation. However, I went from time to time to hear, and grew more and more happy every day. After some time, I again covenanted with God in the following manner: Lord, as I have chosen Thee to be my God and Guide, I now choose thy People to be my people. I then joined the Society, for which I have much reason to praise God ever since.

– Rachel Bruff, Arminian Magazine, 1787

And now, dear Sir, I have endeavoured to give the relation desired by you; though to be as particular as I might, would take up too much paper, and too much of your time. Excuse what difficiencies you will find in this, and believe me, with the utmost duty and respect, your friend and servant. – Elizabeth Scaddan, Arminian Magazine, 1791

In these extracts from John Wesley's Arminian Magazine we see the complex interplay between orality, spiritual experience, belief, conversion, and print that characterized early Methodism. This complex nexus worked to produce a developed culture of evangelicalism during the period that worked to form a fully developed religious public sphere. Since the publication of Jürgen Habermas' Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere the concept of the public sphere as a freestanding institution of bourgeois society has been progressively modified, including by Habermas himself. What has emerged since that time is the conception of multiple public spheres that often overlapped and sometimes conflicted. Of particular interest to me is the way that a religious public sphere (something Habermas never even considered) emerged and matured over the course of the long eighteenth century in conjunction with the liberal “secular” public sphere. As Jon Mee has pointed out:

Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere, with its newspapers being discussed in coffee houses and clubs, its periodicals encouraging the circulation of sound knowledge and banning disputation in religion from its pages, had an alter ego in the heterotopias of chapels, field meetings, and the huge circulation of popular religious pamphlets and sermons. Eighteenth-century notions of civility were almost defined by...
While I would certainly agree with Mee's overarching point that a developed religious public sphere encompassing a vast network of print, sermons, and field meetings existed during the eighteenth century I would take issue with the idea that these networks constituted a counter-public. Instead, I will argue that this religious public sphere was actually the product of the same enlightenment discourses that brought the secularized bourgeois public sphere into being. In this sense the religious public sphere did not operate so much as a reactionary counter-public sphere opposed to "notions of civility," but as part and parcel of the larger societal debate over the role of evangelical religion in public life that was largely played out on the pages of the periodical press.

Of course, it has long been assumed that the evangelical religion that arose and spread during the Evangelical Revivals in England and America was diametrically opposed to Enlightenment. However as Michael Warner has recently pointed out, "Far from being simply a reaction against an already concealed 'Enlightenment,' eighteenth-century evangelical practices came into being through many of the same media and norms of discourse. What we now call evangelicalism can be seen as the transformation of older strains of piety by public sphere forms…. Indeed, it is not clear that enlightenment and evangelical religion were recognizable to contemporaries as opposing forces" (Preacher's Footing 368). Thus evangelicalism in fact participated in the same norms of discourse that created what Warner has termed an "evangelical public sphere" during the eighteenth century. This evangelical public sphere operated alongside the secular in ways that "required the space of controversy afforded by competing printers, the compressed and progressive temporality of news, awareness of translocal fields of circulation, and a semiotic ideology of uptake" (Freethought and Evangelicalism 11:00).

In other words, evangelicalism was not a reaction to Enlightenment, instead the two were in many ways mutually constitutive, relying on many of the same foundations. One of the most crucial foundations was the advent of the public sphere. By only positing the public sphere in terms of secularization and liberalization scholars have thus overlooked the fact that the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century participated in a robust public sphere of print and periodical literature that still dwarfed secular publications throughout the century. By 1830, for example, The Sunday School Magazine had sold over 30 million copies far more than any other contemporary title, while the Arminian Magazine and its successor Methodist Magazine regularly outsold the better known Gentleman's Magazine. Whitefield and Wesley's print empires dominated the literary marketplace of the eighteenth century with their published journals going through hundreds of editions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Furthermore, aside from their own publication successes, the journals of Whitefield and Wesley provoked further writing and further print in the mode Clifford Siskin has detailed in The Work of Writing – turning readers into authors (163-170). Individual converts imitated Wesley's confessional style and utilized the burgeoning print culture to transmit their experience to a much wider, and much more socially variegated, audience. Drawing upon the "private" diary and letter form, spiritual experience authors oriented their texts towards a specific audience – probing the developing space that was opening up in print. As Habermas writes, "From the beginning, the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one's self and the other: self observation entered a union partly curious, partly sympathetic with the emotional stirrings of the other I" (49). By thus appropriating these forms in print, early eighteenth century conversion narrative writers (like novelists) began to develop a complex internal subjectivity that was both rooted in internal experience but oriented towards a public space. People like John Wesley published their spiritual experiences not only or primarily for their own sakes, but in order to elicit mimetic spiritual experiences in rapidly expanding reading public.

This proliferation of print that the Evangelical Revival spawned was, of course, in direct conversation with the "secular" public sphere – indicating not so much a binary relation, but a close, symbiotic relationship tied together through mediation and circulation. In conjunction with attacks on Methodist preachers and meeting houses, anti-Methodist literature proliferated during the period. Novels by Smollet (Humphry Clinker) and Fielding (Joseph Andrews) lampooned Methodists as deranged enthusiasts. Pamphlets by religious leaders like the Bishop of London compared them to Catholics and cheap print like The Story of the Methodist-lady; or, The Injur'd Husband's Revenge: A True History, cast Methodists as disturbers of the social and domestic order. As Fielding's character Parson Adams says in Joseph Andrews men like Wesley and Whitefield, "set up the detestable Doctrine of Faith against good Works… for surely, that Doctrine was coined in Hell, and one would think none but the Devil himself could have the Confidence to preach it" (70). As strange as it may seem to a post-modern audience, such questions of religious discourse were very much part of the public conversation in the eighteenth century in large part because of the medium of print.

However I would argue that it is exactly the discourse that is at stake here, not the actual doctrine of justification by faith. As Michael Warner has argued, we must attempt to understand evangelicalism "not by the doctrinal emphasis which has so far dominated the intellectual history of evangelicalism since almost all of these doctrinal elements could be found almost anywhere, anytime," and instead move toward an approach that examines the "discourse culture of evangelicalism" (Printing and Preaching 31:00). To do so we must examine the discourse of popular evangelicalism more broadly – moving beyond print to the relationship between print and orality in early evangelicalism. As Warner puts it, "In a movement context that mixes printed and preached sermons with pamphlets and newspapers, performance and print were densely laminated together" (Printing and Preaching 42:00).

In the case of Methodism this confluence between print and orality was inherent in the Methodist media culture. In his published Journal, John Wesley not only records his extensive travels, but also details the sermons he preached – many in the open air to thousands of listeners. However, in contrast to his printed sermons which are composed and arranged specifically for publication, in the Journal Wesley usually only recounts the Scripture passage he preached on and the number of people he preached to. These mostly ex tempore public sermons were shaped by his context...
and his public audience, and the account of them in the printed journal thus highlights the unbounded nature of his audience and his text. Nevertheless, the fact that an account of the sermon made it into the Journal and that some version of it was eventually printed illustrates the closely intertwined nature of Methodist public space.

However it was the very unbounded nature of open air Methodist itinerant preaching that was perceived as the greatest threat to the established social norms. Anglican parish preaching was directed in mostly set language (The Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies) to a very specific and set group of people within a sanctioned public space by an ordained priest – itinerant Methodist preachers, on the other hand, openly operated outside of this established structure. Mostly un-ordained and uneducated, and thus outside of the established structure, they moved from town to town preaching ex tempore in the open air or unsanctioned chapels. Many of their sermons were never printed, nevertheless the storm of controversy they stirred up (both for and against) clearly made its way into print and informed the national conversation on the Revival. Thus it was this “unauthorized” entrance into the public space of preaching – the claim to be able to address an unbounded audience – that caused much of the animosity towards Methodism. In other words, to paraphrase Michael Warner, it was the discourse not the doctrine of the revival that was at issue.

An example of this can be found in the Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers. After confessing her childish sins of card playing and dancing, Rogers relates her reaction to the new Methodist preacher, Mr. Simpson:

_I heard various accounts of a clergyman whom my uncle Roe had recommended to be curate at Macclesfield, and who was said to be a Methodist. This conveyed to my mind as unpleasing an idea of him, as if he had been called a Romish priest; being fully persuaded that to be a Methodist was to be all that is vile, under a mask of piety. These prejudices were owing to the false stories which from time to time I heard repeated to my father, when about seven or eight years old; and also many more which my mother heard after his death, and to the present time: so that I believed their teachers were the false prophets spoken of in the Scripture: that they deceived the illiterate, and were little better than common pickpockets; that they filled some of their hearers with presumption, and drove others to despair: that with respect to their doctrines, they enforced chiefly, that whosoever embraced their tenets, which they called faith, might live as they pleased, in all sin, and be sure of salvation: and that all the world besides must be damned without remedy: that they had dark meetings, and pretended to cast out devils, with many other things equally false and absurd; but all of which I believed. I heard also, that this new clergyman preached against all my favourite diversions, such as going to plays, reading novels, attending balls, assemblies, card tables, &c. But I resolved he should not make a convert of me; and that if I found him, on my return home, such as was represented, I would not go often to hear him (15-16)._ 

Thus Rogers’ objection to the Methodist Mr. Simpson has very little to do with anything he actually believes or preaches and very much to do with the way in which he disturbs the order of society. As she writes later, “When I came back to Macclesfield, the whole town was in alarm. My uncle Roe, and my cousins, seemed very fond of Mr. Simpson, and told me he was a most excellent man; but that all the rest of my relations were exasperated against him (16-18). Simply my participating in the discourse of Methodism, then, Mr. Simpson calls up the specter of unbounded enthusiasm and disruption of the social order. In fact, after Hester becomes a Methodist she receives an ultimatum from her family and ends up working as her mother’s servant for over a year just so she can remain in the house after she is in essence disowned.

More than that, though, Rogers’ account illustrates how closely intertwined orality and print were in early Methodism. Sprinkled throughout her published Account are references to sermons by Mr. Simpson, John Wesley and others. Ostensibly instances of the localized orality of popular religion, evidence of these sermons nevertheless make it into print accounts – the most famous and published of which was Rogers’. Likewise the women who wrote in to the Arminian Magazine participated in this conversation between orality and print, often giving accounts of revivals and sermons for the larger Methodist public. Thus early evangelical media culture worked to form a type of feedback loop within which the genres of public oral sermon and printed discourse were constantly in conversation. And it was this feedback loop of orality and print that threatened to break down the established public boundaries between private spirituality and public life.

To better illustrate how this evangelical public sphere operated and was contested I want to turn now to the role of women writers within the Evangelical Revival. For not only do these evangelical women writers illustrate how print could be used to blur gendered distinctions between public and private, they were also the locus for much of the anti-Methodist criticism and satire. In general the women of early Methodism used their private, internal experience as a way to disrupt the categories of public and private. Religious experience in this sense gave them the language to enter a public space and explode any distinction between inner emotion and outer action. Thus it was not so much that evangelical religion appealed to women because it was inherently more suited to private and domestic consumption, but because it allowed for participation in a conversation beyond those bounds.

In this context I would argue that the role of gender within religion was at the root of the doctrinal controversies that the Revival engendered. Thus the debates over doctrines like justification by faith or religious “enthusiasm” were in reality expressions of deeper seeded concerns over the role of marginalized members of society – women, the poor – in organized religion. This anxiety is everywhere apparent in Leigh Hunt's Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism in which he states, “We may see directly what influence the body has upon this kind of devotion [Methodism], if we examine the temperament of its professors. The female sex, for instance, are acknowledged to possess the greater bodily sensibility, and it is the women who chiefly indulge in these love-sick visions of heaven” (55). Thus what is really at stake in the print wars over Methodism is not so much the doctrine of justification by faith but the eroding of social boundaries via spiritual experience.
One of the main outlets for women's writing during the Evangelical Revival was John Wesley's *Arminian Magazine*. Wesley founded the *Arminian Magazine* in 1778 in direct response to growing tensions within the evangelical revival over the question of predestination. However the real purpose of the magazine, for Wesley, was to defend "universal redemption" against predestination not only through polemical and theological argument, but also through the personal experiences of actual Methodist men and women. This real-life experience was proof positive for Wesley that the salvation experience was available to all.

It is in this context that Wesley solicited personal religious experience accounts for the *Arminian Magazine*. Religious accounts had always been important to Wesley as validations of his ministry. His published *Journal* not only served as an apologia for Wesley's ministry but also, according to Hindmarsh, worked to mimetically produce both spiritual experiences and spiritual experience accounts by lay people, thus creating a kind of "narrative community" (127-128). Furthermore, from the earliest days of the movement both Wesley brothers encouraged their lay preachers and members to record their spiritual experiences and send them as letters, some of which were later published in the *Arminian Magazine*.

Especially under Wesley's editorship, which he maintained until his death in 1791, the widely circulated *Magazine*, served as an ideal outlet for women's writing. Tolar Burtons has estimated that, of the 238 biographical accounts in the *Arminian Magazine*, 79 are about women (200). Interestingly enough, 113 of these accounts were published between the inception of the magazine in 1778 and Wesley's death in 1791 (Jones 275), at which time men's and women's accounts were almost equally represented (Tolar Burton 200). Wesley also regularly published stand alone pamphlets by women that detailed their conversion and spiritual experiences – the most famous being the *Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers*, which remained in print on both sides of the Atlantic until the end of the nineteenth century. What is especially interesting about these narratives is that the majority of them are by or about Methodist lay-women – ordinary women who wrote to Wesley about their conversion and experience of faith. Thus, not only did Methodism offer the women a space within the burgeoning public sphere, their accounts in turn worked to expose the very binaries that constructed this sphere as inherently gendered spaces in need of subversion.

For example after her conversion Elizabeth Scaddan relates how her family gave her an ultimatum, telling her she "should no longer remain with them; that they would disown me; and accordingly I had only till the next morning to determine what answer to give them" (XIV: 187). Eventually her family backed down, but it was not atypical for family members to be distressed at their daughters or wives becoming Methodists. This concern reflected not only contemporary prejudices against the doctrine of justification by faith, but also the prevalence of false rumors that were widely spread about the Methodists accusing them of Popery and even sponsoring orgies at their "love feasts," or communal gatherings.

What these concerns indicate is that controversy over religious doctrine in eighteenth century England was rooted in something far deeper than scholastic arguments over the nature of salvation and redemption. The average layperson may not have understood why Wesley's doctrine of justification by faith and insistence on immediate sensible conversion caused such uproar within the Church establishment, but he or she surely understood that such doctrines threatened social order in radical ways. Implicit in Wesley's assertion that God's grace was a free gift and salvation was available to all was an understanding of doctrine that exploded static categories of rich/poor, male/female, public/private. By emphasizing that the experience of salvation could be sensibly experienced outside of Church walls, Methodism offered a fundamental redefinition of self based on personal experience with God and interaction with a new community of faith.

Furthermore, early Methodism was in many quarters considered profoundly countercultural. As Clive Field's comprehensive survey of early Methodist membership lists tentatively suggests, the perceived threat to social structures reflects the fact that a disproportionate number of Methodist members tended to be drawn from the skilled trades – mining, carpentry, weaving, etc – though this could vary by locality (165). In this type of local economic activity families had a vested economic interest in their sons and daughters remaining in the family trade (Malmgreen 64). The concern on the part of fathers, mothers, and husbands was that if their daughters or wives were out participating in Methodist meetings they would not be at home helping raise the family or contributing financially (Field 157). Likewise, by developing a grassroots system of classes, bands, and select bands in order to foster a unique Methodist social community, Wesley created an organization that operated with what Gail Malmgreen describes as a "centrifugal force" which brought individuals together across wide distances and "broke down the narrowness of provincial life" (62). For this very reason, though, these bands were seen as profoundly threatening to existing social and religious structures; thus it should come as no surprise that the early years of Methodism were accompanied by intense persecution in the form of riots, press gangs, and family pressure to renounce Methodism.

In becoming Methodists these women were in essence declaring their allegiance to a new spiritual family that was set in direct opposition to mainstream British culture. Henceforth their primary allegiance was to God and the Methodist community and, as Elizabeth Scaddan's testimony illustrates, they were willing to give up everything to do so. They did so not to make a political or feminist statement, but because they felt they owed allegiance to a higher moral authority. Such self-determination in the face of vigorous opposition from friends and family defined many women's experience with Methodism, especially in the early days of the movement, and it partially explains why they felt compelled to speak out in public about the true nature of their religious experiences.

Conversion not only operated to break down social and cultural bonds, however, it also granted a sense of liberatory agency that licensed Methodist women to disrupt the public/private binary in print. For example, Rachel Bruff describes writes:
One day I bowed myself at the Redeemer's feet, and determined not to let him go without the blessing. And glory be to his Name! in a moment my burden was gone. My soul was now so enraptured with a sense of his love, that I was constrained to praise his name aloud. From that time he has been constantly with me, and has borne me up above all my sins, temptations, and sufferings (X:192).

Likewise, M. Taylor states, “There is now a free and open intercourse betwixt God and my soul…. My soul cries out for love, and hungers and thirsts for more, and to be more united to him who is my all in all” (XIV: 619). Mrs. Planche similarly uses the language of liberation to describe her experience:

He came into my soul with such a display of his grace and love, as I never knew before. All my bands were loosed, and my spirit was set perfectly free. I felt an entire deliverance from all the remains of sin in my nature; and my precious Jesus took full possession of my heart (XIV: 421).

Thus in each case these women represent conversion as an overwhelming experience of God's love that destroys sin by entering into them and taking possession of their hearts. Furthermore, they tend to represent this experience in almost erotic terms – using the language of love and affection to describe the sensory feeling of sanctification. This would seem to suggest that these women view this experience in much the same terms as a human relationship – their relationship with Christ is cemented in Christian perfection through the mystical union of their soul and body with Christ. Unlike similar accounts by men, perfection for these women is an intensely embodied experience that licenses public action.

Thus it appears that women, more than men, saw their sanctifying submission to God as an empowering or agency-granting experience in the sense that their primary allegiance was to God, not men. The experience of sanctification empowered them to speak and act in ways that would have been inconceivable before because they believed they were operating as God's agent in the world. In fact at the end of her narrative Elizabeth Scaddan explicitly asks her audience to “excuse what difficiencies [sic] you will find.” Despite these perceived “difficulties,” however, these women overcome their reservations because they see themselves as called to speak out and testify to the broader Methodist community about what God has done in their lives. This has the radical effect of opening up a space in discourse within which lay-women can use religious experience as a means of participating in a fully developed religious public sphere that calls into question the very nature of the public/private, inner experience/outward action binary itself.

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Agnes Bulmer – Methodist Poetess

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When most people think of “Methodism” and “poetry” together they naturally think of Charles Wesley. Indeed, it could rightly be argued that the great poet and hymnist shaped the Methodist movement at least as much through his poetry as his more famous brother did. However, scholarship on Methodist poetry (scanty as it is already) rarely moves beyond Charles and, when it does, it mainly considers such religious poets as curiosities – it generally makes no attempt to regard such poets in their own terms and take them seriously as poets – it most certainly never considers women. Of no one is this truer than Agnes Collinson Bulmer.

Agnes Bulmer was the most notable poet of second generation Methodism – her epic Messiah’s Kingdom runs to twelve books and over 14,000 lines, a scale of ambition rarely seen since Milton. It is certainly one of the longest poems of the nineteenth century and perhaps the longest poem ever written by a woman. And yet this magnificent and important poem has received no serious scholarly attention. This is due, in part, to long-standing elision of explicitly religious eighteenth century poetry in general and religious poetry by early evangelical women in particular. Though feminist critics have done an admirable job of reintegrating women into the canon over the past thirty years, religious women continue to be written out or, when they are included (as in the case of someone like Hannah More) their writings are largely considered primarily in terms of gender, class, or politics and rarely in terms of the more primary category of religion.

This is especially true of writers like Bulmer who wrote almost solely on religious topics and who dared to do so in an epic poetic genre largely dominated by men. Instead of being considered for their own literary and cultural merits, these works have largely been laid to the side as the cliché moralistic devotional poetry of the religious fanatic. Indeed this is too often the case as religious writers of lesser talent (both women and men) often turned to scripture and sentimental cliché as a substitute for poetic vision; but it is not true of Bulmer, who used the materials she was given craft a cohesive and original poetic vision that speaks beyond its limited religious sphere to address the key moral, social, and political questions of the day in an original and powerful voice. That subsequent critics have not recognized this has more to do with our preconceptions than the actual content of the text.

Agnes Collinson was born in London on August 31, 1775 to Edward and Elizabeth Collinson. Both her parents were devout Methodists and personal friends of John Wesley. She was baptized by Wesley and received her first Methodist class ticket from him in 1789. By this time Wesley was a venerated figure both within and without Methodism and London had become the one of the key centers of the Methodist movement. Here Agnes would have rubbed shoulders with the Methodist elite, her first class leader was Hester Ann Rogers and she also became acquainted with Elizabeth Mortimer – both major female leaders of early Methodism who present at Wesley’s death.

Early on Agnes exhibited a keen intellect and a marked talent for writing. Her favorite book, aside from the Bible was Young’s Night Thoughts, a work that would have a profound influence on her later work. She also began composing poetry early in life and her first poem, “On the Death of Charles Wesley,” was published in the Arminian Magazine in 1788, when she was just fourteen. It is hardly great poetry, but it exceptional for a fourteen year old girl. She also contributed a longer, more polished poem, Thoughts on a Future State to the posthumous 1794 edition of Hester Ann Rogers’ famous Account. It is a far more developed poem and one that indicates the direction her poetic vision was taking – incorporating a thoroughgoing knowledge of Scripture with a keen ear for poetic diction.

In 1793 Agnes married Joseph Bulmer, a London merchant and one of the stewards of the famous City Road Chapel. By all accounts the marriage was a happy one and Joseph’s relative wealth allowed Agnes the leisure to pursue both poetry and deep involvement in the Methodist societies. She was a frequent contributor to the Arminian Magazine, the later Methodist Magazine, and Youth’s Instructor. She also carried on an extensive correspondence with the luminaries of the second generation Methodism, some of which was published after her death as Select Letters (these are currently unavailable in an electronic edition – I have a copy and will be transcribing at a later date). Some of her notable friends included the prominent Methodism theologian Adam Clarke and Jabex Bunting, the powerful leader of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.
It seems, however, than much of Bulmer's greatest poetry revolved around and was spurred on by the experience of death. Her husband Joseph died in 1822 and her mother in 1825. It was after this second experience of nursing her mother during her final illness that Bulmer began her magnum opus: *Messiah's Kingdom*. Published in 1833 in twelve books, *Messiah's Kingdom* is a momentous achievement by any standards. At 14,000 lines it is 4,000 lines longer than its most obvious literary forbearer, *Paradise Lost*, and only 2,000 lines shorter than one of the longest poems of the Romantic period, *Don Juan*. Its scope is tremendous, beginning (like Milton) with the fall of man and proceeding through the major events of the Old and New Testaments, the establishment of the Church, the Reformation, and up to the contemporaneous evangelical fight against slavery and social ills. Its overriding theme is the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth, first through his redemptive work on the cross and then through the actions of the individual Christian in society.

Length and scope, however, are not necessarily the best indicators of poetic worth. This, combined with the fact that the subject matter of the poem is so explicitly religious, no doubt explain why it has been overlooked by serious scholars for so long. Nevertheless, careful attention to the poem clearly indicates a marked poetic talent—a clear grasp of both content and form that are married together seamlessly. As late nineteenth century biographer Annie Keeling put it, Bulmer composed the poem, "with a rare fervour and depth of conviction, with impassioned eloquence, and a style always musical and graceful, often rising in power. The whole poem presents an attractive unconscious picture of a high, pure spirit delighting itself in the loftier regions of thought and speculation; and in the frequent lyrical outburst which break the flow of its rhymed heroic verse there is a certain swift and fiery quality, an airy grace of flight..." This quality is best exhibited in the lyric sections, like this one which links God's promise to Noah to his promise to redeem humankind through the coming Messiah:

GLOOMY cloud, that, lowering low,
      Shadowest nature's lovely light,
Wide thy deepening darkness thrown
      Catch the sunbeam bursting bright;
Gently on thy humid breast,
Bid its soften'd splendours rest.

Wild the wind, and fierce the flood
      Foaming, roaring, raved, and rush'd;
Thuder's roll'd, – the voice of God: –
            Now the angry storm is hush'd,
Now the eddying whirlwind sleeps,
Ocean seeks its barrier deeps.

... Hush! the word of promise breaks,
      Not in thunders hoarse and loud:
Lo! the covenant Saviour speaks
      Softly from the symbol'd cloud.
Rise! the storm of wrath is pass'd;
Judgment shall not always last.
...

From the cross, where darkness shrouds
      Him who suffer'd there for me,
In the fearful tempest clouds,
      Resting, dread, on Calvary,
Mercy's beaming sign appears,
See, believe, and dry thy tears!

Not all passages of the poem are (or could be) this moving, but even Milton had his bad lines. This style may not be to everyone's taste, and Bulmer is no Milton, but the fact that Milton's epic religious poem has been endlessly dissected and connected so clearly with social and political events, while Bulmer's has not, says more about the state of scholarship on religious women poets than it does about Bulmer's poetry. Bulmer is just as much of an engaged social poet as Milton was, she just exhibits this engagement in different terms in a different time and place.

However *Messiah's Kingdom* was not what Bulmer was most famous for, even during her lifetime. In 1836, after the death of her friend and Methodist fore-mother Elizabeth Mortimer, she edited the *Memoirs of Elizabeth Mortimer*, which became a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. She also wrote several volumes of *Scripture Histories*, prose re-workings of Biblical stories mainly targeted to children. Indeed, all of these works were picked up by the formidable Methodist publishing machine and circulated widely. This alone makes her a writer who deserves considerable attention. Methodist membership in England and America during the 1830's was sky rocketing and it would be no exaggeration to say that a fair portion of the population was familiar with her work.
Agnes Bulmer died on August 20, 1836 on the Isle of Wight. Her funeral sermon was preached by William Bunting, the son of Jabez Bunting, who later wrote that Bulmer was "one of the most intellectual and holy women, probably, whose presence ever adorned this world," while Adam Clarke wrote, "That woman astonishes me. She takes in information just as a sponge absorbs water.... Whether it be philosophy, history, or theology, she seizes upon it, and makes it all her own."

These tributes are touching, but they also clearly reveal the crucial tension between official Methodism and the role of women in the movement during the nineteenth century. During John Wesley's lifetime women like Hester Ann Rogers, Elizabeth Mortimer, and Sarah Crosby were given prominent roles in the movement – allowed to preach publically and express themselves in official publications. After Wesley's death official Methodism moved quickly to proscribe the roles that were available to women within the movement and under Jabez Bunting women were further confined to a space of Victorian domestic piety. This move is revealed in the tributes to Bulmer after her death. Both William Bunting and Adam Clarke treat Bulmer as an anomaly – the intellectual woman – not the rule. The fact that Bulmer was largely confined to the private world of correspondence with other women and poetry instead of public speech and preaching indicates just how far the Methodism of the early nineteenth century had moved from its roots. Indeed, at the end of the century, Annie Keeling frames Bulmer in explicitly domestic terms:

This beautiful nature, rich in thought and in love, shy and retiring as regarded all public manifestations, yet abounding in the beneficent activities of private life, has a right its own peculiar place among our types of Methodist womanhood, exemplifying as it does the union of high intellectual gifts with a saintliness no less pure and true than that of any martyred and canonized virgin, though displayed in the quiet, sheltered station of an ordinary English matron.

According to Keeling, Bulmer was skilled in the “activities of private life,” and an “ordinary English matron.” The fact that she was a serious intellectual and poet is secondary to her role as faithful Methodist wife and matron – it is just an added benefit.

We cannot know for certain what Bulmer herself thought of this tension between gender and religion because she left no written record. After her death her Memoirs were edited and published by her sister, but they are mainly a collection of her extant pious letters that tell us little about her inner life. What we are left with, then, are her impressive literary productions which reveal a woman of deep learning, keen intellect, and immense poetic talent. If this record is any indication, Bulmer found a way of expressing herself despite a religious culture that confined women to a private domestic piety. It is my hope that, by drawing more attention to Bulmer and her poetry, religious women poets in general will begin to receive more attention from the scholarly community.

For this reason I am embarking on sustained scholarly work on Agnes Bulmer on this blog. In addition to research on her life and work, I will be slowly transcribing and posting the entirety of Messiah's Kingdom. Through the magic of Google Books, an entire facsimile text of Messiah's Kingdom is now available online. However, this is truly a poem that deserves more scholarly and critical attention – attention that would be much assisted by a modern annotated critical edition. Since such an edition is unlikely to appear anytime soon and I am currently in no position to make that happen, I am in the process of making the complete text available here. As of today both the Introductory Stanzas and Book I are posted under “Primary Sources.” Over time I will also be creating eBook versions of the text (currently unavailable through Google), working up some annotations, and posting some of her letters and minor works. My hope is that making this fascinating poem more readily available will encourage more scholarship on Bulmer in particular and on early evangelical women poets and writers in general.

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Since the publication of Jurgen Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* the concept of the public sphere as a freestanding institution of bourgeois society has been progressively modified, including by Habermas himself. What has emerged since that time is the conception of multiple public spheres that often overlapped and sometimes conflicted. Of particular interest to me is the way that a religious public sphere emerged and matured over the course of the long eighteenth century. This was something that first erupted during the tumultuous years of the English Civil War when the disestablishment of the Church of England led to a proliferation of religious sects that splintered the population. Even after the Restoration and the reestablishment of the Church, though, the genie was out of the bottle. After attempts to proscribe dissent in the *Clarendon Code* and the *Test* and *Corporation* Acts largely failed, Parliament passed the *Toleration Act* in 1689 which, while continuing to bar dissenters from the universities and government, lifted the most burdensome restrictions.

It was within this religious climate that the Evangelical Revival arose in England for, though Methodism itself began as a movement within the Church of England, it quickly located itself within the developing religious public sphere. The fact that there was so much anti-Methodist literature from writers ranging from Smollett to Fielding to people like the anonymous pamphleteer who wrote *The Story of the Methodist-lady; or, The Injur'd Husband's Revenge: A True History* indicates the extent to which religious debates were very much a part of the public consciousness. As Fielding's character Parson Adams says in *Joseph Andrews* men like Wesley and Whitefield, "set up the detestable Doctrine of Faith against good Works... for surely, that Doctrine was coined in Hell, and one would think none but the Devil himself could have the Confidence to preach it" (70). As strange as it may seem to a post-modern audience, such questions of religious doctrine were very much part of the public conversation in the eighteenth century.

On the other end of the spectrum spiritual experience diaries and narratives proliferated as people like John Wesley and George Whitefield cannily utilized print as a means of spreading their message. Both men's journals were best sellers and indeed religious literature as a whole dominated the literary marketplace. Of course, this spiritual experience genre no doubt existed well before the eighteenth century. Catholic mystics like *St. John of the Cross* and *Teresa of Avila* on the continent and *Julian of Norwich* in England recorded powerful, intimate, and deeply symbolic mystical experiences that continue to influence generations of readers. However, their writings, beautiful though they may be, are largely bound up in the representational symbolism of the established church. They are internal spiritual experiences first and though are presented largely as models for spiritual devotion. In this sense these religious experience accounts largely mirror Habermas' category of the "representational" public sphere. The authority of the church largely mediated how spirituality was transmitted and experienced by the public at large and as a result relatively few members of the general population ever got to read about these great saints.

The evangelical conversion narrative, however, is a different story and, as I have argued elsewhere, it largely follows the general eighteenth century trend towards the development of a complex internal subjectivity that interacts in innovative ways with the developing public sphere. Starting roughly with Bunyan's *Grace Abounding,* the evangelical conversion narrative in fact acted like a spiritual solvent – eroding the artificial divide between private and public. Unlike earlier spiritual experience account the evangelical conversion narrative is clearly oriented towards a broader audience embodied in a specific religious community. Individuals like John Bunyan, John Wesley, and Hester Ann Rogers were not and never claimed to be part of the spiritual elite, instead they represent their experience as a constant struggle. For the tinker John Bunyan there is nothing of the heavily symbolic spiritual rapture of St. John of the Cross, only honest struggles with sin, doubt, and oppressive local authorities. Just as Addison and Steele attempted the reform and democratize manners in the emerging bourgeois public sphere so Bunyan brought legitimate spiritual experience and struggle to a much wider swathe of the British population – a population that was still largely dependent on the representational authority of the church largely mediated how spirituality was transmitted and experienced by the public at large and as a result relatively few members of the general population ever got to read about these great saints.

Furthermore, these authors utilized the burgeoning print culture to transmit their experience to a much wider, and much more socially variegated, audience. Drawing upon the "private" diary and letter form, spiritual experience authors oriented their texts towards a specific audience – probing the developing space that was opening up in print. As Habermas writes, "From the beginning, the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one's self and the other: self observation entered a union partly curious, partly sympathetic with the emotional stirrings of the other I" (49). By thus appropriating these forms in print, early eighteenth century conversion narrative writers (like novelists) began to develop a complex internal subjectivity that was both rooted in internal experience but oriented towards a public space. People like John Wesley published their *spiritual experiences* not only or primarily for their own sakes, but in order to elicit mimetic spiritual experiences in rapidly expanding reading public.

As the century progresses, however, this divide is almost entirely erased (especially for women) as individuals begin to see religious experience, and especially writing about religious experience, as a means to entering into a developing public conversation about the role of religion in British life. John Wesley, for example, published his *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* as an explicit response to the early criticisms of Methodism. Even more interesting, however, is how the women of the early evangelical revival used the space they found within religious experience to express themselves publicly. I have written about this at length elsewhere, but in general the women of early Methodism used their private, internal experience as a way to disrupt the categories of public and private themselves. Religious experience in this sense gave them the language to enter a
public space and explode any distinction between inner emotion and outer action. Thus it was not so much that evangelical religion appealed to women because it was inherently more suited to private and domestic consumption, but because it allowed for participation in a conversation beyond those bounds.

In this sense a new sort of religious “public sphere” emerges during the eighteenth century within which gender and the role of gender within religion become part and parcel of more abstract discussions about doctrine and theology. Thus I would argue that the debates over doctrines like justification by faith or religious “enthusiasm” were in reality expressions of deeper seeded concerns over the role of marginalized members of society – women, the poor – in organized religion. Over the course of the nineteenth century the roles of these women were gradually circumscribed as religious movements like Methodism became centralized institutions. Once again women were used as representational religious symbols – the “angel in the house” of domestic piety. This is not to say that women did not find ways to counteract this narrative even well into the nineteenth century, it is just that such excursions into the religious public sphere were looked upon with far more suspicion.

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Quotes tagged as 'religious-experience' Showing 1-6 of 6. “The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.” — Meister Eckhart, Sermons of Meister Eckhart. tags: eyes, god, knowledge, love, medieval, mysticism, religious-experience, seeing, understanding, vision. 590 likes. Like. “One ape's hallucination is another ape's religious experience - it just depends on which one's god module is overactive at the time.” — Charles Stross, Accelerando. In 1969, Alister Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford. The R.E.R.U. collates the religious experiences of people and publishes books on these from time to time. Edward Robinson Became the [...] Religious Language. The Nature of Religious Language. Philosophizer. Oct 15, 2016. one comment. D. Z. Phillips is probably the most prolific writer in Philosophy of Religion representing the Wittgensteinian view. He has applied the