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# Review of Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810

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expensive pastimes that, if her letters to William can be believed, she regarded as obligatory and even burdensome.

Still, one wonders if Elizabeth's changing role brought her some benefits that she did not acknowledge in her letters to her husband. Elizabeth Wirt published a book on flowers in 1829 and Jabour briefly mentions her involvement in benevolence work, which began during her Washington years. How did the Wirts regard these undertakings, and what, if any, satisfaction did Elizabeth derive from them?

The Wirts were neither typical Americans nor were they typical southerners. Of middling social origins, they prospered economically in the most dynamic upper South cities by exploiting the opportunities offered by modernizing, urban economies. But the pursuit of prosperity and status took its toll on their private lives, as it did for many middle-class couples who eventually accepted the notion of separate spheres as a metaphor for their increasingly fractured lives. Like the declining Virginia planters who were their contemporaries, the Wirts came closest to attaining the companionate ideal at home when their prospects in the outside world were bleakest. In the early nineteenth century, true companionship and equality in marriage may have been consolation prizes for the sentimental but downwardly mobile.

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***Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810.*** By Cynthia Lynn Lyerly. *Religion in America Series.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. viii, 251. \$45.00.)

The last several years have seen a rich outpouring of writing on the history of evangelicalism in postrevolutionary America. The best known example of this recent work, Christine Leigh Heyrman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (1997), argues that southern evangelicalism became "respectable" only by shedding its radical teachings regarding gender roles, slavery and race, and the male code of honor. Cynthia Lynn Lyerly's *Methodism and the Southern Mind* recognizes that Wesleyan doctrines were out of step with the ethos of the Revolutionary southern gentry. Yet Lyerly argues persuasively that Methodists enjoyed great success among certain groups in the South precisely because they rejected the secular, martial values of the region's ruling elite. Unlike Heyrman's work and earlier studies like Nathan O. Hatch's *Democratization of*

*American Christianity* (1989), Lyerly examines Methodism separately from other evangelical sects. Moreover, she analyzes religious thought and practice on their own terms, not as the expression or reflection of Revolutionary republicanism or other secular ideologies.

Lyerly's study is similar in some respects to another recent book published in Oxford's *Religion in America* series, John H. Wigger's *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (1998). Wigger argues that Methodists enjoyed such remarkable growth because the movement mirrored the egalitarian, individualistic ethos of popular culture in the early republic. Examining Methodism's appeal in a southern, not national, context, Lyerly gives due credit for the sect's growth to its strong organization, use of itinerants, and its plain-speaking, plain-living ministers. But while employing evidence from preachers and itinerants, her chief interest are the women, slaves, and poor men who constituted the bulk of Methodism's ranks in these early years. Methodism appealed to these groups, she argues, because of the incompatibility of its doctrine and practice with conventional southern values.

*Methodism and the Southern Mind* challenges the notion that Methodism and evangelicalism were, in part, tools for elite hegemony. At least in this period, Lyerly maintains that Methodism had revolutionary potential, as evidenced both by its appeal to marginal folk and by the fierce opposition it provoked among the privileged. Methodism's central tenets—free will, falling from grace, and sanctification—placed the burden of salvation on the individual believer, an empowering but daunting responsibility. These doctrines provoked the scorn of Calvinistic southerners, but they gave Methodists a sense of uniqueness and reinforced the faithful's sense of human agency. Lyerly also identifies, perhaps arbitrarily, a Methodist "style" characterized by emotionalism, mysticism, asceticism, enthusiasm, and evangelism. The net effect of these qualities was to distinguish Methodists from other southerners and to establish the sect's hostility to the region's secular culture. Methodist asceticism, for example, which manifested itself in plain dress, sober habits, and clean living, signified a denunciation—not merely a repudiation—of the honor ethos and a challenge to the dominance of slaveholding men.

The core of Lyerly's account examines the appeal of this vision to ordinary southerners and the uses to which they put it in their daily lives. To reconstruct the world of these marginal people, Lyerly employs the creative reading of conventional sources (itinerants' reports, church histories) with arduous manuscript research. Free blacks and slaves responded to Methodism because the faith defined all people as worthy of God's love and possessed of free will and human dignity. Church practice allowed them publicly to demonstrate their sense of self-worth as

communicants and even preachers. White Methodists were not racial egalitarians, and Lyerly characterizes their efforts to end slavery as ambivalent and ineffectual. But their condemnation of slaveholding did attract slaves and free blacks to the church, and Methodists did briefly hold out the ideal of a kinder, gentler society. Similarly, Methodism appealed to the poor because it empowered believers to condemn the gentry for their hedonistic lifestyle. Like slaves, the poor found a community of believers in the church and asserted their status as moral agents. Just as asserting the spiritual equality of slaves contradicted the racist code of slaveowners, the condemnation of wealth and luxury stigmatized the secular ethos of the gentry.

Women made up a majority of members in the early years of the southern church and its growth owed much to their efforts. Methodism appealed to women for many of the same reasons it attracted blacks and the poor, particularly for its doctrines of moral agency and spiritual equality. In the context of southern gender conventions, the very act of joining a church represented an act of autonomy and—literally, in the cases of Sarah Jones and Mary Hinde—resistance to male authority. Women violated custom in a myriad of ways, from public speaking to associating with slaves on a plane of near-equality. And remarkably, women joined the church despite resistance from other sects, husbands, other male relations, and the local establishment. Lyerly interprets the hostility faced by the early church as compelling evidence that powerful groups in southern life—male heads of households and the slaveholding gentry in particular—saw Methodism as a dangerous threat. And, indeed, Lyerly argues that the early church really did seek to “turn the world upside down” by inverting “southern hierarchies of race and gender” (175). It was precisely this ideal that made the church’s attainment of “respectability” by sacrificing its early radicalism so tragic.

Lyerly observes that Methodism differed significantly from other evangelical sects, particularly Baptists, whose decentralization and willingness to blend the secular and sacred distinguished them from Wesleyans. Yet *Methodism and the Southern Mind* would have benefited from a more systematic comparison of Methodism with other evangelical churches. In addition, Lyerly perhaps overstates the radical potential of the church. As she admits, many members, particularly preachers and itinerants, were divided on policies toward slaves and women. But Lyerly argues that the efforts of antebellum church chroniclers to make Methodism respectable by downplaying its antislavery, egalitarian roots has obscured the threat that it posed to southern society. Lyerly engages this and other historiographical debates mainly in her notes. This makes for a lucid, concise text, while preserving the interpretive issues that interest

scholars. Readers, however, are urged to bring their bifocals to cope with the tiny, dense font employed to squeeze the text into 186 pages. *Methodism and the Southern Mind* is an accessible, penetrating analysis of an era of Methodist history that has been overshadowed by the church's remarkable growth in later decades. It deserves a wide readership.

Daniel Kilbride is assistant professor of history at John Carroll University. His article "Cultivation, Conservatism, and the Early National Gentry: The Manigault Family and their Circle" appears earlier in this issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic*. He is currently completing a manuscript on social relations between the antebellum planting elite and their northern peers.

***The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780-1833.*** By Peter S. Field. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998. Pp. xiii, 272. \$39.95.)

From the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritan (later "Congregational") clergy enjoyed a privileged status in New England. Outside of Boston, their positions became legally "established" and tax dollars paid their salaries starting in 1693. Incredibly, state constitutions ratified in 1780 and 1820 continued tax support. Disestablishment did not occur in Massachusetts until 1833. For fifty years after the American Revolution, Congregational clergy remained "the Standing Order."

*The Crisis of the Standing Order* describes how this class of clergy split in half over this fifty year period. The story has been told before by religious and intellectual historians. Traditionally, the focus has been upon doctrine. Peter Field offers an alternative perspective. A "materialist," Field believes that "interest" is more important than ideas.

Economic forces drove divisions among the clergy, he argues. Churches in Boston were funded differently than in the rest of the state: here the clergy were supported by voluntary contributions. As a result, control gravitated to the largest contributors.

Wealthy merchants allied with "liberal" clergy to form a class of "Boston Brahmins" during the Federalist era. Driven to demonstrate cultural dominance, rich merchants patronized pastors who were erudite, engaging, and refined with little regard for their theology. The same class of merchants enlisted some of these same clergy to edit a new magazine, *The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*. Brahmin merchants also created the Boston Athenaeum to be a social library limited to the very rich—and their pastors, who were given memberships. Finally, they took