

Introduction

IN HIS STUDY OF anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England, Colin Haydon (1993) demonstrated that “Early Methodism showed a powerful dislike of Popery”; therefore, it can be misleading to view John Wesley (1703–1791) as “foreshadowing ecumenical ideas, brilliantly combining Protestant and Catholic traditions in his writings.”¹ David Chapman (2004) rightly warned: “Regrettable as Wesley’s anti-Catholicism now appears in the light of the ecumenical movement, it would be anachronistic to judge him by modern standards.”² However, some scholarship has portrayed Wesley as an ecumenical pioneer with his sermon *Catholic Spirit* (1748) and his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* (1749) exemplified as nearly magical twin documents that could usher Methodists and Catholics into a utopian ecumenical relationship.³ Yet while lauding Wesley for his ecumenical spirit, most have overlooked the fact that three years after

1. Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism*, 63, and 17. In connection with the second quotation, Haydon referenced Burrows, “Wesley the Catholic,” 54–66.

2. Chapman, *In Search*, 42.

3. Baker, *John Wesley*, 124. This book will use the date 1748 for the writing of a *Catholic Spirit* based upon Baker’s statement that it was when Wesley first preached the sermon rather than the 1750 date commonly used as the date it was first printed in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, vol. 3. For other printings, see JW, *Catholic Spirit: A Sermon on 2 Kings x. 15*. London: Cock, 1755; Bristol: Pine, 1770; London: New Chapel, 1789. The sermon is reprinted in *Works*, 2:81–95. When Wesley’s sermon is named, it will be capitalized and italicized. When the idea of catholic spirit is referenced, it will be in lower case with no quotations. JW, *Letter to a Roman Catholic*; *Works* (Jackson), 10:80–86. For examples of *Catholic Spirit* and *Letter to a Roman Catholic* as twin ecumenical documents, see Outler, *John Wesley*, 493; Baker, *John Wesley*, 126; and Tyson, *The Way*, 185–87.

writing *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, Wesley published *A Short Method of Converting all the Roman Catholics in the Kingdom of Ireland: Humbly Proposed to the Bishops and Clergy of this Kingdom* (1752) with little evidence of the eirenical approach of the *Letter*.⁴

Henry Rack proposed that “Roman Catholicism [pertaining to Wesley] needs more study.”⁵ This book is written on the basis that a historical investigation of Wesley and Catholicism can examine the limits to which John Wesley, as an evangelical Protestant in a society in which anti-Catholicism was prevalent, was able to put into practice his self-professed ideal of a catholic spirit.

This book argues that although he expressed principles for religious tolerance towards British Protestants in his sermon, *Catholic Spirit*, Wesley never expected these principles to bring about unity between Protestants and Catholics in theology or politics. Furthermore, this study seeks to bridge the gap in Wesley studies concerning Wesley and Catholicism, as a book-length historical study of Wesley and Catholicism has yet to be written, especially regarding Jacobitism, his time in Ireland, Jesuitism, and his reaction to the Catholic Relief Act of 1778.

From the first accusation of monasticism at Oxford, to the Gordon Riots of 1780, allegations and events forced Wesley to confront what many Georgian Britons called the evils of Popery. “Wesley may have yearned for peace, but he often found himself embroiled in controversy.”⁶ He once observed: “When I say, ‘I have no time to write largely in controversy,’ I mean this. Every hour I have is employed more [than in writing in controversy] to the glory of God.”⁷ “This may be one of the reasons he wrote much of his corpus in pragmatic response to his opponents, even though he claimed he hated writing ‘controversially.’”⁸ Moreover, it cannot be denied that Wesley wrote far more about the dangers of “Popery” than about the hope of Protestants and Catholics living in harmony.⁹

4. For example: Schwenk, *Catholic Spirit*, 3; Crutcher, *John Wesley*, 168–69; and Burrows, “Wesley the Catholic,” 54–66.

5. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 558.

6. Yates, “Perhaps He Cannot Know,” 331.

7. JW to Samuel Furley, December 9, 1760, *Works*, 27:224.

8. Yates, “Perhaps He Cannot Know,” 331–32.

9. For example: *A Short Method of Converting all the Roman Catholics in the Kingdom of Ireland. Humbly Proposed to the Bishops and Clergy of this Kingdom*; and *The Advantage of the Members of the Church of England over the Members of the Church of Rome*.

Wesley's contemporaries described his mindset towards Catholicism in various ways. Expressing concern for her brother's possible "papism," his sister, Emilia (1692–1771) reproached him for "Romish errors," imploring him to set aside his beliefs in "auricular confession and bodily austerities."¹⁰ Furthermore, Bishop George Lavington (1684–1762) assumed that Wesley's alleged "enthusiasm" led to "papism" and "Jesuitism."¹¹ Wesley wrote to Thomas Church (1707–1756), a Church of England clergyman who had accused him of "abandoning the true church for Rome," saying: "Some of you have said, that there is no *true church* but yours; yea, that there are no *true Christians* out of it . . . They are exceeding great mistakes [in the Church of Rome], yet in as great mistakes have holy men lived and died."¹² Mark Massa suggested that this phrase in the letter to Church was the first literary step Wesley made on his way to composing *Catholic Spirit*.¹³ However, he had already taken steps in that direction in the preface to his first published *Journal*, and in *The Character of a Methodist* (1742).¹⁴

In *Character of a Methodist*, Wesley indicated the importance of Christian love: "a Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him.'"¹⁵ Further, Wesley said: "this commandment is written in his [the Methodist's] heart, that 'he who loveth God, loves his brother also.' And he accordingly 'loves his neighbour as himself;' he loves every man as his own soul."¹⁶ The Methodists wanted to do the will of God, including doing good "unto neighbours, and strangers, friends, and enemies."¹⁷ It was loving God and loving others, including enemies that were "the *principles* and *practices* of our sect; these are the *marks* of a true Methodist."¹⁸ He desired that the Methodists have no division. He quoted 2 Kgs 10:15, the verse he used for the text of *Catholic Spirit*: "'Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine?' I ask

10. Emilia (Wesley) Harper to JW, June 17, 1741, MARC DDwf 6/11, *Works*, 26:63.

11. [Lavington], *Enthusiasm*, 8, 31–33.

12. JW, *An Answer to Mr. Church*, 6.

13. Massa, "The Catholic Wesley," 40.

14. See JWJ [Preface], October [19], 1732, *Works*, 18:127–28; and JW, *The Character of a Methodist*, *Works*, 9:32–46.

15. JW, *The Character of a Methodist*, *Works*, 9:35.

16. JW, *The Character of a Methodist*, *Works*, 9:37.

17. JW, *The Character of a Methodist*, *Works*, 9:41.

18. JW, *The Character of a Methodist*, *Works*, 9:41.

no farther question. ‘If it be, give my thy hand.’”¹⁹ Wesley worked hard to convince others, especially those who accused him of Dissent, that “from real Christians, or whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all. Nor from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not attained.”²⁰ Wesley expanded the principles outlined in *Character of a Methodist* when he wrote *Catholic Spirit* six years later.

Albert Outler reported that Wesley preached on the text used in *Catholic Spirit*, 2 Kgs 10:15, thrice: November 23, 1740, September 8, 1749, and November 3, 1749, although it is not certain the sermon preached was *Catholic Spirit* on each occasion.²¹ He quoted or referred to 2 Kgs 10:15 at least eight other times in his publications.²² After discussing loving one’s neighbor in the sermon, Wesley argued that “there is a peculiar love which we owe to those who love God.”²³ Peculiar, as defined by Samuel Johnson means, “not common to other things.”²⁴ This “peculiar love” Wesley set out to define in the remainder of the sermon.

He believed that what prevented Christians from practicing “catholic love” and having an “external union” was “difference of opinions or modes of worship.”²⁵ Wesley explored what it meant for one Christian’s heart to be “right” with another Christian’s heart.²⁶ In *Catholic Spirit*, Wesley said he would not “impose” his, that is the Church of England’s, “mode of worship” on any other Christian. He believed that his mode was “primitive and apostolical;” and continued by asserting: “but my belief is no rule for another.”²⁷ Further, he said in a letter to Baptist pastor Gilbert

19. JW, *The Character of a Methodist, Works*, 9:42. Wesley used variants of these two phrases in the following: *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (1743), *Works*, 11:73; *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II* (1745), *Works*, 11:237; *A Word to Methodists* (1748), *Works*, 9:243; “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel” (1777), *Works*, 3:592; “Hymn 486,” in *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (1780), *Works*, 7:673; and *Thoughts upon a Late Phenomenon* (1788), *Works*, 9:537.

20. JW, *The Character of a Methodist, Works*, 9:42.

21. Outler, “Introduction to Sermon 39,” *Works*, 2:80; see also Baker, *John Wesley*, 124.

22. See *Works*, 3:592; 7:673; 9:42, 243, 537; 11:73, 237; and 21:440.

23. JW, *Catholic Spirit, Works*, 2:81.

24. Johnson, *Dictionary*, s.v. “Peculiar.”

25. JW, *Catholic Spirit, Works*, 2:82.

26. JW, *Catholic Spirit, Works*, 2:86.

27. JW, *Catholic Spirit, Works*, 2:86.