

embracing Christianity must become for the well-being of people and society. Marsh himself writes that “Christianity will only reveal itself to be a visible form of religion in contemporary Britain if it begins to work again for people as a source of personal, social and political transformation” (p 118). To even contemplate that takes a great deal of faith, and I believe Marsh’s book certainly encourages that.

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*A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley,*  
**Roy Hattersley, London: Little, Brown. 2002. ISBN:**  
**0316860204, pp. 468. £20.**

Back in the 1950’s when I was a boy, I remember being taken to the Methodist Hall in our village to see a film of the life of John Wesley in glorious colour. It was a vivid movie and must have cost the worldwide Methodist Church a lot of money to produce. I remember being impressed by Wesley’s rescue as a child from his father’s burning rectory, his dramatic conversion, and his travels on horseback. The film presented Wesley’s life rather in the way that the Book of Acts presents the growth of the church, an irresistible force inspired from first to last by the spirit of God. But the Book of Acts needs to be balanced by a careful reading of the letters of Paul, where the advance of the Holy Spirit is hindered by quarrelling, controversy and lapses in faith in the church. Hattersley’s biography does more than balance the message of that film. It shows it to be at best hagiography and at worst harmful propaganda. Hattersley gives us John Wesley, warts and all – and there are warts aplenty. Although a great man of God, Wesley was at times small-minded, domineering, calculating and, when young women were around, downright silly.

John Wesley always considered himself a brand from the burning because of his narrow childhood escape from his burning home. At Oxford University he became involved with the Holy Club, which was

nicknamed ‘Methodists’ before he joined them. Once ordained, he sailed to Georgia to work as a missionary to the Native Americans and the slaves. But during an unhappy twenty months there his mission failed miserably and in the course of providing pastoral care to the colonists, he caused such offence by his sheer arrogance that they were glad to see the back of him. Perhaps the most important experience of his American adventure was witnessing the faith of some Moravian fellow passengers on board ship. During a fierce storm they sang psalms steadfastly and showed no terror.

On his return to England Wesley experienced his own famous ‘moment of Pentecost’ on 24th May, 1738 when, at a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, he felt his heart ‘strangely warmed.’ Hattersley warns against calling this Wesley’s conversion. It was rather the confirmation of an earlier revelation thirteen years previously.

Wesley soon became the leader of the Methodist societies. Influenced by his friend George Whitefield, the greatest preacher of the eighteenth century, he began open air preaching to ordinary working people and undertook the life of an itinerant evangelist. At the time the Church of England was in decline. Many clergy neglected their parishioners and were indifferent to the things of God. Wesley’s work prospered throughout England. (It is interesting that Methodism made no great impression in Scotland where the established church did not by and large neglect the preaching of the gospel and the care of people).

Wesley’s mission caused many hundreds to be converted to faith in Christ and Methodist societies to be formed all over England. On many occasions he was threatened by mob violence but showed remarkable courage and presence of mind in moments of crisis. The growth of Methodism threw up all kinds of problems. Should Methodists become a separate church or should they remain within the fold of the Church of England? Should their doctrine be Calvinist like Whitefield’s or more moderate on issues of predestination? Who should serve these societies as local preachers? Wesley sought to solve these problems by his own unique brand of Christianity. Hattersley claims that ‘Methodism was very largely made up as it went along – very largely inside John

Wesley's troubled mind.' Indeed Hattersley's book is full of quarrels and controversies and the sheer determination of a man who would never be satisfied with any church he could not dominate.

Wesley ruled Methodism with such despotism that he was nicknamed 'Pope John.' He held regular 'purges' expelling local preachers who did not spread the doctrine he preferred or match the standards of behaviour he set. He disputed with Calvinists, Moravians and mainstream Anglicans. He quarrelled with his brother Charles who was always afraid that the consequence of John's theology and practice would be separation from the Church of England. The separation was inevitable and came when Wesley ordained preachers to serve the Methodists of America.

Wesley's attitude to women left a lot to be desired. The child of an unhappy marriage, he never seemed to achieve a mature attitude to the female sex. On several occasions in his early life he formed an attachment to a young woman, reaching a point where an engagement was the next logical step. Then he would draw back, declaring that his life was dedicated totally to God. The most dramatic incident described in Hattersley's book is not the moment when Wesley's heart was 'strangely warmed' in Aldersgate Street. It is rather the time when John was engaged to a pious Methodist called Grace Murray. His brother Charles, determined to prevent the marriage of the leader of Methodism to a woman who had worked as a common servant, 'kidnapped' Grace, or at least persuaded her to ride with him – perched precariously on the back of his horse – to Newcastle. There Charles married Grace to one John Bennet, a Methodist preacher, to whom she had previously been engaged. Needless to say the Wesley brothers were cool towards each other for some time after that incident. When John did marry, he felt free to carry on his itinerant life. Hattersley sums up the match with these alarming words: 'he plunged into a marriage which began in acrimony and ended in disaster'.

John Wesley was a truly great man, one who helped shape the church and the world that we know today. In the face of a hostile mob he showed more than average courage. In concern for the needs of others he was

generous to a fault, giving away much of the considerable fortune he made by the sale of books and pamphlets. In founding Methodist societies and ruling them with a rod of iron he showed remarkable powers of organisation. But the formation of a brand new movement requires leadership that is determined, devious and at times ruthless. Wesley was all three.

Hattersley writes well and has produced a fascinating and entertaining narrative. But being himself a retired politician he is too interested in the internal politics of Methodism and the public controversies in which Wesley was involved. This preoccupation with one aspect of Wesley's work, seems to exclude another of equal importance. Wesley was one of the most effective preachers who ever lived, but Hattersley seldom quotes the sermons, gives us no analysis of Wesley's preaching style and makes no attempt to get to the heart of why conversions happen at massed open air preaching events. Hattersley also pays scant regard to what kept the Methodist societies going. We are never told what happened at a typical meeting and how it affected the members. Indeed the thousands of hymns written by Charles Wesley for the use of the faithful are hardly mentioned at all. Perhaps one can sum up Hattersley's view of Wesley in words once used of St.Paul: 'a great missionary, but not a very nice man.'

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*"He kissed him and then wept" Towards a Theology of Jewish-Catholic Partnership,* Eds. **Rabbi Tony Bayfield, Rabbi Dr. Sidney Brichto and Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, London: SCM Press 2001. pp. 267. £16.95.**

In the early days of the Second World War when Hitler's forces were beginning the systematic extermination of Polish Jews, a Jewish couple gave their son to Catholic neighbours for safekeeping. They gave the neighbours an address in New York to which the boy should be sent after