



R E V I E W

Michael Farrell. *Blake and the Methodists*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. x + 259 pp. £58.00/\$95.00, hardcover; £55.00/\$90.00, softcover; £43.99/\$69.99, e-book.

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1 AT the heart of this study is a detailed and very informative comparison of Blake and John Wesley. The

book needs its wider title because it includes a chapter on the Moravians and glances at other eighteenth-century figures associated with Methodism, including George Whitefield and William Cowper. Some earlier studies have considered Blake in relation to Methodism, but this is the first comprehensive treatment. Farrell suggests that critics have been put off exploring this subject more fully by E. P. Thompson, who attributed his own disapproval of Methodism to Blake himself.¹ Against Thompson, Farrell points out that Blake “undeniably held sympathies towards” Methodism, as shown by the positive allusions to Whitefield and Wesley in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* (8).

2 Although Blake’s hostility to state religion is obvious in much of his work, he seems always to have been sympathetic to sincerely held religious beliefs—even beliefs that many Christians would dismiss as mere superstition. One of his early annotations, to Lavater, declares “no man was ever truly superstitious who was not truly religious as far as he knew.”² He would certainly have been sympathetic to those Methodists who seemed to him “truly religious,” even if he didn’t share their beliefs. Farrell invites us to consider Blake’s attitude in relation to the wider religious developments of the eighteenth century. During the evangelical revival there was a “wide variety of Dissenting religious groups” and, in Farrell’s account, spiritual “seekers” would oscillate freely between them, “adopting a compound of doctrinal sympathies.” Citing the example of Francis Okely, whose movement between different Christian denominations during his lifetime “exemplifies the porosity between religious groups during the Revival,” he suggests that “Blake was a seeker and, as such, was less unusual in his own era than we have subsequently come to believe” (15).

3 Farrell finds a more specific context for Blake’s own attitude in the Moravians—a group that has become a familiar point of reference since the discovery, by Marsha Keith Schuchard in collaboration with Keri Davies, that Blake’s mother was at one stage a member of the Moravian community in London’s Fetter Lane.³ He gives a clear, detailed account of the origin of the Fetter Lane society, Wesley’s involvement in it, and of its doctrines and influence. The elaborate rituals and regulative practices would not have appealed to Blake, but, as Farrell suggests, the Moravians’ openness to art and music, their recognition of the importance of sexual desire in the spiritual life of Christians, their

1. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) 44.

2. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) 591.

3. Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard, “Recovering the Lost Moravian History of William Blake’s Family,” *Blake* 38.1 (summer 2004): 36-43.

hymn singing, and the ecumenical spirit inspired by their leader, Count Zinzendorf, may have been an influential part of Blake's maternal inheritance.

- 4 Farrell's detailed comparison of Blake and Wesley includes a chapter on hymnody, which builds on and extends the work of other scholars. Here, his comments on "the discourse of the hymn" are particularly interesting, since he emphasizes "the negotiation and transaction of meaning" between hymns: "hymns interact with one another, comment upon, plagiarise and satirise one another; their form and function is adaptable to shifting ideological contexts" (93). He notes that Wesley continued to publish Moravian hymns after the hymns of his brother Charles had become available. This practice was not simply an example of "shared speech" but also entailed "parody and transgression": in 1749 Wesley published anonymously a number of Moravian hymns with a mocking preface, a procedure that, says Farrell, "invites direct comparison with Blake's treatment of Swedenborg in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*" (98-99). More generally, the intertextual nature of eighteenth-century hymn writing emphasized here provides an illuminating context for the allusive and parodic elements that generations of readers have found in Blake's *Songs*.
- 5 In other parts of his comparison of Blake and Wesley, Farrell takes us into what may be for many readers less familiar territory. Here the emphasis is less on doctrinal openness than on the struggle to establish, control, and defend doctrinal differences. Farrell points out that during his lifetime Wesley was responsible for 371 publications. Putting things into print played a crucial role in his efforts to define and spread Methodist doctrine and to control the meaning of other well-established Christian texts. Wesley not only published Methodist hymns, sermons, and expository and polemical works, but also republished the works of others using "highly interventionist" editorial procedures (70). He modified the text of the King James Bible, making around 12,000 changes, some of which subtly removed any suggestion of predestination. His qualified admiration of Milton's *Paradise Lost* inspired an attempt to make the poem intelligible "to persons of a common Education" (Wesley, quoted in Farrell 133). This attempt involved not only adding explanatory notes, but also making stylistic simplifications, removing epic similes and passages deemed esoteric, mitigating the poem's radical implications by cutting lines describing Satan's uprising, omitting the lines describing Christ as the agent of God's punishment, expurgating the "explicit accounts of the amorous exploits of Adam and Eve" (144), and removing all references to predestination. Farrell says that "effectively every page has some abridgement or modification" (134). Wesley made comparable alterations in an edition of Edward Young's long Christian poem *Night Thoughts*, taking out "explicit references to religious feeling that he feared could exacerbate anti-enthusiasm among rationalist readers" (116) and, among other changes, omitting the line "O for a telescope His throne to reach" in order to eliminate the suggestion that God might be known through scientific means or be perceived with the human eye (130). This detailed account of Wesley's appropriations and redactions makes fascinating reading.
- 6 Wesley's engagement with hymns, the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, and *Night Thoughts* offers plenty of scope for comparison with Blake, who, as writer and/or illustrator, engaged with each of these areas himself. In the process of comparison Farrell turns up many useful insights and draws interesting parallels. The discussion includes some thoughtful observations on Blake's illustrations, although unfortunately the book has no plates for the reader to look at. And Farrell includes a brief but valuable discussion of Blake's attitude to Cowper, a figure who is said to have shaped Blake's view of the "correlation between Methodism and madness in *Milton*" (159). It has to be said, though, that while Farrell is sure footed as a historian, he is less so when it comes to detailed textual comparison. His approach commits him to emphasizing similarities, and while this works well at the general level where he can outline the allusive, parodic, and interventionist strategies in which Blake and Wesley engage, it can become more problematic at the level of textual particulars.
- 7 Here, the study might have benefited from more consideration of the problems involved. Sacred texts can, obviously, give rise to a wide range of interpretative traditions and practices. The same words can acquire quite different meanings within different interpretative communities. What significance, then, can be attached to the presence of "similarities" between the practices and beliefs of different Christian traditions? If one overlooks the differences, the Anglican Communion is "similar" to the Roman Catholic Mass. The similarities may seem fundamental, but to believers they can appear incidental, while the differences seem all-important. The differences are the things to be fought over: why else would Wesley expend so much effort on editing out of other Christian texts things he didn't agree with?
- 8 We can expect to find all kinds of similarities between Blake's views and those of Wesley and other Christian writers, but at what point do such similarities become more than incidental? In the chapter on hymnody, when Farrell compares Wesleyan hymns prompted by the American Revolutionary War with the prophetic rhetoric of Blake's *America*, the hunt for parallels brings this question into sharp focus. Farrell understands that the Wesleys' hymns represent the authors' "High Church Toryism" while Blake's

- rhetoric of revolution “subverts ... temporal, regal, and clerical authority,” but he concludes: “The differences of opinion between the writers ... are real but secondary. What links the two books is their common use of affective language and the prophetic stance to arouse and engage the reader’s political awareness” (110). If this means we should regard the similarities of language (which are in this case rather vague) as more significant than the opposed points of view, I think the reverse is true. The use of affective language or of a prophetic stance to arouse political awareness was in itself hardly unusual in eighteenth-century poetry: we can find such things in, for example, Whig battle poems, patriotic odes, or songs to liberty. They were used in the fast-day services and sermons that were an important part of the official British response to the American crisis. This is reflected within Blake’s *America* itself, where the authoritarian Albion’s Angel and the rebellious Orc both adopt a highly charged prophetic rhetoric. Such language can be adopted by both parties. That is why we have to look very closely at what is being said. The differences of opinion between Blake and the Wesleys in these works are hardly secondary—they are surely all-important.
- 9 Farrell is sometimes inclined to press the case for similarity harder than he needs to, and in ways that can blur the very real differences between Blake and Wesley. He claims, for example, that Wesley, like Blake, “opposed the idea of a punitive God, preaching instead forgiveness and Christian fellowship as epitomised by Christ” (139). This is simply misleading. Wesley may have played down the punitive aspect of divinity—certainly compared with a Calvinist writer like Isaac Watts—but he didn’t reject it: he took William Law to task for claiming that “Hell and damnation are nothing but the various operations of self” and he insisted on the scriptural authority for divine vengeance and future torments for the wicked.⁴ On the other hand Farrell follows Robert Ryan in claiming that “Blake gives an account of the Atonement entirely congruous with the mainstream Protestant thought” (56) and in citing *Jerusalem* plate 96 as evidence of Blake’s orthodoxy,⁵ but he ignores the context in which the account appears and the ideas of “Brotherhood,” “kindness,” and “Divine Image” through which the significance of Blakean atonement is developed. He sometimes divorces lines from their dramatic context to illustrate Blake’s “doctrine,” showing little concern for the interpretative problems this can raise.
- 10 In the realms of particular similarities, Farrell is most persuasive when he develops the idea, proposed by Morton D. Paley and others, that Blake experienced a kind of spiritual conversion or “New Birth” at Felpham, and that Blake refers to this experience in ways that draw upon Methodist terminology.⁶ Here Farrell is guided securely by his understanding that Methodist doctrine is “inherently eclectic” (163) and that “to assume that there was a single doctrine of spiritual rebirth that all held” is a mistake, because “there was no such doctrine” (179). Thus in his letters Blake can adopt the “language and tenor ... typical of the Evangelical Revival” (162) and in his poems develop concepts of “regeneration” and “self-annihilation” that have parallels in Wesleyan doctrine, without being “entirely assimilable to Methodist notions of spiritual rebirth” (170). The general conclusion of the work is that “there was ... a Methodist influence on Blake’s works, but it was combined with a number of other religious sympathies” (193). I doubt if anyone could disagree with that.
- 11 This book’s careful survey of Wesley’s engagement with religious writings that Blake himself engaged with will make it a useful resource for all those with an interest in Blake’s religious thought. It shows that we don’t always have to place Blake among the radicals in order to illuminate his ideas. It is a pity that Palgrave has published this study without illustrations and apparently without proper copyediting (given the running problems with formatting of quotations). It is nevertheless a book that every university library should have.

4. John Wesley, *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law* (London, 1756) 95-96.

5. Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 49.

6. Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 70.