LEGALISM, and how Methodism is perceived

Joyless, uncaring legalism has often been the image people have of Nonconformist or Evangelical religion in general, and of Methodists in particular, and writers of both fiction and non-fiction frequently portray Methodists in a cynical, mocking or dismissive tone. This is the theme of this article, with most examples culled from Primitive Methodism.

What is Legalism?

It seems appropriate to ask the question first: what is *legalism*? There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, voluntarily, and even eagerly, applying a set of strict rules and disciplines to oneself, which in the Bible are not required of God's people, in order to help oneself conform to a desired way of life, and on the other hand striving to impose those same rules and disciplines on others, and disapproving of people to for whatever reason do not follow them. It is this application of non-biblical rules to people other than oneself than I call legalism, and that is its meaning in this article.

To take an obvious example of non-legalistic strictness applied voluntarily to oneself: a man might be converted from a life of drunkenness. After coming to faith, if he were wise, he would not go into a pub, and might well become a teetotaller.

Other people's weaknesses and temptations lie elsewhere. If one is inclined to gluttony, it is not sensible to eat in a restaurant where you pay a fixed price and 'eat as much as you can'.

For another, sexual or romantic attraction is hard to fight against, and so, knowing his personal weakness in this particular matter, he decides there are certain contexts or company he will avoid, which for others would provide no difficulty.

And one could go on with other obvious, and less obvious, restrictions which are not laid down in scripture but which various people need to require of themselves in order to 'walk uprightly'. They are not free to require the same disciplines of other Christians, if such restrictions are not required in scripture. They are wise to live by them; they are legalists if they apply them others.

The many regulations and requirements which were part of Methodism, and of Nonconformity more widely, undoubtedly carried the risk of legalism, and there can be little doubt that a perceptible number of members and adherents may have fallen into the trap, especially as the early fervour declined from about mid-century; nor can it be supposed that, like any religion, Methodism failed to attract its regrettable share of hypocrites.

We shall look first at examples of rules and regulations which are not laid upon God's children in the Bible but which came to be part of this kind of religion, especially in the Free Churches; then we shall turn to the impressions and responses which the practice of them aroused in

people in the wider society. We take our examples from Primitive Methodism, without implying that other streams of Nonconformity were less at risk of legalism.

Some Examples of Methodist legalism

I have a copy of the 1912 *The General Rules of the Primitive Methodist Church*: it extends to 256 pages. Certain constraints were imposed on, or recommended to, preachers and members in the Connexion. Some of them seem stern, restrictive, pettifogging, unnecessary or simply bizarre, and we shall consider them under various subheadings.

TOBACCO

There was a lurking disapproval of smoking - before the days when medical science had discovered its ruinous effects on the smoker's health. The 1828 Conference Minutes lay down: "No preacher who is a smoker of tobacco shall be deemed to have completed his probation, unless he produce a certificate from a physician of advice, certifying that it is necessary for his health."

The Conference Minutes of 1845 say: "When a Circuit shall apply to the General Committee for permission to take out a preacher to travel, it must furnish written answers to the following questions:... 5. Does he smoke tobacco? if he do, to what extent?"

In 1843 the Brinkworth Circuit requested local preachers not to smoke in the street.[1]

DRESS CODE and HAIR STYLE

Here are some words from the 1819 Conference Minutes (page 5):

> - In what dress shall our travelling preachers appear in public?
>
> - In a plain one. The men to wear single breasted coats, single breasted waistcoats, and their hair in its natural form; and not to be allowed to wear pantaloons, trowsers, nor white hats; and that our female preachers be patterns of plainness in all their dress.

The prohibition on preachers' wearing white hats was imposed because political reformers had adopted white hats, as Royle explains[2]:

> The white hat was the 'trademark' of the radical Henry 'Orator' Hunt, a leading popular radical of the period who was the principal speaker at St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819 when the 'Peterloo' massacre took place. So in the late teens of the 19th century white hats symbolised parliamentary reformers advocating full democracy. The ban on such hats was in effect a 'no politics' rule.

1 Tonks
2 email, 3.12.2013

The 1822 Conference[3] required travelling preachers not to "wear their coats without collars in future, except those who have them may be permitted to wear them out." At the 1837 Conference, a charge was brought against William Clowes for allowing John Flesher to be appointed as a delegate, for a portrait of him suggested - wrongly - that he was wearing a double-breasted coat.

The 1828 Conference Minutes stipulate "that all our travelling preachers do enforce plainness of dress both by example and by precept, and also do advise with members on this point."

The rule against preachers wearing 'trowsers', which had been repeated in 1828[4], was "entirely done away" at the 1830 Conference[5]. Part of the justification for this decision was that 'trowsers' were cheaper than their alternative (breeches, gaiters). Nonetheless, the 1831 Conference[6] emphasised again:

> That our travelling preachers be plain in their dress, the men to wear single-breasted coats, plain waistcoats, and their hair in its natural form; and the females to be patters of plainness in all their dress. Also plainness of dress is strongly recommended to all our Local Preachers, leaders and members.

The 1839 Minutes (page 2) lay down that "preachers on probation who do not conform to rule in regard to dress, and to their hair, be not taken on the Annual List."

The Reading Circuit quarterly minutes for December 1840 require "That the Preachers in the Circuit does conform to the rules, relative to their Hair and Dress"; and in September 1844 "That Bro Gilbert shall wear his hair in its natural form."

The style of a man's sideboards was a matter for a resolution of the Brinkworth Circuit in 1835.[7]

The September 1863 quarterly meeting decided that "in our judgement Brother Blandford's allowing his beard to grow militates against his usefulness as a preacher, and that if he doesn't come to this meeting a letter be written to him requesting him to shave." They were still worried about Blandford's beard at their December meeting: "That Mr Blandford's case respecting his wearing his long beard stand over till next Quarter Day, and that legislation be prepared on the subject." Facial hair was definitely under scrutiny, for in March 1864 legislation "against any of our preachers wearing a Mustache" was to be forwarded to the District Committee. The circuit's 1864 Report to the District Meeting and Conference, signed by ministers Henry Yeates and Aaron Smith, included "the following piece of legislation praying that it will meet with your approbation and support: That none of our ministers and Local Preachers shall be allowed to officiate among us who wear a *mustaches* for the following reasons:

1. Because it assumes the military rather than the ministerial character
2. Because it is in conformity to the world and the Gospel says be ye transformed

3 Minutes, page 3
4 Minutes of Conference, 1828 (page 33)
5 Minutes, p. 5
6 Minutes, p. 30
7 Tonks

3. Because preachers should be examples to their hearers and these preachers are bad models for imitation in sacred things
4. Because numbers in our Society and congregations have signified their disapprobation of receiving such preachers."

The same 1844 Reading Circuit meeting cited above also decided "That Bro Gilbert shall wear his watch in his [illegible] Pocket."

Sartorial plainness was "strongly recommended" "to our brethren, the Stewards, Local Preachers, Leaders and private Members, both Male and Female" by the 1819 conference.[8] The 1822 Conference[9] laid down that "in future, all our local preachers and exhorters shall appear in the same plain uniformity of dress as the travelling preachers."

In my view, a particularly unpleasant instance of legalism, of the sort which must have contributed to the later stereotypical image of Methodists, is to be found on pages 104-5 of Clowes' *Journals*, referring to an event in the 1812-8 period (he gives few dates) at the home of a farmer called Byatt near Alton, Staffordshire:

> I accepted an invitation to preach in their house, when the Lord gave me their daughter Mary as a seal to my ministry. I spoke to her in the name of the Lord on the subject of laying her curls aside, and becoming plain in dress, as a Christian ought to be who adorns the gospel... and when she came down stairs she had stripped off her curls, and was attired as a Christian professor ought to be.

There were a number of people in Staffordshire around that time with the name Mary Byatt. The earliest ten-year population census which provides names and approximate ages is 1841, and the only unmarried Mary Byatt in Alton (other than one born about 1833) was born some time in the years 1797 to 1801 and was the daughter of Elizabeth Byatt; and there weas another who was christened at Alton on 9th February 1806, being the daughter of William and Hannah Byatt. If the former Mary (the Mary born around 1801) is the one Clowes preached to, she was probably a teenager at the time of Clowes' visit. If she was the latter, and if she was christened soon after her birth, this makes her at most about 12 years old. If this Mary was one of those, she was no older than 23 at the time of Clowes' visit, probably a teenager, maybe even younger.

It is doubtful in any case that Mary was dressed as a seductive hussy, but be that as it may, the requirement to "strip off her curls" if she was to look like a good Christian seems not only repressive but also at variance with God's handiwork, especially in view of the fact that the Bible so beloved of the Primitive Methodists speaks approvingly of the beauty of a woman's hair.[10] Women's hairstyle in the first decade of the century was neo-classical, characterised by using curls on the forehead and above the ears, and the hair held with a knot or a chignon at the back

8 Minutes, page 5
9 Minutes, page 3
10 1 Corinthians 11:15: "it is a glory to her." See also Ecclesiastes 4:1.

of the neck[11]. Young women and girls often wore long tresses in braids, or long cascading ringlet curls.[12]

Clowes's requirement, very much in the Puritan tradition, arose from the Primitive Methodists' wish to see hair worn in its natural form: to cultivate curls (unless they were wholly natural) was a step on the ladder to worldly vanity. Yet his demand comes across as aggressive and domineering, an attempt to suppress natural, probably youthful, *joie de vivre.* It gives a glimpse of the darker side of Primitive Methodism, which assuredly contributed to the distaste with which Methodists were later perceived.

Curls: Klishë e krështérë, Hora e Arbëreshëvet, Sicily

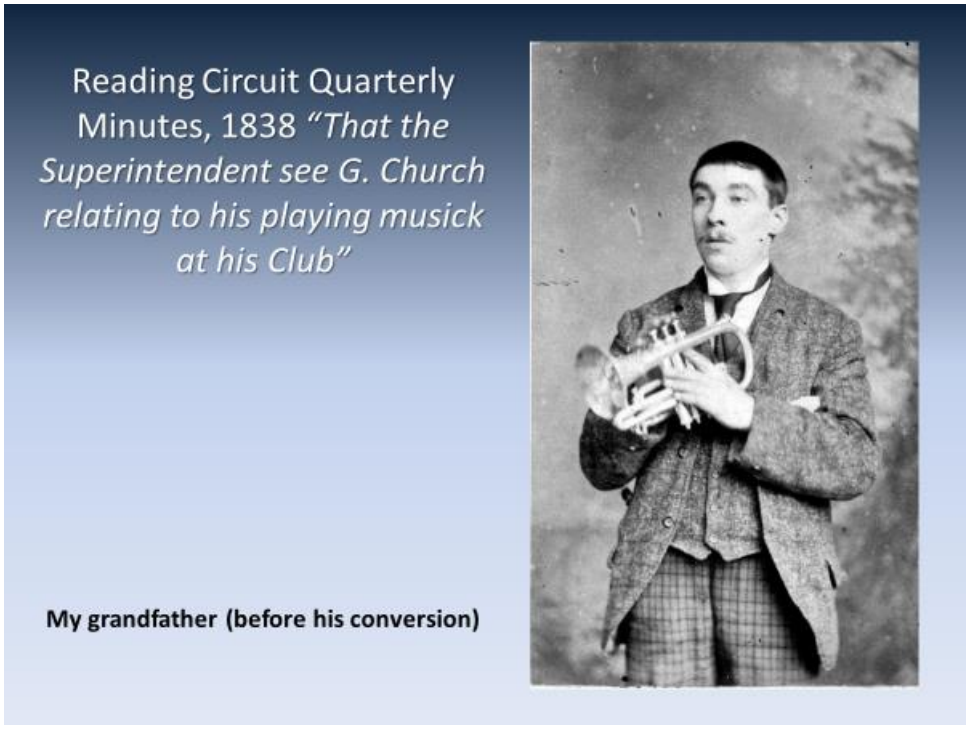
LEISURE ACTIVITIES

The Conference Minutes of 1831 state: "None must be admitted as members of the Primitive Methodist Connexion, who attend vain and worldly amusements, waste their time at public houses... If any member transgress the rules, he must be required to appear before the leaders' meeting." A local example is found in June 1844 when the Reading Circuit resolved "That Jesse Herbert have a note informing him that our connexion does not allow its members and official characters to attend worldly amusements" and "That the said note be sent to W. White and J. Smallbone." And one wonders who had authority to decide how much time spent in a pub was to be deemed 'wasted'.

The Reading Circuit Quarterly Minutes record a resolution in March 1838 "That the Superintendent see G. Church relating to his playing musick at his Club." Matters which attracted censure in the Prees and Oswestry circuits include going to the conjurer, using the pawnbroker, attending the annual hunt,

11 http://thehistoryofthehairsworld.com/hair_19th_century.html
12 hairfinder.com

and Garratt (2002:94) adds going to the circus. Hampshire Primitive Methodism took its origin from Shropshire, and doubtless such activities would also have come under disapproval in Hampshire too.



my grandfather, Philip Young

An activity which I assume was similar to today's carol singing was also the object of disapproval[13]: "All our members are strongly recommended to refrain from going out in the night on what is called Christmas singing." This activity was however permitted if it was undertaken for charitable purposes under the direction of the Circuit quarterly meeting. But "in all instances where it is at all continued, the members of our society are strongly recommended not to taste strong drink nor spirituous liquors."

Before carol singing in public became popular[14], there were official carol singers called 'Waits', bands of people led by important local leaders who had the only power in the towns and villages to take money from the public (if others did this, they were sometimes charged as beggars). A slightly different description is given by Margaret Baker in *Christmas Customs and Folklore* (1968:51, Shire Publications, Aylesbury, UK):

> The visit of the Waits was once an inseparable part of Christmas. No one now knows if the term originally applied to the musical instruments they carried, the music they played, or the players themselves, but by the mid-nineteenth century it had come to mean the group of musicians who toured the town in the night during the weeks before Christmas. Usually they played wind

13 Conference Minutes 1834, p. 8

14 James Cooper (2013) *The History of Christmas Carols* Retrieved from whychristmas.com: w*ww.whychristmas.com/customs/carols_history*

instruments and any popular music of the day, not necessarily carols, and after a performance money or drinks were expected from the householders.

Carols were not necessarily Christian songs; pleasure was enjoyed in unconverted company; and alcohol was involved. From the outsider's perspective, it gave the Primitive Methodists something else to disapprove of, and doubtless increased their reputation as aloof kill-joys.

It is recorded[15] that "At Chaddleworth, high on the Berkshire downs, the village waits, with fiddles, oboes, serpents and clarinets, snowflakes sparkling in the soft yellow light of their lanterns, sang when all were in bed; and in Somerset, 'holly riders', with berry-wreathed hats, rode round the hill-farms ... singing carols for cakes, cider and pennies."

Russell (1886:205) notes that it was at Chaddleworth that he was arrested, and that on an occasion when Elizabeth Smith preached there, a magistrate attempted to arrest two of her congregation: one was a former wrestler, who tumbled the magistrate into a ditch with nettles, saying, "We came here peaceably to worship God; when you come again, behave yourself, and all will be well."

Tea parties also came under disapproval. Minutes, 1836: "We recommend all our preachers and members not to encourage public tea parties, except for Sunday schools."

An 1847 resolution of the Brinkworth Circuit "strongly disapproves of members playing at the game of Kissing in the Ring".[16] One matter which attracted censure in the Prees and Oswestry circuits was walking together too much before marriage, and one wonders whether the deliberations at the circuit authorities' meetings were also sometimes somewhat intrusive. Leaders' Meeting, 11th October, 1844, and the Committee of the Reading Circuit, as recorded in the quarterly minutes: "That it is our opinion that John Swain and Sarah Rowley both missed there way in there Cortship."

SUNDAY

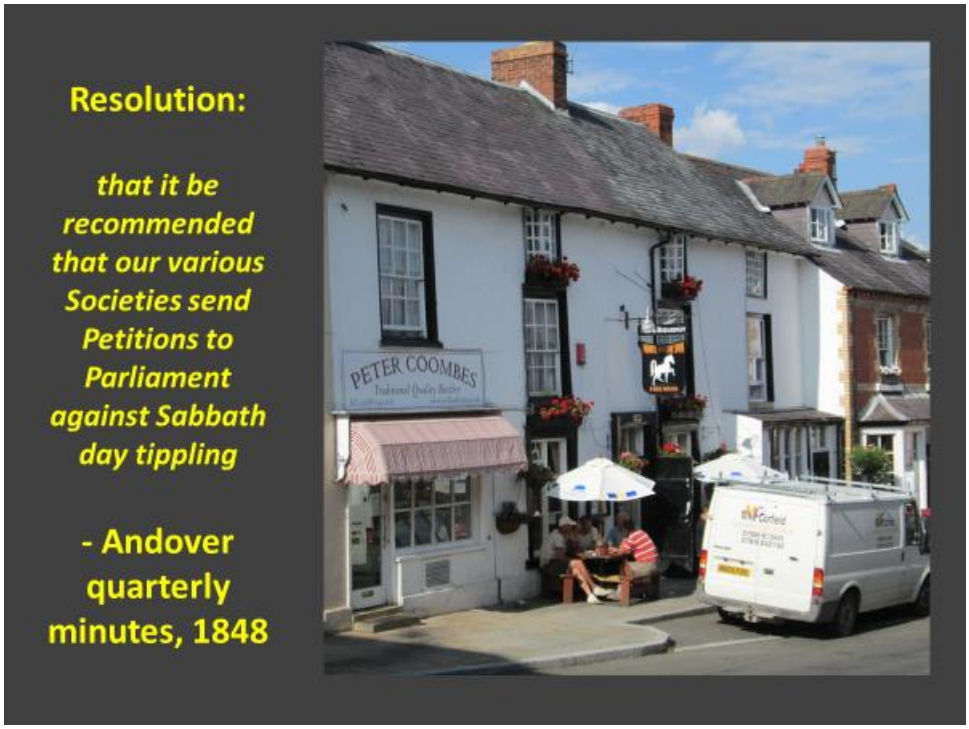
There is repeated emphasis on 'Sunday tippling', and sabbath-breaking is considered a serious offence. The Reading Circuit quarterly meeting resolved in December 1845 "That the circuit committee investigate a charge of Sunday traffic against Brother [illegible] on Christmas day at 2 o'clock." The Reading Circuit quarterly meeting resolved in December 1845 "That the circuit committee investigate a charge of Sunday traffic against Brother [illegible] on Christmas day at 2 o'clock." The Primitive Methodist Consolidated Minutes published in 1849 laid down that: "All our members are earnestly entreated to discourage sabbath breaking, by refraining from travelling and working themselves, except in cases of necessity or mercy, and by discouraging public bakers and other persons from yielding to that vice."

John Wesley, in his 1763 *Sermon preached before the Society for the Reformation of Manners,* commends that Society because, bringing offenders before Magistrates, "They proceeded to a more difficult attempt, the preventing tippling on the Lord's day, spending time in alehouses, which ought

15 Margaret Baker (1974:91) *Folklore and Customs of Rural England* (Newton Abbot, UK: David & Charles)
16 Tonks

to be spent in the more immediate worship of God." He also records that from August 1762 to January 1763, 400 persons were "brought to justice" for Sabbath-breaking.

William Clowes related, in the fifth chapter of his autobiography, how he and some associates also brought people before the magistrates for tippling on Sundays.



Sunday tippling?

Here are attempts to thrust the same restrictions through the force of law on to who have not become personally persuaded of them..

Such restrictions regarding Sunday are nowhere found in the Bible – though if by individual choice and persuasion they help someone to develop a better life, then he is free to apply them to himself. Many Christians, including the early Methodists, believed that God appointed Sunday as a kind of 'Christian sabbath', superseding the Jewish Saturday sabbath of strict rest; many other Christians do not see this transfer in the New Testament, and interpret Paul's words in Romans 14:5 as applying to this matter as much as to any other question about special days: "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind."

ALCOHOL

The seed for the increasing growth of teetotalism in the movement was sown a good deal earlier, though the movement among Primitive Methodists gained momentum especially from the 1830s, and somewhat later among other Nonconformist bodies.

There is much on “temperance”, which word was misused to mean total abstinence from alcohol, in the *Primitive Methodist World* towards the end of the nineteenth century. For example, on 6th April 1899 (page 259) these words appear among the Editorial Notes, penned presumably the editor himself, the Rev. R. T. Hunt:

> A correspondent writes to say that he has been informed upon what he regards as good authority, that in one of our Midland towns there is a Circuit Steward now holding office who is a wine and spirit merchant. ... If the statement is correct it is indeed a great discredit, and we hope the Circuit will soon clear itself of the reproach. If the Circuit cannot get a rich man worthy of the honour it should select a poor man, but rich or poor he should be free from complicity with such a vile traffic.

Worse followed. In a section entitled *The Temperance World* on 8th June 1899 there is a note of a bequest of £107,500 left by a wine and spirits merchant for the maintenance of churches, clergymen and various charities. The paper’s *Notes and Comments* section dubs it BLOOD MONEY; the comment is not attributed, and may be assumed therefore to come from the editor, Rev. T. H. Hunt. The phrase “blood money” almost became a *Leitmotiv*, for on page 23 of the *Primitive Methodist World* of 11th January 1900 a notice announced “No ‘Blood Money.’ The Primitive Methodists of Lower Wortley, near Leeds ... resolved not to receive financial aid from anyone engaged in the liquor traffic.”

These entries betray preference for a rich man over a poor as a circuit official; sour comment on a generous bequest; and probably judgement on members of another denomination who disagree on the matter of abstinence, for the deceased was presumably a member of the Church of England if his bequest included the support of clergymen.

What does Legalism do?

For the purposes of this article, legalism has the effect of creating a settled image of its practitioners coupled with a sense of distaste and repugnance, and this section will provide some examples of the expression of that strong and persistent dislike. The article does not discuss the effect legalism may have on Christians. Does legalism make those who impose the rules proud and disdainful of other Christians whom they perceive as weaker or compromised? Does it sometimes lead to a feeling of moral or spiritual superiority often characterised by the phrase 'holier than thou', and to an attitude of censure and belittlement towards those who fail or refuse to comply? Does establish a division between God’s children, the weak and the strong, the legalistically strict and the more liberal? Does it generate a sense of failure? exclusion? weariness from chronically sustained effort to follow the rules? These questions need to be pondered, but this article is not about them, important though they are.

As Dr Christopher J. Samuel, formerly of Warwick University and sometime scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge, wrote by email: “Several writers suggest a recovery of evangelical self-confidence after 1945. Nonetheless, a writer who wants an off-the-shelf sinister, hypocritical character still uses a dissenter.”

Here, from non-fiction, are a couple of examples of this popular impression of Methodists held by the wider public. *The Toilers of the Field* offers a portrayal of Methodists in Wiltshire in the early 1870s:

> In one cottage one may find an upright, stern-featured man... who is the representative of the old Puritan, though the denomination to which he may belong is technically known as the Methodist. He is stern, hard, uncompromising - one who sets duty above affection... aloof from his fellows (page 64)

William Cobbett's classic *Rural Rides* "covers a period of four years from 25 September 1822 to 26 October 1826 and is a powerful record of old rural England in its death struggle", as stated on the first page of the Penguin Classics edition (1985). Cobbett writes from Easton, to the north-east of Winchester, in 1823:

> I will allow nothing to be good, with regard to the labouring classes, unless it make an addition to their victuals, drink or clothing... I know that they are in rags, and that they haven not a belly-full; and I know that the way to make them good, to make them honest, to make them dutiful, to make them kind to one another, is to enable them to live well; and I also know, that none of these things will ever be accomplished by Methodist sermons. (page 137)

I turn now to fiction, in which Methodists are often portrayed as crabbed, or even cruel, hypocrites. Much work has been undertaken to document this trend. Valentine Cunningham's study *Everywhere spoken against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975) fills over 300 pages proving and discussing it. Here are some words of his from pages 9-10: "The Dissenter suffers in Victorian fiction from extensive illiberality at the hands of the novelists who, however, introduce him on such an ample, indeed liberal, scale into their novels..." These portrayals often links this supposed ethos with an emphasis on, almost relish in, thoughts of judgement and hell which await unbelievers, disregarding John Wesley's sentiment, shared by generations of Methodist preachers, that his calling was "With cries, entreaties, tears to save, / To snatch them from the gaping grave" (*Wesley's Hymns* 279).

I take my first example from the first page of "a hugely enjoyable saga set in the four decades since the end of the war" (*Spectator*), "a warmly entertaining novel that tackles the question of the times - how did we get into this mess?" (*Sunday Times*) - the quotations are from the write-ups in Penguin's 1986 edition of John Mortimer's *Paradise postponed*: "'I thought we'd grown out of all that in first-year theology... God on a cloud... judging people! Parting the sheep from the goats. That sort of thing.'"

The portrayal may sometimes be of a lovable and somewhat quaintly old-fashioned character still holding on to ideas which the rest of us know to be obsolete. Here is R. F. Delderfield writing of Methodist local preacher Edwin Willoughby in his novel *Long Summer Day* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1966):

> he had grown to look rather like a saint, with his long silky hair, white as hoar frost, high, pale forehead, and mild, deepset eyes that burned with love for all mankind... His sermons, although spiced with the traditional touch of brimstone, expressed his deep belief in an era when lions would lie down with lambs, and reformed Potters would hoe harmoniously alongside Derwents.

Katharine Mary Briggs (8 November 1898 – 1980) was a folklorist who wrote the 4-volume *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*. She also wrote a charming and gentle story entitled *Hobberdy Dick*, set in Oxfordshire in the period following the English Civil War, first published by Eyre and Spottiswoode in 1955, and marketed from 1972 by Puffin Books as a children's book, though to be sure I have read it four times in adulthood, and each time with delight. However, on the subject of hell, here is part of a comment by one of the good children:

> Old and young'll be rolling their eggs on Easter Sunday; but don't let the ministers know, nor yet the godly, for they do cut up terrible rough about Easter and all the Saints' days. My daddy he be one of the godly, and we have a power of them down to our house, and they do talk like a book about Hell-fire and all.

'The godly' is a way of referring to the Puritans, precursors of later Dissenters and of today's Evangelicals, and greatly admired and in some ways copied by the Primitive Methodists, whose writings have enjoyed a resurgence of appreciation since the 1950s. Here is some more about gloomy - nay, kill-joy - their way of life (Chapter 6):

> Anne waked on the next morning after that to a world of clear shining frost. It was two days before the Eve of one of the most dismal Christmases England had known. Only the geese had reason to rejoice. Above-stairs Mr Widdison had decreed a strict Puritan Christmas, without so much as a mince pie...
>
> Samuel Widdison hardly knew how to believe it, but it almost seemed as if some, in his quiet and Puritan household, had stolen out to a Christmas revelry. His anger mounted.

Other writers of fiction portray what they deem outmoded ideas in a less kindly tone. Here is Arnold Bennett in *Old Wives Tale (*1908) (Chapter V Part II):

> In the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on Duck Bank there was a full and influential congregation. For in those days influential people were not merely content to live in the town where their fathers had lived, without dreaming of country residences and smokeless air--they were content also to believe what their fathers had believed about the beginning and the end of all. There was no such thing as the unknowable in those days. The eternal mysteries were as simple as an addition sum; a child could tell you with absolute certainty where you would be and what you would be doing a million years hence, and exactly what God thought of you...
>
> And there floated before them, in the intense and prolonged silence, the clear vision of Jehovah on a throne, a God of sixty or so with a moustache and a beard, and a non-committal expression which declined to say whether or not he would require more bloodshed; and this God, destitute of pinions, was surrounded by white-winged creatures that wafted themselves to and fro while chanting; and afar off was an obscene monstrosity, with cloven hoofs and a tail very dangerous and rude and interfering, who could exist comfortably in the middle of a coal-fire, and who took a malignant and exhaustless pleasure in coaxing you by false pretences into the same fire; but of course you had too much sense to swallow his wicked absurdities.

Here is an extract from Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*:

> ...the revivalist, who had been resting in a chair, came forward again. 'Friends and fellow-sinners,' he said, 'a lot of you, fools that you are, have come here to-night to hear me play my cornet. Well, you have heard me... I have been called a mountebank. I am one... But God's precious business cannot be carried on, even by a mountebank, without money, and there will be a collection towards the expenses of the Revival. During the collection we will sing "Rock of Ages," and you shall hear my cornet again. If you feel willing to give us your sixpences, give; but if you resent a collection,' here he adopted a tone of ferocious sarcasm, 'keep your miserable sixpences and get sixpenny-worth of miserable enjoyment out of them elsewhere.'

Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, *Dead Man's Rock* (1887), Chapter 1:

> my grandfather had led a hot and riotous youth, fearing neither God, man, nor devil. Before his return, however, he had "got religion" from some quarter, and was confirmed in it by the preaching of one Jonathan Wilkins, as I have heard, a Methodist from "up the country," and a powerful mover of souls. As might have been expected in such a man as my grandfather, this religion was of a joyless and gloomy order, full of anticipations of hell-fire and conviction of the sinfulness of ordinary folk.

The pilloried Nonconformists, crabbed lovers of strictness and judgement, are not always specifically identified as Methodists, though to be sure Methodists were the largest Dissenting body in England. Sometimes a character is simply identified as a chapel-goer, and there is a persistent tendency to lump them all together, by tacit association, as of one ilk.

Here is an extract from G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories, *The Scandal of Father Brown* (Cassell & Co, London, Toronto, Melbourne and Sydney, 1929):

> The strange story of the incongruous strangers is still remembered along that strip of the Sussex coast, where the large and quiet hotel called the Maypole and Garland looks across its own gardens to the sea. Two quaintly assorted figures did, indeed, enter that quiet hotel on that sunny afternoon; one being conspicuous in the sunlight, and visible over the whole shore, by the fact of wearing a lustrous green turban, surrounding a brown face and a black beard; the other would have seemed to some even more wild and weird, by reason of his wearing a soft black clergyman's hat with a yellow moustache and yellow hair of leonine length. He at least had often been seen preaching on the sands or conducting Band of Hope services with a little wooden spade; only he had certainly never been seen going into the bar of an hotel...
>
> For the next thing that happened, as already narrated, was the astonishing apparition of a brown Asiatic in a green turban, accompanied by the (if possible) more astonishing apparition of a Nonconformist minister; omens such as appear before a doom...
>
> He was no less a person than the Rev. David Pryce-Jones, whose far-resounding slogan was Prohibition and Purification for Our Land and the Britains Overseas... He had corresponded with the leaders of Mahommedan religious thought, and had finally induced a distinguished Moslem (one of whose names was Akbar and the rest an untranslatable ululation of Allah with attributes)

to come and lecture in England on the ancient Moslem veto on wine...

"I ask you, friends," said Mr. Pryce-Jones, with expansive platform gestures, "why does our friend here set an example to us Christians in truly Christian self-control and brotherhood? Why does he stand here as a model of true Christianity, of real refinement, of genuine gentlemanly behaviour, amid all the quarrels and riots of such places as these? Because, whatever the doctrinal differences between us, at least in his soil the evil plant, the accursed hop or vine, has never——"

Over several decades I have read many, probably hundreds, of novels, of a fairly wide variety of genres, and I have formed an impression that Methodists in particular, Nonconformists and Evangelicals are thus portrayed. Often the hints are swift, passing, and subtle - a 'nod and a wink' at what we all know anyway. I think of Kipling's "Riley insisted on Reggie's reading the Bible and grim "Methody" tracts to him" (*Plain Tales from the Hills*); of Charles Dickens's "small dissenting chapels to teach, with no lack of illustration, the miseries of Earth" (*The old Curiosity Shop*); of the sour, bullying grocer Mr Evans, a strict chapel-goer in whose home evacuee children Carrie and Nick billeted in Nina Bawden's children's classic, *Carrie's War* (1973).

In le Carré's *A Murder of Quality* (1962), the novel's hero is surprised when he meets the Baptist minister, a "down-to-earth" person, for he had expected "a Wesleyan hammer, a wordy, forbidding man with a taste for imagery." The novel, described by the *Daily Telegraph* as "a beautifully intelligent, satiric and witty story," also hints at Methodists' imagined lack of human warmth, concern and involvement with the rest of surrounding mankind. Here the novel's reader senses not so much malice or hostility towards Methodism, but rather the tacitly assumed knowledge common to novelist and reader that Methodists are in a world of their own, detached from, and uninterested in, the real world or normal people. The reader does not need to be told about the character of Methodists: it may be assumed he already knows.

The motif reappears in le Carré's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974), Chapter 4:

Tarr's father ... had an evangelical streak and preached in local gospel halls... When the war came the couple evacuated to Singapore... In Changi the father preached God's charity to everyone in sight, and if the Japs hadn't persecuted him his fellow prisoners would have done the job for them. With Liberation... Ricki tried to read for the law but more often broke it and the father turned some rough preachers loose on him to beat the sin out of his soul. Tarr flew the coop to Borneo.

In Jim Kelly's *Death Toll*, a whodunnit published by Penguin Books (London) in 2011, set in Norfolk in 2010, there is further evidence of the general trend of disapproval of Methodism. On pages 94-5 characters enter a chapel (with emphasis added):

A further door led into a chapel itself. It was a simple room with whitewashed walls...

"What are they? **Methodists**? A sect?"

...Shaw turned to look back at a modest set of organ pipes set over the door by which they'd entered. "Music, at least," he said. "Test of it's a bit **joyless**."

Set on either side of the pipes were two portraits in plain gold frames. To the right a man in a **severe** white wig, the **face pinched**, the cheeks slightly flushed. It was one of those rare images - Shaw guessed from the late eighteenth century - which actually looked like a human being, even if it was **not a particularly attractive** human being...

"I'm Pastor Abney... This man, " he said, "... is our founder - Webster Barents. Barents was a **follower of Wesley** until he decided to set up the church here."

Conclusion

Some features and adherents of Nonconformity do supply a measure of justification for the perception so vividly conveyed in Richard Llewellyn's novel, *How green was my Valley*: "I thought when I was a young man that I would conquer the world with truth... With the golden sound of the Word. But only a few heard the trumpet. Only a few understood. The rest of them put on black and sat in chapel."

It is doubtless true that Methodism, as much as any other religion, has adherents who fail to penetrate its inner and true nature, and who dishonour its true calling - men and women who seem to believe they have been granted an exception from obedience to 1 Corinthians 13 in the furtherance of their drive for personal sanctity or for the service of their god. Wesley himself comments in his Journal (11th December 1785): "How hard it is to fix, even on serious hearers, a lasting sense of the nature of true religion! Let it be right opinions, right modes of worship, or anything, rather than right tempers!"

It must be conceded that, whilst some of the Primitive Methodist restrictions may seem quaint, amusing, irrational, whimsical or even plain harmless, others strike us as intrusive. Some of the regulations were (I believe,), in our Lord's words, "the leaven of the Pharisees"[17]. Nor do I question the regrettable presence among religious bodies of hypocrites.

Thus it is only reasonable to concede that some regulations were assuredly "the leaven of the Pharisees", intrusive, restrictive, and carrying the risk that Methodism and other streams of Nonconformity would be viewed as little more than legalistic sects, and they supplied considerable ammunition to opposers of Methodism down to the present day.

Looking back from the standpoint of 1932, Harper wrote on pages 14-5, "I love to think of our church in the dawn of her glory. I love ... the volcanic fire of her heart, the thrill of song, the buoyant testimony of her saints. I love her because of her unquenchable ideals, the largeness of her hope, the untiring energies of her faith." But he added, also on page 15: "It is not denied that there was in the early years of the Church a superficial narrowness, ludicrous limitations and eccentricities."

Legalism was an aspect of Primitive Methodist life and ethos which spoiled its image and reputation in the eyes of a wider society, for in it they were neither consistent nor always wise. Many of the

17 Mark 8:15

restrictions imposed on members, and occasional attempts to impose them on outsiders, contributed to the popular negative perception of Methodism from the Victorian age to the 21st century.

- David Young

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