

Yet Alive?  
Methodists in British  
Fiction since 1890



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By

David Dickinson

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*To Yvette*

*whose interest in this project has been a constant encouragement*

*I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.*  
*'Thoughts Upon Methodism,' John Wesley 1786*

*The Methodist Church ... stands for the best traditions of liberal, socially committed Christianity. It is a Church that encourages people to think, rather than force-feeding them with instant answers. There are plenty of people in contemporary society who are searching for meaning in their lives, suspicious of certainty, but deeply interested in the spiritual dimension. Perhaps the Methodist Church needs to be more serious about being true to its own nature, about exploring new ways of relating to people in their spiritual search, rather than giving in to the temptation to emulate churches which generally take a more conservative stance.*  
*'Gone But Not Forgotten,' p. 96*

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## PREFACE

Theology means God-talk, a word that many Christian believers find off-putting because it smacks of the intellectualisation of individual emotion, experience and belief and locates thought about God in academia. Except when expressed through music or visual arts, theology uses words to communicate itself. Although recognisably inadequate, language is the usual medium to express ultimacy, infinity and ineffability. Theology equals words about God.

Literature is also a verbal art. Poetry and prose rely on words, and their creators use language to construct their art, express their ideas, and tell their stories. That both theology and literature employ words brings them into irresistible symbiosis, such that I find it impossible to live as a Christian and work as a Christian minister without thinking about God through literature. Over thirty years ago I left a career teaching secondary school English to become a Methodist minister, so my work has lived out the theology-literature symbiosis. When my work was to teach English, at the tail end of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, some of the writers discussed in this text were on the curriculum—Chaplin’s *The Leaping Lad* was regarded as accessible for school children in the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne—and, at weekends, I served as a local preacher in the chapels that writers such as J. L. Carr, Arthur Quiller-Couch and Sheila Kaye-Smith would have instantly recognised. Within a few years of full-time ministry, I was in touch with a fellow Methodist, a scholar famed for his study of English hymnody, Richard Watson, then of Durham University. I had a query, the subject of which I cannot remember. In the course of our conversation, I shared my “grass is always greener on the other side” conundrum. When I taught English, I loved theology; now that I was a theologian (for that is what clergy people are), my love of literature burgeoned. He invited me to attend the 1992 annual conference of the International Society for Religion and Literature as an observer in Glasgow. Listening to theologians discuss literature and literary scholars discuss theology hooked me in. I have lived in the territory shared by theology and literature ever since. Nowadays, when I read a novel, I am doing theology.

Literature, the primary subject of this text, occupies a significant part of the modern church where words fill the air when we worship, to such an

extent that some crave silence. When Christian believers congregate on their day of worship, they gather around a book to hear its word proclaimed that they may discover in its words the Word who spoke the world into being. That this book forms the Christian scriptures emphasises that it has been written, for the word “scripture” is obviously associated with terms such as “script” and “manuscript.” Written by whom? Written by men—disturbingly so for women in a less patriarchal society—who believed they were in some way recording, not only words about God (theology), but the words *of* God. Many who read it today read it to listen for the authentic divine voice. Moreover, the worship offered when Christians gather in churches uses a particular form of poetry in its formal prayers, hymnody and carefully crafted language, sometimes crafted over the course of centuries. The preacher engages his or her rhetorical art in the oratory of the sermon—again, words. In addition to this inevitable literary focus of worship, practical theology in that it expresses what Christians believe about God, I, in common with many other worship leaders, sometimes include non-biblical texts alongside Bible readings and, like many other preachers, frequently allude to literature in sermons. The stories and scenes of novels, lines of poetry and plots of TV dramas, films and theatre fund many a contemporary sermon. Much more than using literature for sermon illustration, this can entail genuine and deep dialogue between the disciplines of theology and literature, thereby enriching the human perception of the divine. The Catholic hymn “*Ubi Caritas*” and Leo Tolstoy’s much-loved story of Martin the Cobbler teach that, where love is, God is. I have learnt that where literature and theology, my two loves, converge God is also found.

Born into a Methodist family, I am, however, a Methodist by conviction. I believe its distinctive theology, outlined in chapter one, brings an important contribution to the panoply of contemporary Christianity, and *Yet Alive?* progresses naturally from my years of study, thought and practice in the field of religion and literature. Part of a continuing exploration of the interface between the two disciplines, I have been keen to discover how fiction, a branch of literature, depicts Methodism, one of the larger Protestant groupings within Christianity, yet still much smaller and less influential than the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

Every reader reads with pre-understanding, so when I read novels I hold several assumptions. Decades of wide-ranging fiction reading has developed within me a high doctrine of fiction, and I have high expectations of any novel I hold in my hands. I am almost persuaded that prose fiction can achieve more than any other literary form. Novels can

capture the least definable aspects of my experience in life and leave me marvelling at the mystery of it all. They are so open and flexible in form that they can host more than one worldview, exist on several planes at once, and place me, if I allow them, wherever they want. Such is the creative power of novels. Novels embody characteristics of the cultures in which their narratives are set and in which their authors live, and can also hint at another reality beyond; they can mix reality and unreality; they can mix magic and realism; they can speak of things seen and unseen; they can deal with the tangible, quotidian world and offer traces and glimpses of another higher world and higher Being. Novels are tangible yet transcendent. For this reason, my indebtedness to fiction in my formation and practice as a Christian minister is inexpressible. Reading a novel lifts me to another plane and helps me gain alternative perspectives on all that meets the eye.

Unlike theology, which uses reasonable argument in its striving for orderliness and understanding, fiction is rarely neat. In its messy depiction of human relationships, it mirrors the twists and turns I and others take on our way through life. As a result, the interdependence of literature and theology finds creative tension in the case of fiction. The tendency of theology to systematise and the capacity of fiction to contain inconsistencies establish a tension of different expectations from which fresh understandings of human existence can emerge. This accounts for what I sometimes think is a misperception of a “sacred turn” in British novels since the 1980s. Novels have always been able to speak of remarkable or marvellous things (to borrow part of the title of Jon McGregor’s 2002 debut novel, in which an anonymous city street becomes a miraculous place). The convergence of sacred and secular in fiction is no recent phenomenon, but, rather, a continuation of the way fiction has always presented itself. Perhaps contemporary readers pick up on the implied presence of the spiritual in novels because they engage less with organised religion, thus signifying a sacred turn among readers instead of a sacred turn in novels. In my own preaching and writing, I have found the tension between literature and theology both a helpful discipline, in that theology has reined me in from chasing seductive unorthodox thoughts up theological cul-de-sacs, and creative, in that literature has restrained theology’s tendency towards dogmatism and permitted exploration. Living and working within the territory shared by literature and theology has enabled me to push at the edges and forge new expressions of Christianity’s old, old story for the current age in order to tell the gospel afresh.

When I read, I also assume that I am not reading alone. The act of reading appears solitary. Readers shut out distractions, turn their gaze from whatever occurs around them and immerse themselves in a book. Yet we read in company, not alone. First, we read with the author and his or her characters; we dialogue with them. And we also read with other readers (usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly if we will later meet in a book club to discuss our reading). To this end, I have set up church book clubs. How much they have contributed to my study of Methodism in fiction is difficult to gauge for I have learnt from other readers over many years. Moreover, we read the novel we presently have in our hands with memories of books we have previously read and their authors. And we read the book in our hands in dialogue with our experience of the culture we live in. These form interpretive communities and prevent isolated reading. Communal reading holds our individualistic views in check and keeps us in good company. I can imagine a congregation of readers. As I write, I imagine a company of Methodists reading of themselves and their forebears, and I am among them.

## INTRODUCTION

The governing body of the Methodist Church in Britain, the Methodist Conference, meets annually, opening its proceedings with the *a cappella* singing of Charles Wesley's hymn "And are we yet alive and see each other's face?" Seemingly amazed that they have survived another gruelling year, Conference representatives raise their voices in song. That the hymn begins with the word "and" introduces an element of astonishment, implying also that its singers are part way through a conversation which presumably began at some undetermined point in the years of fervent activity between 1738, when the Wesley brothers experienced separate heart-warming experiences, and 1744, when the first collection of Charles Wesley's hymns was published. Further, the "and" signals continuation as long as Methodists live. Throughout this conversation, literary interest in the Methodist movement has been shown, beginning surprisingly early in that, within ten years of the beginning of the Wesley brothers' public ministry, Henry Fielding subjected the movement to literary scrutiny in his novels. A significant turning point in this literary interest in Methodism occurred in 1890 with the publication of Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, and this forms the starting point of this study. Surprisingly, the denomination, highly controversial at its inception, in steep decline since the First World War and struggling currently with its sense of identity, still features in British literature, so "Yet alive?" serves as a fitting title for a study of Methodists in British fiction in the last hundred years.

In 2014, the year of the preparatory work for this book, the President of Conference, the Reverend Dr. Kenneth Howcroft, used his presidential address to ask in his opening paragraph, and answer, what some might regard as a dangerous question: What is Methodism for? Posing this question in such a public arena can be seen as bringing into the open a crisis of confidence: Are we yet alive? What is the purpose of Methodism? Has it anything to offer British society and individuals within it? This text examines novels that, in various ways and to differing degrees, have asked similar questions. They have explored the contribution Methodism has made to the spiritual lives, the religious landscape, and the theological understanding of the British reading public; cumulatively, they have established a portrait of the denomination in the popular imagination.

Contemporary Methodists will want to consider whether the portrait presented in fiction proves accurate, misleading or, indeed, complete enough to be worthwhile.

Since 1940, when T. B. Shepherd published *Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century*,<sup>1</sup> a hiatus in this field of study has existed, and there has been little scholarly interest in Methodism's literary portrait in the twentieth century. Almost all publications concerning Methodism in literature have been restricted to the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of these have considered the influence of Methodism either on the writers or their novels; some have assessed the literary contribution of celebrated Methodist novelists; some have looked for Methodist traits and themes in well-known fiction of the century, such as that of the Brontës and George Eliot's celebrated depiction of Methodism. But all ended their studies at the close of what some historians call "the long nineteenth century", dating it from the French Revolution of 1789 to the outbreak of World War One in 1914. All regarded the literary analysis as a means of studying the historical Methodist movement, and many were written from an American perspective or for a specifically American market. This book covers, approximately, the next hundred years from 1914 to the present. In asking how the denomination is portrayed in fiction, this examination approaches the subject from a decidedly literary perspective. Its main interest lies in how the denomination has been described and discussed in novels rather than how it has influenced them. Inevitably, therefore, this book offers a critique of some neglected and forgotten novels, perhaps assisting in the recovery of some of these authors from the obscurity that results unjustifiably from the fads and fancies of literary fashion.

Recovery of neglected authors would be a felicitous by-product, but this book's primary purposes are three-fold. First, it attempts to fill the gap left since Shepherd closed his work. Secondly, it should add, in a small way, to the assessment of the role of religion in British literature, which continues to host spiritual, religious and theological themes despite being written and read in an age of competing convictions of faith and belief. Thirdly, it contributes to Methodist studies in that it analyses the more recent depiction in literature of the denomination's people, origins, ecclesiology and theology which has escaped published scholarly description, except for this author's article of 2013, *Methodism in English Fiction*.<sup>2</sup> Readers who are familiar with Methodism and its history will profit from the review offered herein. Non-Methodist adherents will learn that narrative. Both groups will profit from new insights that will come from the literary depiction of a valued religious orientation.



In the nineteenth century, many novels found their framing with Methodist settings, themes, characters and authors, some of which will be discussed as background in the second chapter. Many of these were highly successful in publishing terms. Indeed, the first novelist to sell a million copies of one title in Britain was a Methodist minister, Silas Hocking, whose *Her Benny* of 1879 told a story of street children who were abused by their parents and sold matches for a living. Based on his experiences as a minister in Liverpool, it outsold the works of much better-remembered writers of the time.<sup>3</sup> He and his siblings, Joseph and Salome Hocking, wrote their novels, documenting the ideas and ideals of Methodism, with the express intention of making their beliefs accessible to a wider audience and converting them to the Methodist cause. Unapologetically didactic and propagandistic, the Hockings were romanticists who wrote of a Methodism that never existed and of Methodists dreaming of conversions they never got.<sup>4</sup> In contrast with the Hockings' hagiographical style, most nineteenth-century novels dismissed Methodism as a distasteful or hypocritical sect whose zealous, and sometimes extreme, behaviour was unseemly. George Eliot, drawing on her own family history, famously bucked this trend and, in *Adam Bede*, painted an honest, accurate and quite charitable picture of Methodism at the close of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Arnold Bennett, the other novelist of Victorian Britain who comes to people's minds when Methodism in novels is mentioned, depicts Methodists, in novels such as *Anna of the Five Towns*, as "typical products of decaying Puritanism".<sup>6</sup> Anna's father's "holy valour for the pure doctrine" is matched only by his parsimony and unforgiving self-righteousness.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the self-critical character of the Victorian era, evident for instance in Charles Dickens's novels, serves as a supporting foundation for the better, reforming aspects of Methodism. Reflecting the steep decline in numbers and influence that the denomination has experienced since its heyday in the first decade of the twentieth century, which may or may not have had something to do with this austere reputation, Methodism makes less frequent appearances in British fiction in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The concern of this book becomes, thus, to discover how Methodism has fared in these twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels. How accurate is its depiction in English fiction, and how strong is its presence in popular imagination?

Both to establish the focus of this study and to let the reader understand its author's assumptions, the three parts of this book's subtitle require introduction before the study gets under way: namely, Methodism, fiction, and the years since 1890.

## **Methodism: historical overview and denominational characteristics**

In the family tree of Christian denominations, the place of Methodism among British churches survives now as uneasily as its hold in literature remains slippery. A cuckoo in the Christian nest, Methodism's origins are peculiar, its short history chequered, and its clearly-defined characteristics often, paradoxically, indistinct.

Founded almost unintentionally by the followers of John Wesley, who always wanted his converts to attend parish Communion, Methodism's roots lie in the Church of England from which it seceded soon after Wesley died. In 1784, Wesley, who had governed Methodists more or less single-handedly and quite autocratically throughout his evangelistic ministry, had made provision for their governance after his death. Under deed poll, he nominated one hundred people to be members of the "Yearly Conference of the People called Methodist" and indicated how their successors were to be appointed. This structure was to serve as Methodism's governing body after Wesley's death. Thus, soon after he died in 1791, Methodists found themselves, more by accident than by design, outside the established church, and, within four years, a "Plan of Pacification" was adopted by the Conference to allow for the administration of Baptism and Holy Communion in Methodist chapels. A declaration, in the same year, 1795, that the admission of a preacher to "full connexion with the Conference" conferred ministerial rights, effectively severed Methodism from its source. Methodists had evicted themselves from their parents' nest. So, unlike many nonconformist groups in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century who could trace their origins in a direct line to the Reformation, the Methodist Church's line of descent was by way of the Church of England.

As if proving the rule that the nature of Protestants is to protest and the nature of nonconformists is not to conform, nineteenth-century Methodism was riven with schism and secession, spreading in its various forms, according to the poet, George Crabbe, in his Preface to *The Borough*, like "spiritual influenza".<sup>8</sup> Even before the century began, the Methodist New Connexion split away in 1797 in protest at the concentration of power with ministers in the Conference. In 1805-6, discontents in the Warrington area formed an essentially lay movement, formally known as the Independent Methodists but sometimes nicknamed "Singing Quakers" because of Quaker elements in their structures. In 1807, Hugh Bourne and William Clowes organised the first Camp Meeting on Mow Cop in Staffordshire and, within five years, they had adopted the name Primitive Methodist

because of their desire to return to a primitive, therefore presumably purer, form of Christianity modelled on the New Testament. Although Primitive Methodists, nicknamed “Ranters”, were the most numerous, best-known and most long-lived of such splinter groups, other similar movements emerged in the early decades of the century, including Bible Christians (1815) and Tent Methodists (1820). The cracks continued to appear. In 1827, a dispute over the installation of an organ in Brunswick chapel resulted in a group of protestors in Leeds forming the Protestant Methodists; in 1832, the Arminian Methodists seceded at Derby over a point of doctrine, and, in 1842, Teetotal Methodists seceded in Cornwall. This ignoble history serves as illustration of the common tendency for groups to want to return to the most-pure source (which they always see as their position) and often behave most impurely in their efforts to get there.

In the early 1850s, the originating Methodist group, Wesleyan Methodists, was governed by an increasingly authoritarian Conference. Dissatisfaction with this led to a number of mass expulsions and secessions, most of whom joined forces in 1857 to create the United Methodist Free Churches and a minority of whom established the Wesleyan Reform Union in 1859. Others left and dissociated themselves from the Methodist movement entirely; the most famous of these was William Booth, first a Wesleyan then a New Connexion preacher, who left Methodism in 1861, eventually to set up the Salvation Army. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Methodist family of churches originating in the ministry of John Wesley was a diverse, but significant nonconformist group, alongside whom there were at least two other “Methodist” groups, one originating with George Whitefield—the Calvinist Methodists—and the other originating with Selina Hastings—the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion.

Stevie Davies’s forlorn comment in her novel, *Awakening*, that “factious Baptists pierce (Christ’s) naked side with disputes as vicious as they are petty and self-righteous” could easily be equally appropriately applied to nineteenth-century Methodists. One of the two daughters of a Baptist pastor at the heart of this novel, Beatrice, imagines the robe of Christ torn to shreds by his followers as they drag their wounded Saviour this way and that between them.<sup>9</sup>

Sundered thus into many pieces in the hundred years immediately after Wesley’s death, the ignoble story of schisms and secessions had shaped a complex Methodist family, open to being misunderstood but whose influence remained surprisingly strong. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, although the core group of Wesleyan Methodists enjoyed resurgence because it had built central halls in many large towns and cities

which facilitated effective social ministry, the general direction of Methodism was towards reunification. This was fulfilled in 1932, when the main groups—the Wesleyans, the Primitives and the United Methodists with the inclusion of some smaller Methodist societies—united to form the British Methodist Church. Since then, however, in common with many other British churches, the denomination's influence on wider society in Britain has waned and its membership has decreased.

The particular course of the original formation and historical development of Methodism has forced it into carrying some anomalies. For much of its history, the Methodist Church thought of itself as a society, of which believers can choose to be members. The practice continues to this day in its dual assignation of its service welcoming adults into the church as “Confirmation and Reception into Membership”, a duality reinforced in liturgical gesture and posture in that, at the moment of confirmation, the presiding minister first lays hands on the kneeling confirmand's head and then invites him or her to stand to shake his or her right hand. Annual membership tickets are also issued to the church's members. Many Methodists currently find this remnant of a bygone age awkward in that it sets up an uneasy distinction between outsider and those who belong, and sets more firm boundaries around the organisation than is customary in most churches. Furthermore, Methodists have never been Dissenters; rather, they are Nonconformists in that they have never been Reformed (in the sense of being party to the Reformation). But they are Protestant, and, following the style of John Wesley, they are both Catholic and Evangelical. Since 1932, the Methodist Church has been a broad church retaining, in its current liturgical expressions, both Wesleyan and Ranter elements. A Covenant with the Church of England, agreed in 2004, expresses its commitment to work more closely with the established church in Britain in acknowledgement of both Methodism's origins and its eventual destiny within Anglicanism.

In the contemporary church scene, when denominational loyalty matters less to churchgoers than shopping around to find a church whose worship style suits, the defining characteristics of Methodism are obscured. Its distinctive features include an almost unique form of church governance known as Connexionalism, which combines all local congregations under the authority of the annual Conference, presided over jointly by an ordained President and a lay Vice-President supported by a standing Methodist Council. The President, who serves for one year only, acts on behalf of the Conference when it is not in session. Doctrinally, Methodism is noted for its pragmatism; following the practices of Wesley, who exposed himself to criticism and hostility because he was sometimes

prepared to set aside theological principles for the sake of the furtherance of Christianity, Methodism has been reluctant to resort to dogma and has left itself open to the charge of being unprincipled in its preparedness to accommodate new ways of thinking in its official statements. It has, for instance, been not far behind the vanguard on ethical matters, such as the marriage of people previously divorced, inter-faith dialogue and so on.

Social conscience, especially in the later years of the nineteenth, and the early years of the twentieth, centuries, has characterised many branches of Methodism. Methodists engaged themselves in the activities of the early Trades Unions, and Primitive Methodists were among the first leaders of the Labour Party. They sought to relieve poverty and unemployment with social programmes organised from the local chapel, and their campaigns against the hardships caused by the abuse of alcohol and gambling brought to the church a reputation for prudence, abstemiousness and “clean-living.” Not always understood outside Methodism rests the fact that it also has a distinctive theology, often expressed in its hymnody (which is why Methodism is one of the few denominations in Britain officially to authorise hymn books for use in its churches). Mainstream Methodism has been Arminian in its theology<sup>10</sup> wedded to the belief that the Christian gospel is for all, that all can respond to it, and that no one is predisposed to reject it. Since Methodist union in 1932, the British Methodist Church has offered open hospitality at Holy Communion, in contradistinction with Methodism’s original requirement to show a class ticket as proof of good standing in membership before admission to Holy Communion. The church has also emphasised an evangelical appeal to “all who desire to flee from the wrath to come”<sup>11</sup> and it has welcomed “sinners to the gospel feast.”<sup>12</sup> This has often been expressed as the “Four alls”, which Methodism’s preachers are encouraged to learn and practise: all need to be saved, all may be saved, all may know they are saved and all may be saved to the uttermost. This led Wesley to an uncompromising commitment to Christian perfection and his followers to an equally uncompromising commitment to personal and social holiness. Every Methodist hymn book since the early *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* in 1797 has, therefore, carried Charles Wesley’s hymn “Let earth and heaven agree” with its neat summation of Arminianism, which Methodists trumpet as their distinctive rallying call:

For all my Lord was crucified,  
for all, for all my Saviour died.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar vein, this minor English poet, but prolific and great hymn writer, enabled Methodists to sing in praise of “the Saviour of humankind” (originally, “the general Saviour of mankind”) through whom God’s “undistinguishing regard/was cast on Adam’s helpless race”,<sup>14</sup> and, in another hymn, Methodists respond with love to God’s ...

...sovereign grace [which] to all extends,  
immense and unconfined;  
from age to age it never ends,  
enfolds all humankind.<sup>15</sup>

Other features of the denomination will be discussed in the course of this study, but this introduction to the movement contextualises twentieth- and twenty-first century novelists’ depiction of it. Methodism did not live, move, and have its being in a vacuum, so consideration of the nature of the society in which novels depicting Methodists have been written and read becomes essential.

## **British society since 1890**

The long nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century proper began on the outbreak of World War One, whose years of trauma had as profound and disturbing an effect on religious life in Britain as it had on European politics for the ensuing century. The highpoint of organised religious affiliation in England and Wales had been reached in 1905<sup>16</sup> and that of Wesleyan Methodism only slightly later in 1911.<sup>17</sup> Gradual, but inexorable, decline of formal religious observance, leading some to describe the century as the secular age, marked religious life in Britain from 1920. Indeed, the term “secular” has become convenient shorthand for the prevailing characteristic of British society since the Edwardian era. But describing modern Britain as secular is a matter of academic dispute. Questions arise. Are we secularised or secularising? Are we subject to the processes of secularism or secularisation? And what is the difference?

One problem in any religious discussion of the nature of contemporary society comes with awareness that secularism has several meanings. At its simplest, it can mean an attitude of indifference toward religion. It can also mean the systematic or programmatic process of disentangling religion from state or cultural powers, in other words the intentional weakening of religion both as an authority over our lives and an influence on how we think and behave. Furthermore, secularism can refer to the ideology that promotes this disentanglement. Usually this is a non-religious ideology, but, extraordinarily, secularising ideologues can be religiously motivated,

as they were in nineteenth-century Britain when certain nonconformists argued for the formal separation of church and state.<sup>18</sup> Although the terms are often used interchangeably, readers will understand secularism to mean an intentional secularising programme and secularisation to mean an observable, if unintentional, process by which society has become inclined to observe religious practices. Whether or not British society is secularised or secularising depends on one's assessment of the completeness of the process.

Is British society secular? Strong indicators suggest it is. Not only have British churches lost the allegiance of about forty percent of the population over the course of the twentieth century, but sociologists of religion, such as S. J. D. Green, also identify trends through the century, including the growing acceptability of divorce, the drop in public esteem for the clerical profession, falling enrolments in Sunday Schools and a slipping away from Victorian ideals of Puritanism, as markers of secularisation. As long ago as the interwar years, Dean Inge offered the criticism that the "shakiness of church hierarchies" was accompanied by a rising demand for a more personal spirituality which had the deleterious effect of weakening our concept of the divine. When the successful transmission of religious belief from one generation to the next requires a measure of coercion, namely the subordination of the individual to the group, the demand for more personal spiritual autonomy and general distrust of authority militate against the survival of public religion.<sup>19</sup> British society has generally moved away from the habitual observance of public ritual and organised religion so that, by the early twenty-first century, unanchored spirituality floats free from institutions in Britain.<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor famously dubbed this theory of secularisation "the subtraction story," a narrative in which religion constantly concedes ground to secularity, or in which, to use Green's vivid image, the abandoned country garden gradually merges into the surrounding wilderness. This process became a concern to early American Puritan preachers, and they used the image of the "wall" and the "garden." The wall around protected religious practice was always under attack, allowing the wilderness to invade and choke the garden. The role of the preachers became that of guardians of, and on, the wall to keep the garden safe. Indeed, A. W. Plumstead's book of collected Massachusetts Election sermons carries that title, *The Wall and the Garden*.

The other side of the coin, however, instructs that, as a whole, the world is more religious than it was and points to indicators that suggest religion is resisting secularisation in Britain. Any assertion that British society has moved away from religious observance must be qualified by the observation that religious beliefs, habits, and assumptions persist

sufficiently strongly that, for instance, in the event of an accident or a tragedy, the public outpouring of grief includes informal, but no less compulsive, ritual such as the placing of flowers at the scene, as well as formal occasions such as organised observations of silence and well-attended memorial services, sometimes in cathedrals, but often in local churches. The persistence of such quasi-religious practices forms an incorrigible resistance to the flattening-out effect of secularisation. Evidence points to the innate religiosity of humanity that cannot help but reach out beyond itself into other dimensions and the realm of transcendence. The philosopher, Philip Kitcher, argues that the secular humanism, which he embraces, allows for the possibility, even the probability, that there is more to life than meets the eye.<sup>21</sup> He calls this secular humanism “soft atheism” as opposed to the dogmatic, so-called militant atheism unthinkingly covered in press reports. For him, the extra dimension of transcendence probably exists, yet modern humanity lives a secular life. Though most people in “western” society lead secular lives, they cannot help thinking theologically, behaving religiously, and feeling spiritual. According to Green, any secularising process in Britain had bottomed out by 1960, mainly as a result of non-Christian migration from Commonwealth countries being balanced by Christian migration from the West Indies, Africa, and Eastern Europe, as well as the development of new religious movements, but also because humanity simply and naturally refuses to live in the bleakness of secularity.

What’s more, the assumption that religion was once stronger than it now is, which lies behind all suggestions that religion is weakening and non-religious understandings of life are gaining ground, should be interrogated. How religious was the working class at the time of the industrial revolution in Britain and how religiously observant was society at the dawn of the modern era? The story of the emergence of Methodism suggests that earlier populations were less observant of organised religious practices than is often supposed. The “good old days” were worse than imagined. Wesley and his first preachers travelled to where the need was greatest, where the church was often absent and where people were largely unchurched, a calling within them that resulted in urgent missionary zeal for America.

Of course, the question, problematised by the language used, creates difficulties. The binary distinction between religious and secular bequeaths instability. Take, for instance, one of the commonly suggested indicators of a secular society—the falling number of weddings conducted in churches. The Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations Act 2005, which came into force in the December of that year,



liberalised the rules governing the conduct of weddings and permitted the licensing for weddings of venues other than churches and register offices. The Act was a statutory instrument laid before both Houses of Parliament on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2005, and the journals of both Houses show that no debate took place.<sup>22</sup> However, the clause forbidding the use of any religious content in weddings conducted in venues other than churches was commonly understood to have been included to preserve the interests of the Church. Since then, the contorted efforts taken to classify what constitutes a religious song, and even when a prayer is or is not a prayer, and all the resulting anomalies indicate the falsity of the sacred-secular division.

Full appreciation of these complex sociological and political arguments, based as they are on complex research and statistics, lies outside the scope of this brief introduction, whose purpose is merely to open our awareness to the potential of art to address the problems of secularity. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, superbly placed to offer a view based on experience, offers the opinion that secularism reduces everything to functionalism.<sup>23</sup> He helpfully distinguishes between two forms of secularism. He calls one procedural, by which he means a public policy not to privilege one religion over another. This poses no problem to Christians. He calls the other form of secularism programmatic, meaning the process by which every public showing of religion is ironed out so that loyalty to the state enjoys supremacy over loyalty to religion. Such denigration of religious expression is, in his view, a problem both because it reduces moral decisions to the level of private choices and because it restricts individual capacity to criticise the state, whose rationality cannot be guaranteed.<sup>24</sup> However, because secularism does not give priority to the way God sees the world—Williams, of course, writes from a faith perspective—the secularising movement is doomed and cannot flourish. In contrast, art is necessarily un-secular, to use William's precise but unorthodox term, inasmuch as the arts host aesthetic and religious discourses.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the arts are capable of sustaining the imaginative life, and, in communicating both religious and irreligious themes, they continue to flourish in our contemporary world despite threats to their public funding. Novels are part of this art world and their publication continues to flourish.

## Why fiction?

Novels with religious settings and spiritual themes—novels retelling biblical stories, novels fictionalising the stories of great Christians, novels

set in religious communes, monasteries and churches, historical novels using religion and its practices to establish the context of the plot and novels whose main characters are people holding or wrestling with faith—are plentiful in recent decades, despite the current decline of organised religion and its public influence. The arts have replaced religion as the arena in which a secularised public may be permitted its continued exploration of theological and spiritual concerns. Because literature is written about what matters most, the essentially ultimate concerns of religion inevitably interest many novelists. Perhaps this explains the persistence of religious, theological, and spiritual themes in novels written in a nation and an age when organised religion is in decline. The novelist and critic, James Wood, is not alone in discovering fiction when he lost his faith, loving it for “its proximity to, and final difference from, religious texts” and seeing it as “the nearest thing to life.”<sup>26</sup> Seemingly, even irreligious and atheist writers cannot resist the impulse to deal with theological matters.

The poet and critic of culture, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), popularised a particular view of progression in enlightened inquiry, in which literature replaces religion as the means by which moral and spiritual values are conveyed to modern people; as religion declines in influence, literature becomes more powerful. This Arnoldian view and any of its variants depend upon the binary of religion and secularity. We may have relied too much on Arnold’s theory, for the complexity of the religious scene at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where religious fundamentalism continues to spread despite postmodern suspicion of metanarrative, where religious progressives concerned about human rights and environmental justice emerge and speak out, and where there has been a so-called theological turn in philosophy and critical theory, means not that the modern self is necessarily secular, but that religious faith is expressed differently.<sup>27</sup> Religion has not disappeared; it has, rather, been displaced and relocated. For many, its expression, its ritual and its exploration arise in places other than churches, temples, synagogues and mosques, as if God’s Spirit roams around to find an expression outlet denied in formal religious venues.

Religion and theology inhabit stories. The philosopher, Don Cupitt, remarked that stories have a dirty name:

In common speech stories are very often untruths, tall stories, whoppers, self-indulgent fantasies, fictions produced by people who are romancing and have largely lost touch with reality. Stories are myths, fairy tales, just-so stories, old wives’ tales, idle superstitions, or folktales told merely to terrorise the gullible. ... A typical story-teller is the salesman, seducer or

con-artist whose line, spiel, story or patter is carefully designed to deceive. Novels, apocryphal tales and legends are bywords of untrustworthiness (his emphases removed).<sup>28</sup>

Yes, but stories are “make-believe”; they have the power to persuade and convince; they can bring hearers and readers into a different world, a different time and a different frame of mind. This power arouses some people’s suspicion, and to this day, suspicion of the fiction-writer lingers in some religious circles. Within living memory, for instance, public scandal was caused in Britain when a radio play included ordinary dialogue for Jesus. Such attitudes exist despite a common belief that God inspires all human creativity, despite the concept of narrative theology which is evident in so many forms in the Bible, including the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, and despite the fictiveness of ostensibly non-fictional sections of the Bible. The biblical authors and editors used literary techniques, each of which introduced fictionalising elements, to explicate their theological, spiritual, ethical or religious purpose. The histories of the Old Testament are formally known as “the Former Prophets” in recognition that they are not objective history but theological or religiously nuanced narratives and the four Gospels of the New Testament are not biographies but proclamations of good news, propaganda in its non-pejorative sense. In common with all narrative, biblical narrative is inflected, and the presence of fictive elements within the Bible liberates it from a specific place and period to everywhere and all time. It acquires a make-believe quality.<sup>29</sup> This need not disturb any for whom the Bible’s historicity is important; it did not disturb John Milton. Rather, Don Cupitt’s use of the term “fictional theology” can have provocative and creative results. Theology is not fiction in the sense of “made up” (though it may be), but fiction conveys theology in that the story speaks to us of God and God’s ways with the world.

Nevertheless, a crisis of confidence may have hit the contemporary story-teller. In his introduction to the modern novel, Jesse Matz wrote of the rise, in the latter half of the twentieth century, of metafiction—stories about stories, fiction about fiction and novels within novels—and he suggested that this self-conscious questioning of story-telling was caused by uncertainty about the power of fiction.<sup>30</sup> He dated this uncertainty to 1914, the year in which Henry James published an essay about the new novel, in which James worried about the future of fiction and its capacity to keep its sense of a “higher” purpose.<sup>31</sup> Matz argued that since then, whereas previous writers had been able to take a certain reality for granted, modern writers have had to be quite purposeful from the outset in asking “What is reality?” and “How can a full and authentic report of

reality be given?”<sup>32</sup> In a century where scepticism has prevailed, and truth claims are tempered by relativism and irony, reality cannot be regarded as an absolute “transcendent, permanent, god-given certainty, but a matter of how you see it.”<sup>33</sup> Nor can truth. Writers have presented their own view of reality and their own understanding of what is true. Consequently, in the present age, fiction that preaches is unacceptable. “Good” fiction shows without telling. Mimetic fiction, which is un-preachy and non-didactic, with its open endings, frayed edges and depiction of quotidian life, has unravelled plot but it has also given readers “the feel of immediate realities [with] new powers of precision, sensitivity and evocation.”<sup>34</sup> In this sense, fiction has not lost any of its power as “make-believe.” Indeed, these developments give readers greater power to delineate the meaning of the story—immensely theological in the sense of individual choice in life matters.

At least four significant features of story account for its persistent power and for its continued capacity to host religious, theological and spiritual exploration in a manner meaningful for those who seek this outside organised or institutional religion. First, stories form an essential part of who we are: “I am,” said Cupitt, “the story I can tell about my own life.”<sup>35</sup> These life stories will lack total coherence, they will have loose ends and they are likely to threaten to fall apart at several points, yet they are an indispensable aspect of our being. Moreover, they will not exclusively be about us; others’ stories and a story of the Other will impinge on our story. Second, stories have the capacity to be open-ended. Real life holds more unanswered questions than there are full and final explanations and story-telling is valuable as a way to deal with the contingency of both unending stories and the presence of extraneous details.<sup>36</sup> Third, stories encourage curiosity in that when we listen to a story we embark on a search not only for what happened next but also for significance, and this can cultivate a wide-ranging and continuing search for understanding which will probably include at least some aspects of theology, the spiritual, or religious orientation. Fourth, stories share texts. Although reading appears to be an exercise carried out silently by an individual in isolation, shut away from distractions, reading is dialogue between writer and reader and conversation with other readers, other writers and other texts. Such communal texts can carry significance beyond that of the text itself; the story can carry ultimate and eternal significance. Fiction can, indeed, lead us to the Ultimate and the Eternal.

In short, human beings deal with their deepest spiritual, moral, and religious matters by telling stories, so, in a world of declining religious observance, novelists and artists have become surrogate priests, showing a

world beyond what meets the eye, showing glimpses of a better place. For this reason, the important task of this book is to take notice and give an account of what novelists say about one of the world's religious expressions—the branch of Christianity known as Methodism. In a secular age, more people gain their perception of church second-hand, mediated or filtered by the novels they read, than through first-hand experience so *how* the Methodist Church is depicted in such novels should be noted.

In the chapters that form the main body of this book, different facets of Methodism will be examined. Chapter one begins this task by tracking how Methodism was previously depicted in literature. Its description of the literary legacy left by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels with Methodist themes and characters sets the historical and literary contexts for subsequent chapters. Chapter two discusses novels published in the first decade of the twentieth century. These show a marked change in the novelistic treatment of the denomination and the chapter includes appreciation of the transitional contribution of Arnold Bennett to the genre of Methodist novels. The novels discussed in the third chapter explore the Methodist denomination as a movement with political and social influence. Methodism's founder, John Wesley, called the world his parish, and his successors have had a social conscience which has had distinctive, and sometimes counter-cultural, expressions. The complexities of this facet of Methodism found expression in Howard Spring's *Fame is the Spur* and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's less well-known *Nicky-Nan, Reservist*. Chapter four considers the nature of Methodist faith, not the specifics of its beliefs, but the relationship between faith and doubt in some historical novels featuring Methodists. In common with many Christians, Methodists have wrestled with this faith-doubt tension. Many contemporary novels use the belief-disbelief antithesis as the dramatic focus and impulse for their plots, in the process making valuable contributions to the way readers understand and deal with one of modern life's most persistent conundrums. The chapter focuses specifically on the small number of recent novels that use Methodist contexts for their exploration of this tension. Chapter five concentrates on Methodist preachers and preaching featured in the novels discussed in the previous chapters. The significance of this chapter resides not only in the fact that Methodism is renowned for its preaching, but also for the role played by sermons in British literature generally. Throughout the story of literature in English—from Chaucer to Iris Murdoch—sermons have been embedded in fiction for all manner of reasons and, despite both the crisis in the pulpit in the contemporary church and the reduced exposure of the general British public to actual preaching, as well as the way preaching

has been brought into disrepute by the haranguing of extremists, contemporary British novelists continue to feature preachers and their sermons in their books.<sup>37</sup> The fifth chapter also analyses the sermons encountered in the books discussed in previous chapters and asks what impression of Methodism they give their readers. The concluding sixth chapter draws this book's discussion to a conclusion.

As well as preaching, Methodists are also famed for their hymn singing. This reputation comes primarily from the contribution Charles Wesley and, to a lesser extent, his brother John made to Christian hymnody. Wherever hymns are sung in English, Wesley hymns feature prominently. Surely, every Christmas, wherever English is used, carollers sing "Hark! The herald angels sing". Inevitably, so important are Wesley hymns to the formation of Methodism that some are referred to in the novels discussed in subsequent chapters, but not frequently enough to allow them to form the basis of a chapter. Instead, as a sort of homage to Methodist hymns and Methodist hymn singing, each chapter uses a quotation from an appropriate Wesley hymn as its chapter title, as does the book: "Yet alive?"