

Title: Women Articulating Faith

Abstract

‘Rapture and Reason’ is the title of a recently digitised collection of conversion narratives written during the 18th century held at the John Rylands library in Manchester. This collection, which is part of the official archive of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, was previously unpublished, but now is available to study. The description of the collection states, ‘[t]hese testimonies provide a vivid insight into a dynamic and sometimes disturbing spirituality that fuelled an explosion in popular religion and created one of the building blocks of the modern world.’

This paper, ‘women articulating faith’, is the first part of a proposed longer study. In this part themes which have emerged through an analysis of thirty-three letters in this collection which were written by women to Charles Wesley are presented. Whilst the texts are described as conversion narratives, they are also valuable resources for indicating a broader spiritual experience.

The question of the final section addresses whether and how these spiritual themes relate to the Methodist church today. These conversion testimonies of women in the 18th century demonstrate the dynamism of the evangelical revival, the spiritual renewal and revolution that defined the early Methodist movement; are those spiritual emphases recognised, reflected or indeed relevant today? What does the spirituality expressed indicate about the vitality of faith and the understanding of God today? Are there emphases no longer present which might be appropriately revived and restored for individuals and congregations in our current context? These questions are addressed in the final section of the paper.

This research is intended to contribute to the conversation about how we might encourage and enable spiritual revival and renewal in 21st century British Methodism, and to glean insights about how we pray ‘thy grace restore, thy work revive’ today.

Introduction

This paper, ‘Women Articulating Faith’, is the first part of a proposed longer study of the same title. In this part I will present themes which have emerged through an analysis of thirty-three letters in a collection of letters entitled ‘Rapture and Reason: Accounts of evangelical conversion in Georgian Britain’. This collection, held at the John Rylands library in Manchester, comprises recently digitised conversion narratives written during the 18th century, primarily to Charles Wesley.¹

The thirty-three letters examined for this paper were written by women to Charles Wesley. Whilst the texts are described as conversion narratives, they are also valuable resources for indicating a broader spiritual experience. These conversion testimonies of women in the 18th century demonstrate the dynamism of the evangelical revival, the spiritual renewal and revolution that defined the early Methodist movement. The remainder of the project will draw conclusions from a qualitative research project looking at how women within the Wesleyan Christian tradition write about such experiences of God today. I will be examining the use of language, imagery, and spiritual and theological themes to explore whether the 18th century spiritual emphases are recognised, reflected or indeed relevant today. I will ask questions of the contemporary data such as, ‘what does the spirituality expressed indicate about the vitality of faith and the understanding of God today? Are there emphases no longer present which might be appropriately revived and restored for individuals and congregations in our current context?

This paper however, focusses on the letters of testimony written by women to Charles Wesley at his request. The ‘Rapture and Reason’ collection comprises 153 manuscripts of conversion narratives, many written between 1739 and 1745. The narratives are in process of being transcribed. This paper presents an overview of the spiritual themes which emerge from 33 of the texts, and identifies both significant themes and those which have less emphasis. Due to the limitations in length of this paper two of the significant themes are explored in more detail: practices of faith and experience of Christ.

In addition to the spiritual themes which emerge three other aspects of the writing are notable. The first is the theology evident in the texts. Martha Jones attests that Christ died for her, and ‘his righteousness was imputed to me.’² Elizabeth Downs refers to herself as ‘reprobated’, and expresses that she could have ‘dispatched’ herself, ‘but by the preventing grace of God.’³ Hannah Hancock talks about the ongoing theological battle she had between election and universal redemption, which was evident in her practice, ‘I went careless waiting for his [ir]res[ist]able grace and I left [the] bands.’ Naomi Thomas bemoans ‘my lost state by original sin.’⁴ Clearly these women had a level of understanding of the theological concepts

¹ <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/search-resources/manchester-digital-collections/digitisation-services/projects/rapture-and-reason/>

² EMV:3 Jones.

³ EMV:53 Downs.

⁴ EMV:129 Thomas.

and of the debates, particularly between Calvinism and Arminianism, being discussed at the time.

The second notable point is the use of hymn texts in these accounts. The accounts span the first fifty years of the Methodist movement and it is clear that hymn texts are becoming a resource for the spiritual journey. Albin notes that the reference in Ann Martin's letter, dated 1740, to words from parts I and II of 'The Love Feast', published in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* in the same year, is the first time hymn words are used in a spiritual autobiography to express spiritual experience.⁵ Other hymn texts quoted are 'Christ the Friend of Sinners', and 'The method', written by Herbert. In Elizabeth Sais' letter she quotes,

I know thou will accept me now,
I know my sins are now forgiven.
My head to death O let me bow,
Nor keep my life, to lose my heaven.

Sais comments, 'the Lord spoke those words to my soul and applied them to my heart; so that, to the great comfort of my soul, I could once more declare that the God of tender mercy had healed my backsliding and written pardon in my heart as with a pen of iron. I could wish to die that instant, because I was not at all afraid to meet the king of terror.'⁶

The account of Miss Copper's death reports her singing 'When pain on my weak flesh prevails/ with Lamb-like patience arm my breast', and finding reassurance through the words 'For me my elder brethren stay,/ and angels beckon me away,/ and Jesus bid me come.'⁷ Similarly, the last words of Joanna Barber are from hymn texts and are recorded by her husband: 'Come shed thy promised love abroad/ And make my comforts strong.'⁸

Thirdly, the texts seem to indicate that there was an expected language and formula to describe the experience of conversion; this is evident in many of the texts. As will be evident in the key themes identified below there was language used of the self prior to conversion, awakening, the burden of sin, conviction, doubts, temptation, and the agency of the devil. An oscillation between a sense of being saved and a fear of being damned, between faith and doubt, experience of God or forgetting God, is common. Most of the texts end in a positive manner, articulating assurance of salvation, desire for holiness, overcoming temptation and such like. One however is notably different. Naomi Thomas describes herself at the end of her testimony as follows, with a candid honesty, declaring her current experience of faith which belies any formula,

Although I am now in the dark, yet I know the Lord has not wholly forsaken me although (through my own deadness and coldness) the Lord hath left me to weaken in darkness at this time. But yet I do hope that the Lord will deliver me out of this

⁵ EMV:4 Martin.

⁶ EMV:126 Sais

⁷ EMV:?? Unknown

⁸ EMV:22 Barber.

present state which I am in at this time. Oh that I may look on him whom I have pierced afresh and mourn for my sins. And the Lord grant that I may never rest till I am in Christ a new creature.⁹

Methodology

The methodology underlying this study is one of critical discourse analysis. The texts are analysed to discern the theological and spiritual emphases inherent to them, and also considered within the context of the religious, cultural and societal context of the time.

The majority of the 153 conversion narratives in the ‘Rapture and Reason’ collection were written to Charles Wesley, though not all. Fourteen are addressed to other recipients, or the recipient is not known. For some letters the author is unknown. Of the texts in this collection fifty-six are identified as written by women to Charles Wesley, among them forty-six different authors; Martha Jones, Ann Chapman, Fanny Cowper, M. Grinfield, and Mary Guy wrote two or more letters.

For the purposes of this paper I used the letters from women already transcribed by Tom Albin. These comprise thirty-one texts known to be by women, and two texts written by men about the experience of women, and which quote the words of the women whose experience they recount. For this reason they are included.¹⁰

From these texts over seventy themes emerged. Some, whilst being significant themes, had few references to them in the texts examined, sometimes surprisingly. These included references to obedience and duty. In these texts there are fifteen references to duty or duties, but the majority refer to the desire of the believer to give their duty to Charles or John Wesley, rather than referring to their relationship with God. Obey and obedience have similarly few references (twelve), and refer to obedience to Charles Wesley and parents, as well as to God. These statistics were surprising given the context of 18th century Britain in which obedience and duty shaped the cultural and religious context. Theologically there were only four references to being born again, and three to new birth. God’s wrath was referred to four times, again a surprisingly few instances. Use of the language of love however was common: 103 references to love in relation to God, twenty-one references in relation to others, and eight with reference to the world; love is a strong determining feature of the theological and spiritual context within which these women were writing. Erica Stalcup, who has also carried out research on the texts in this collection, notes that the language used in the letters frequently reflects the language of the preachers.¹¹ In the language of these letters we are hearing, to some extent, the emphases in the sermons of Charles and John Wesley, and George Whitefield.

My analysis of these texts revealed a number of significant, recurring themes. These themes are: love, particularly in relation to God and to others; referencing Scripture; bands (which

⁹ EMV:129 Thomas.

¹⁰ EMV:112 Unknown; EMV:110 Unknown.

¹¹ Erika Stalcup, ‘It is heart work to be born again’: The Language of Renewal in Early Methodist Conversion Narratives’. Oxford Institute paper, 2018.

appear to have been very significant); doubt, the devil or the enemy, and hell; illness and suffering; unworthiness; the deprecatory language used of the self, prior to conversion; sanctification or holiness; the means of grace – particularly Holy Communion; witnessing; being resigned to God and considering the self as nothing; feelings and emotions; helplessness and weakness; prayer, and the influence of and appreciation for the ministries of George Whitefield, John Wesley and Charles Wesley.

All of these themes deserve detailed analysis, and in the fuller project that analysis will be undertaken. Here however we examine two key themes.

Analysis of two key themes

1) Practices of faith

Clear evidence of following practices of the faith appear in the texts. Sometimes such practices are viewed negatively; some believers refer to themselves as a ‘Pharisee’ in their pre-conversion state, and one speaks of ‘saying prayers’ with implied criticism.¹² Nonetheless, the quoting of scripture, the use of prayer, and attendance at the Lord’s Supper are three frequently recurring elements of these texts, and evidently central to faith.

Quoting Scripture

Scripture is seen as a delight, and as offering comfort.¹³ More than that, the women’s experience is frequently compared to that of biblical characters or events. Mrs Platt talks about crying out with the jailor, and she expresses the desire to but touch the hem of Jesus’ garment, that she might be whole. She likens Jesus to the good Samaritan, and also quotes from the Old Testament, words of Solomon.¹⁴ This is not atypical. References to people and events in the Gospels are frequent, for example the friends of the paralysed man,¹⁵ the man born blind,¹⁶ Zacchaeus,¹⁷ the parable of the sower,¹⁸ the parable of the virgins, waiting with lamps, for the bridegroom,¹⁹ the ten lepers,²⁰ the woman of Samaria,²¹ Bartimaeus,²² Nicodemus,²³ and the woman taken in adultery.²⁴ There are references to other books of the Bible, though in lesser quantity, apart from the heartfelt cry of the jailer in Acts 16.30, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ which recurs five times. The frequent and ready use of Scripture in these spiritual narratives suggests a high level of biblical literacy among these believers.

¹² EMV:13 Ramsay.

¹³ EMV:41 Claggett.

¹⁴ EMV:10 Platt.

¹⁵ EMV:11 Bristow.

¹⁶ EMV:12 Price.

¹⁷ EMV:1 Austen.

¹⁸ EMV:1 Austen.

¹⁹ EMV:5 Middleton.

²⁰ EMV:5 Middleton.

²¹ EMV:13 Ramsay.

²² EMV:4 Martin.

²³ EMV:136 Webb.

²⁴ EMV:128 Thomas.

Prayer

Prayer is a regular feature in these narratives. The women recount their experience of prayer; experiences of hardness of heart which meant they couldn't pray, a sense of being 'dead in prayer',²⁵ to the response to prayer of being filled with joy and love. Prayers for the Wesleys are frequently expressed and the overriding impression from these narratives is the centrality of prayer for faith. The following example demonstrates the point:

God often calls me to prayer. He bids me ask and I shall receive. In confidence of this promise I ask, though I find the enemies would fain put me off and my own evil heart would find many excuses. But this makes me but the more earnest since I find all that is evil in me is against it and I find it is exceeding good for my soul to pray.

It is in prayer God has communicated most of his blessings to me. It is in prayer mostly that [I] am convinced of any evil. It was in private prayer I was first sprinkled with the blood of the covenant....²⁶

Prayer is not only evident through accounts given of praying or referencing times prayed, prayer also interjects into the narratives. One text contains a long prayer, comprising almost half of the narrative.²⁷ The prayers are prayers of praise, petition and longing. Communication with God is as natural as communication with Charles Wesley in these letters, probably even more so. The words prayed are the outpourings of the heart, as the following examples demonstrate:

O draw me Saviour and I will run after thee. Thy love is more precious than thousands of gold and silver [pieces]. I long to love thee with all my heart. Kindle this flame in me and let it never be quenched. Seal me by thy Spirit unto the day of redemption and fill me with all the fullness of God. Amen.²⁸

Lord I bless thee that thou art one with me and all that thou hast is mine. Thy Love is greater than my weakness, greater than my helplessness, greater than my unworthiness. Lord thou sayest to corruption, thou art my sister. And glory be to thee, O Jesus, thou art my brother. Let me comprehend with all saints the length and breadth and depth and height of thy love,...²⁹

Means of Grace - Holy Communion

Accounts of attending Holy Communion and of receiving the Sacrament, or not, demonstrate a wide range of theological and spiritual responses to God. Prior to conversion it is a practice of faith, part of the weekly church discipline, but often without full impact or import; Mariah Price refers to partaking in the bread and wine but not in the body and blood of Christ before conversion'.³⁰

²⁵ EMV:13 Ramsay.

²⁶ EMV:107 Mann.

²⁷ EMV:42 Cowper.

²⁸ EMV:4 Martin.

²⁹ EMV:?? Unknown.

³⁰ EMV:12 Price.

Communion demonstrates the theological battle with stillness. Martha Jones records her response to the teaching of men who preached after the Wesleys had left, 'I would not consent to leave the ordinances though they said we should not go to church nor pray nor receive the sacrament. These things shocked me, not that I trusted in any of these things, God by your ministry had taught me better'.³¹

Here too the battle with Satan is evidenced,

Indeed, before I was justified, Satan threw his daughter at me to keep me from the ordinance. But the Lord gave me power to go and when I was at the table, the voice of the Lord said unto me, "This is the way, walk ye in it." And the Lord enabled me to go on, not trusting in them but in him alone.³²

The teaching of Charles Wesley is recorded by Mary Ramsay, 'you showed that in our best we had eaten and drunk damnation and that we were but moral devils.' She responds,

This frightened me and I saw myself so black that I thought I must not go to the Lord's table any more. And the devil suggested such thoughts that I had eat[en] and drunk damnation enough. So that I had a great mind not to go, though I had purposed to go. This was the first time that even I had a mind to keep away, but I thought there was as much danger in staying away. So the Lord permitted me to go, black and devilish as he had shown me I was. And I received much comfort in the evening by Mr. Hall.³³

Holy Communion is a 'converting ordinance', the place where the promise of sins forgiven is received.³⁴ One woman reporting that she,

... dared not take the Lord's Supper fearing she should do as Judas did; till Mr. Wilson, meeting her on the day before Good Friday, asked if she intended receiving the next day. She was startled at the question but told him "no" for the above reason. But Mr. Wilson told her that if she would not, he would never speak to her any more. She complied rather than disoblige him; and there she received a full sense of the pardoning love of God and went home rejoicing. This is about 30 years since.³⁵

There is a deep sense of unworthiness in the letters, which emerges particularly in relation to Holy Communion; there is a fear of partaking unworthily, and yet fear too of not receiving. Rebecca Wrench gives a long and powerful account of her experience of attending and receiving communion, of which this is part:

For as much as I knew in my own soul that I went with a desire to meet Jesus and in obedience to him with a trembling awe[?], considering my own great unworthiness and begging that Christ's merit might enrich my poverty, I approached the altar with

³¹ EMV:3 Jones.

³² EMV:7 Barber.

³³ EMV:13 Ramsay.

³⁴ EMV:86 Hancock.

³⁵ EMV:110 Unknown

much reverence and humility begging and beseeching of Jesus Christ that he would then and there meet with me and show me whether I was an accepted guest at his table or not.

But O when I received the bread into my mouth how was I overflowed with his heavenly presence my head, my heart, my soul, my every vein – my eyes overflowing with tears of love and joy unspeakable which cannot be uttered (as it is now at the writing[?] of it).³⁶

Finally the experience of communion communicates an experience of Christ for some. The language used is visual and visceral.

I felt a great calmness in my spirit. Then Mr. Diaper said, "Now look up and behold the Saviour; see him pour out his blood for your sakes." My heart was touched; in a moment the Lord revealed himself to me in his crucifixion evidently, by faith. I saw him with his blood running from his wounds, in branches divine; his arm and his body in great paleness, and his mouth was grasping his last breath. I felt I received a quickening power and the benefit of his blood applied to my soul that moment.³⁷

The themes which emerge here – of battle with Satan, experience of Jesus, feelings of unworthiness, the knowledge of sins forgiven and acceptance by God are strong, recurrent themes in the letters.

The second key theme to be examined here however which, arguably, emerges the most strongly in the letters, is the experience of these believers of Jesus.

2) Experience of Christ

One of the most striking characteristics of the texts are the references made to the experience of the believer of Jesus – or God - though most often the references are to Christ. It is difficult to determine the nature of these experiences. Whether the visions or aural encounters were interior or exterior experiences is impossible to know. What is clear is that these experiences made a profound impression upon those who experienced them. Several of the accounts refer to hearing the voice of Jesus. Elizabeth Downs describes her experience thus:

I felt first a great burning in my heart, and immediately my soul was filled with the love of God, and sweet peace, and those words applied to me again, "I have blotted out thy transgressions." I said, "Lord, if it be thy voice, I beseech thee, give me a further testimony." And it came again, "thou shalt not die in thy sins."³⁸

Recounting the experience of Joanna Mussell, the author reports, 'About three days after this as she was walking in the street crying and praying (for prayer was now her constant exercise) she heard a voice saying, "Daughter be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee.",³⁹ The same assurance was given to Margaret Austen, 'The next morning [Tue., May 22], as I was arising, the voice of the Lord said to me, "Thy sins are forgiven" twice over. I heard it a

³⁶ EMV:140 Wrench.

³⁷ EMV:53 Downs.

³⁸ EMV:53 Downs.

³⁹ EMV:112 Unknown.

third time, "Daughter, be of good cheer. Thy sins are forgiven thee.",⁴⁰ Similarly with Sarah Middleton, and she records the effect of the voice and words spoken to her,

But I found Christ['s] everlasting arms were under me the fourteenth of September when I was in the greatest agony of soul. I heard a voice say unto me, "Daughter, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee." At the same time I felt so much love in my heart that I could hardly contain myself, for I wanted the whole world to feel what I did and I was at the same time restored to my bodily health as well as ever I was in my life.⁴¹

A number of experiences are visual; Christ's sufferings are vividly presented, frequently at the service of Holy Communion. Margaret Austen records an experience of Christ at Communion in terms of both hearing the Lord through a text of scripture, and seeing:

But after some time, the Lord spoken to me by that text of scripture to Peter when Christ said to him, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren"; by which, I went again to the sacrament. As I took the cup, Satan told me I should be damned for all that. But when we had done receiving and the minister was covering the cup, I saw Christ lay with his open side, and I thought I could see his heart bleeding for me.⁴²

Other visual experiences of Jesus see him in glory. Elizabeth Downs has such visions,

As St. John described him, so did I clearly behold him with the eye of faith, with his garment as white as snow and a glittering belt about his paps, that my soul was filled with direct raptures. Sir, it was not fervent imagination. I know the Father did, with love, reveal the Son unto me; that he communicated the influence of his love to me by the power of faith. ...

The Wednesday following, about noon, I was in private prayer. I was immediately caught, as it were, out of the body. Jesus held out his left hand with the crown exceeding bright. I cannot tell you what I felt in my soul at that time; but I beheld it with great amazement.⁴³

Joan Webb describes a similar experience,

I was taken with a great trembling and turning my head to the window and looking in the element. I thought I saw God and Jesus Christ standing at his right hand. I strove to hide my trembling from the people. It was so powerful that I was obliged to come out for fear I should fall down.⁴⁴

Finally in the testimony to Joanna Mussell, an experience of Christ in glory is recorded. This occurs when she is struggling with a conviction of being lost, and seeking a Saviour:

⁴⁰ EMV:1 Austen.

⁴¹ EMV:5 Middleton.

⁴² EMV:1 Austen.

⁴³ EMV:53 Downs.

⁴⁴ EMV:136 Webb.

Her sorrows rather increased during the sermon, but after, she came home and threw herself on the bed as one bereaved of all comfort, she continued pouring out her broken complaints to the Lord, when on a sudden, a profound silence seared her spirit, and she saw as it were a bright cloud presented before her, and in the midst of the cloud the form of a man with his hands and eyes lifted up to heaven, and it was revealed to her that it was Jesus making intercession for her.⁴⁵

These experiences are dramatic, they frequently occur accompanied by prayer, in the context of Holy Communion, and from an earnest desire for God, for salvation, for holiness. The experiences have an impact, and frequently the response is expressed in terms of love.

Conclusion: implications for a twenty-first century context

Finally, what conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing analysis for the Methodist church in a twenty-first century British context? 300 years later, what parallels or disconnections can be discerned between the experience of those women then, and now? Might the experience of these women, in the first half century of the Methodist revival, provide insights for the renewal of the church today?

The themes identified and explored here demonstrate the vitality of faith and experience of these believers. The biblical literacy and theological language evident in the letters, as well as the theological themes and pattern of the conversion experience which emerge indicate a familiarity with and understanding of these concepts and willingness to express them, both to Charles Wesley and to God in prayer.

It will be interesting to see how current accounts of experience of God compare. Tentatively, my sense, prior to that research, is that scripture will not be as readily referenced, nor will prayer as persistently infuse the writing. Certainly the experience of Communion is different - the fear of receiving, the battle with Satan, are no longer part of the experience for many.

Perhaps the greatest disconnect however, will be regarding experiences of Christ. To what extent are these part of the faith lives of believers today? Perhaps they occur and are not spoken about. Perhaps our expectations of God in prayer are different. Or perhaps the contemporary texts will demonstrate otherwise.

Our context has clearly changed. There are many complex factors which affected and affects how faith was understood, believed and practiced in the 18th century and how it is understood, believed and practiced today. When the research is complete the comparison of themes from both sets of texts should be illuminating. Perhaps the result will challenge us to rediscover and reemphasise spiritual desire for God, familiarity with his Word, reverence for the mystery of Communion, and regular, deep prayer of the heart; but we shall see.

⁴⁵ EMV:112 Unknown.