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Hearing and Believing: Listening Experiences as Religious Experiences in Nineteenth-Century British Methodism

Martin V. Clarke

Abstract

This article uses Jeff Astley's concept of ordinary theology (Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002)) to examine and interpret listening experiences from nineteenth-century Methodist sources. It argues that the participatory experiences of singing together with fellow believers were crucial to the development and sustenance of personal faith, and that believers shared accounts of such experiences in ways that they knew would be understood by their readers as indicative of the depth and sincerity of their spirituality. It further contends that the widely-recognized importance of hymnody in Methodism demands attention to its practice as well its content, and that while the lyrics of hymns set out Methodist theology and doctrine, the participative experience of communal singing was itself invested with meaning and value by many lay Methodists. Ordinary theology provides a framework through which common features of these accounts are identified and discussed, emphasizing the importance of various forms of life writing in understanding the ways in which religious practice shaped the lives and interactions of individual believers. The article also explores differences between different types of published and unpublished life writing. While examples are drawn from different branches of nineteenth-century Methodism, it is argued that hymnody's potential for creating spiritually intense experiences was commonly recognised and affirmed across them. This article contributes to the wider discussion of the significance of listening experiences by emphasizing music's vital role in the construction and communication of meaning between individuals on matters of deeply personal value.

Author Biography

Martin V. Clarke is a Senior Lecturer in Music at The Open University. His monograph *British Methodist Hymnody: Theology, Heritage, and Experience* was published by Routledge in 2018. He was a co-investigator on the Listening Experience Database project. He has published further essays relating to this work in the two volumes of proceedings associated with the project: *Listening to Music: People, Practices and Experiences* (2017) and *The Experience of Listening to Music: Methodologies, Identities, Histories* (2019). His research interests lie in the intersection of theology, music and religious practice, with a particular focus on Christianity in Great Britain. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Hymns and hymn singing have been commonly recognized as particularly important to Methodist thought and practice since the eighteenth century.¹ The close attention frequently given to hymnody in the writings of Methodism's founders and later leaders, the Methodist membership at large and critics of the movement testify to its popularity, its relationship with personal piety and spirituality, and its ability to elicit strong reactions among those who heard or participated in its performance.² To interpret hymnody's historical place in Methodism demands consideration of a wide variety of perspectives and sources. This article contends that the listening experiences of lay Methodists add an important dimension that has hitherto been widely overlooked in scholarly literature on Methodist hymnody.³ Through their focus on the effects of participative musical experiences, these accounts draw particular attention to the role of music in the shaping, expressing

¹ David Hempton argues that 'the most distinctive, characteristic, and ubiquitous feature of the Methodist message, indeed of the entire Methodist revival, was its transmission by means of hymns and hymn singing.' David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2005): 68. J. R. Watson, meanwhile, argues that 'The singing of hymns has been one of the great strengths of Methodism, from the time of John and Charles Wesley, through the problems of the nineteenth century and the turmoil of the twentieth, to the uncertainties of the twenty-first. J. R. Watson, 'Music, Hymnody and the Culture of Methodism in Britain' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism*, ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013): 233-49, 249. Brian Beck draws attention to the tensions that have often surrounded hymnody in Methodism, which bear further witness to the depth of attachment to both repertoire and practice: 'Methodism has a long tradition, back to the eighteenth century, of using popular music to accompany hymns. What has frequently happened, however, has been that yesterday's popular has become today's traditional.' Brian Beck, 'Methodism: Shifting Balances, 1939-2010' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism*, ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013): 65-86, 78.

² The two most well-known phrases attesting to hymnody's status within Methodism are John Wesley's description of his most extensive hymnal as 'a little body of experimental and practical divinity' and the opening sentence of the preface to *The Methodist Hymn Book* (1933): 'Methodism was born in song.' John Wesley, ed., *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983 [1780]): 74. Methodist Church, *The Methodist Hymn Book with Tunes* (London: Methodist Conference Office, 1933): iii.

³ Studies of Methodist hymnody cover a wide range of perspectives and methodologies. Literary and theological studies of Charles Wesley's hymns are unsurprisingly plentiful, such as J. Ernest Rattebury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941) and Daniel B. Stevick, *The Altar's Fire: Charles Wesley's Hymns on the Lord's Supper, 1745: Introduction and Comment* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2004). Others have pursued contextual and theological studies of hymnals, including Robin A. Leaver, 'Psalms and Hymns and Hymns and Sacred Poems: Two Strands of Wesleyan Hymn Collections' in Nicholas Temperley and Stephen Banfield, eds., *Music and the Wesleys* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010): 41-51, and Andrew Pratt, *O For a Thousand Tongues: The 1933 Methodist Hymn Book in Context* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2004). Recent studies of Methodism more generally have broadened the focus beyond the contributions of John and Charles Wesley and other prominent leaders such as George Whitefield to consider the ways in which Methodism impacted upon the lives of its membership at large. Notable contributions include Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Mary Riso, *The Narrative of the Good Death: The Evangelical Deathbed in Victorian England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

and sharing of religious faith. Examination of the ways in which references to music are used between both known associates and in writings for wider audiences sharing similar allegiances also offers insights into the interpretation of listening experiences more generally, as writers seek to validate their own experiences by attempting to recreate them in their readers' minds.

Two distinct types of listening experiences are examined in order to explore differences between public and private writings. Private letters and diaries of lay Methodists foreground the intimate communication between close relatives and friends, in which listening experiences are often interspersed with matters of everyday life. Short accounts of spiritual autobiography and biography published in Methodist periodicals, typically conversion experiences and obituaries, along with longer published works of life writing, illustrate the deliberate prominence given to hymnody to create a bond between the subject and reader. Detailed contextualisation is fundamental to understanding the content and significance of listening experiences. In both types, the intensity of the experience is often connected to the writer's participation in the singing. Listening and singing are shown frequently to combine and promote a particularly attentive type of engagement. The listening experiences discussed here must be regarded as part of the Methodist cultures in which they originated; as such, consideration of their situation in relation to Methodism in its local and institutional expressions is vital.

Critical engagement with Jeff Astley's concept of ordinary theology provides a framework for interpreting the value placed on listening to and participating in music by those who recorded their experiences. Astley devised the concept as a means of investigating and interpreting the beliefs of so-called ordinary Christians. He describes it as a 'phrase for *the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind*'.⁴ Ordinary theology takes individuals' beliefs and the processes involved in believing them as its starting points to investigate the ways in which theology is learned, expressed and valued. This

⁴ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002): 56.

article proposes a modified form of Astley's characterisation of ordinary theology as a means of understanding listening experiences in the context of religious practice more broadly. Astley's concept has been used by scholars working in theology and religious studies as means of interrogating and interpreting many different aspects of religious practice and belief. Beyond its obvious applicability to areas of theology such as liturgy and ethics, it has also prompted considerable interdisciplinary dialogue, including with psychology and educational theory.⁵

Consideration of music as an aspect of ordinary theology has so far only been within the context of thematic studies that draw on it alongside other aspects of religious practice and belief.⁶ Ordinary theology has been primarily oriented towards the gathering and interpretation of empirical data by researchers, rather than the use of historical sources. This article seeks to demonstrate that the concept of ordinary theology can be useful in interpreting historical sources and that it offers a helpful framework for interpreting the values and meanings attributed to music by those participating in and experiencing it within religious contexts. Astley's designation 'ordinary' requires some careful consideration in relation to music, and in particular to the principal type of music covered in the listening experiences discussed hereafter, congregational hymnody. Astley uses the term in a way that is essentially synonymous with 'everyday' or 'commonplace'. He and other theologians apply the concept in ways that actively value the theological contributions of so-called ordinary believers rather than viewing them as uninteresting or insignificant in comparison with formal, academic theology; the ordinariness of their beliefs, practices and experiences is what is most important. The music of congregational hymnody, of necessity generally simple and brief, might easily be overlooked in purely musical terms, so associating it with the term ordinary may suggest a disregard for its significance.⁷ However, the accounts discussed below make clear that this

⁵ See Jess Astley and Leslie J. Francis, eds, *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

⁶ See, for example, David Walker, 'How far is it to Bethlehem? Exploring the Ordinary Theology of Occasional Churchgoers' in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013): 137-46.

⁷ As Paul Westermeyer notes, 'A hymn tune is not much in the world's view of things. It is not a large symphony or an oratorio. It is not even a short choral piece. It holds little attraction in the world. It consists of

music forms part of highly significant spiritual experiences that are, in one sense, anything but ordinary.

This essay concentrates on the lives of nineteenth-century British Methodists. This was a period of global expansion within Methodism; British Methodism was heavily involved in missionary endeavours, as was its North American sibling. Within the British context, however, it was also a time of significant organisational change; the early part of the century saw the formal fragmentation of Methodism, as numerous groups broke away from the original body, now known as the Wesleyan Connexion. Towards the end of the century, there were moves towards formal rapprochement, beginning a process that culminated in the founding of The Methodist Church of Great Britain in 1932, which was formed from the merger of three bodies, the Wesleyan Connexion, the Primitive Methodist Connexion and the United Methodist Church.⁸

The examples discussed below are drawn from several different strands of nineteenth-century British Methodism, including the Wesleyan, Primitive and Bible Christian connexions. Primitive Methodism was the second-largest Methodist organisation after the parent Wesleyan Connexion, and established a strong presence throughout the country. Formally constituted in 1810, its origins are commonly traced to a camp meeting held at Mow Cop, Staffordshire, in 1807. Among its distinguishing features was its adoption of a revivalist approach to worship and evangelism. The Bible Christian Connexion was founded in Cornwall in 1815, and much of its early activity was focused in that county and neighbouring Devon. It made widespread use of women preachers. While some consideration is given to the relationship between the content of individual listening

very few phrases, several lines of notes that serve the church's need to sing. Appearances can be deceiving, however. ... Hymn tunes are weak little things that in their powerful weakness enable the church to sing the faith.' *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2005): 395.

⁸ For an overview of this period in Methodist history, see Kevin Watson, 'The Price of Respectability: Methodism in Britain and the United States, 1791-1865' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism*, ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013): 33-50, and Morris L. Davis, 'Methodism; Consolidation and Reunion, 1865-1939' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism*, ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013): 51-64. The United Methodist Church that was among the bodies that merged in 1932 should not be confused with the organisation of the same name founded in the USA in 1968.

experiences and the branch of Methodism concerned, it is important that such distinctions are not overplayed, for, as Kevin Watson notes, 'For the most part, however, the different Methodist groups had very similar patterns of organisation and discipline, similar styles of worship and similar theological emphases. What separated these groups was not theology but argument about who should be in control.'⁹

The diversity of Methodist traditions covered by the examples discussed below is important not because the accounts can be taken to indicate a type of experience that was either distinctive to one particular group of Methodists or replicated exactly across different groups. Rather, its significance lies in the relationship it highlights between individual experience and religious community that was recognised across Methodism's many branches. Many of the experiences explored below were intensely personal, yet they were shared with others, privately or publicly, to provide and seek mutual support, encouragement and affirmation.

Letters and Diaries in Early Nineteenth-Century Methodism

In keeping with other forms of evangelicalism, early Methodism was prolific in generating a large corpus of private and public literature. Its early leaders, including the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield, were committed diarists and corresponded privately with a wide variety of family members, followers and other religious leaders. As writers, compilers and editors, they were also responsible for a vast array of published material, ranging widely from hymnals, sermons and theological writings to works on literature, history and medicine. Those who exercised leadership at different levels throughout the Methodist structure were thus accustomed to the written word as an important medium for communicating religious feelings, ideas and instruction. The survival of a

⁹ Watson, 'The Price of Respectability': 39. While there were undoubtedly tensions between the different Methodist groups, there is also evidence of cooperation between them in specific contexts. For example, in his account of Primitive Methodism in rural Yorkshire, Henry Woodcock recounts a revival in the village of Cranswick, noting that 'One night twelve persons were converted at the Wesleyan chapel and eight at our own.' Henry Woodcock, *Piety among the Peasantry: Being Sketches of Primitive Methodism on the Yorkshire Wolds* (London: Joseph Toulson, 1889): 106. The extent to which connexional authority directly influenced local practice is also a matter of debate; see Jonathan Rodell, *The Rise of Methodism: A Study of Bedfordshire, 1736-1851* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014).

significant body of sources from the early-nineteenth century makes clear that private correspondence with a known and trusted fellow believer was an important spiritual discipline for some Methodists, allowing them to share their joys, sorrows, trials and aspirations. Evangelicalism's high regard for the authority of the scriptures made, as John Wolffe argues, the use of other literary sources to help interpret the Bible and sustain faith part of its adherents' normal practice.¹⁰

Private contributions to this field of literature, reflecting upon the personal effects of this scriptural faith and the ways in which it was mediated through other literature and religious and cultural practices can thus be seen as a natural extension of the publicly available works of instruction, encouragement and devotional material. Brett McNelly argues that for eighteenth-century Methodists, there were multiple motivations for such personal writings: 'Methodists spoke and wrote incessantly about their spiritual triumphs and struggles in an effort to validate their feelings in the face of self-doubt and external opposition.'¹¹ Such concerns would surely have continued to resonate with Methodist people in the nineteenth century too, even as the movement to which they belonged cemented its place as part of Britain's religious landscape. Within Methodism, the apparent unity, however fragile, that existed under John Wesley's strong personal leadership rapidly disintegrated in the decades following his death in 1791 as numerous breakaway groups asserted themselves, unsurprisingly using publications as a key tool in establishing their identity and building and maintaining their membership. In particular, a new hymnal was typically seen as an essential resource for any new Methodist organisation; in practice, most initially retained Wesley's 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists* and appended their own supplement. This testifies to a shared perception among Methodist leaders about the practical usefulness and spiritual value of hymns and hymn singing. While the listening experiences examined below add weight to the general sense of hymnody's importance in Methodism, they reveal the

¹⁰ John Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843-1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 176.

¹¹ Brett C. McNelly, *Textual Warfare and the Making of Methodism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 63.

importance of participation within particular circumstances in a way that hymnal editors' focus on doctrinal soundness, liturgical breadth and aesthetic quality do not.

A letter from Benjamin Bangham (1779-1842), a long-serving class leader in the Madeley Methodist circuit, Shropshire, to Mary Tooth (1777-1843), a prominent figure in Methodism in the area, provides an instructive example of the ways in which hymnody was often reported in such communications.¹² Writing a few months after recovering from a long a prolonged period of ill health, Bangham dwells at length on the first class meeting he was able to attend following his illness, which had prevented him attending for nearly three years.

Accordingly my friends being come together, I in the house, and strength, of my adorable Master, began the Meeting by giving out that appropriate Hymn, the first verse of which I here transcribe;

“And are we yet alive,
and see each other's face?
Glory and thanks to Jesus give
for his almighty grace!

Preserved by power divine
to full salvation here,
again in Jesus' praise we join,
and in his sight appear.”

The Meeting was very eminently crowned with the Divine presence, we had fellowship with him, and with each other; so that in the concluding part of the Meeting we were constrain'd to sing: -

¹² On Mary Tooth, see Carol Blessing, ““Oh That the Mantle May Rest on Me!”: The Ministry of Mary Tooth’ in *Religion, Gender, and Identity: Exploring Church and Methodism in a Local Setting* ed. Geordan Hammond and Peter S. Forsaith (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011): 156-72.

“And if our fellowship below,
 In Jesus be so sweet,
 What height of rapture shall we know,
 When round his throne we meet?”¹³

Bangham’s quotations from two hymns by Charles Wesley (1707-88), Methodism’s preeminent hymn-writer, provide an insight into the religious habits of lay Methodists, in particular the ways in which they used hymns to react to local circumstances and to shape and express religious feeling. Bangham’s account implies that both hymns were impromptu selections driven respectively by his restored health and by the spirit of fellowship that pervaded the meeting. Those present were thus likely to be sufficiently well acquainted with a corpus of hymnody to be able to identify and share in repertoire they considered appropriate. More significantly, however, this shared knowledge encompassed hymns that were thematically appropriate. The act of singing together may, of itself, have been regarded as an appropriate way to celebrate the success of the meeting, but more than this, they sang a hymn that affirmed the fellowship they experienced by giving it a theological context as a precursor of the divine fellowship of heaven promised to faithful believers such as themselves. The use of the hymn ‘And are we yet alive’ suggests a broader awareness of the place of particular hymns in Methodist culture. In this instance, the text, which speaks of trials overcome and expresses gratitude for renewed opportunities for worship and fellowship, was clearly interpreted in relation to Bangham’s absence and return. However, since the late-eighteenth century, it had also customarily been used as the opening hymn of the annual Methodist Conference.¹⁴ Such use would have raised the hymn’s profile in the popular consciousness of Methodism and may thus have made its selection for this particular occasion seem all the more appropriate.

¹³ Letter from Benjamin Bangham in Coalbrookdale to [Mary Tooth at Madeley], 20 Aug. 1829, Fletcher-Tooth Collection, Methodist Archive, GB 135 MAM/FL/1/2/3.

¹⁴ J.R. W[atson] ‘And are we yet alive’ in *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/a/and-are-we-yet-alive> (accessed 7 Nov. 2017).

While Bangham quotes the hymn texts at some length, he provides no information about the tunes to which they were sung at the meeting. Such omissions, however, should not be regarded as diminishing the usefulness of the account from a musicological point of view. The obvious reason for the omission is that such detail is unnecessary to enable the reader to identify the hymn; furthermore, in instances such as that recounted by Bangham, it is the text that determines a hymn's suitability. Nonetheless, several aspects of Methodism's musical life can be explored through such accounts. Most basically, the frequent references to hymn singing in such letters attest to its pervasiveness throughout the various levels of the Methodist organisational system. Not all references to hymn singing provide the same level of detail as Bangham. For instance, in a letter to Mary Tooth, Katherine Whitmore recounts a recent meeting that she felt was not wholly successful: 'At her request I struggled with a little reluctance and ventured to pray. She seconded me in a very excellent prayer, we sung two hymns, and I trust did not meet without some profit.'¹⁵ The variety of accounts mentioning hymns and hymn singing point both to its ordinariness and its potential extraordinariness for Methodists; it was something they expected to encounter in all of their gatherings, yet they also recognized it as having the potency to contribute to the atmosphere and spirituality of those gatherings and sometimes to affect individual members in profound ways. The instinctiveness of communal song as a response to particular spiritual situations emerges clearly in Bangham's remark that he and his fellow class members 'were constrain'd to sing' in celebration of the spirit of fellowship they had experienced; singing is both commonplace and extraordinary in connecting worshippers with the object of their worship.

The brevity with which the actual singing of hymns is mentioned indicates a tacit assumption that the recipient will understand the nature of the event without the need for extra detail. This is apparent in the letters to Mary Tooth from both Bangham and Whitmore, despite their different perspectives on the effectiveness of the music. Although Tooth was not present at the gathering

¹⁵ Letter from K[atherine] Whitmore in Cotsbrook to [Mary Tooth], [n.d., before 1815], Fletcher-Tooth Collection, Methodist Archive, GB 133 MAM/ Fl/7/15/43.

Bangham describes and was not a member of the same class meeting, he is able safely to assume that she will be familiar with the hymns he quotes and will be able to appreciate their appropriateness. While access to a common hymnal may easily explain mutual familiarity, the matter of the hymns' suitability and the feeling of being constrained to sing go deeper. McInnelly notes how the communal act of singing was itself important to early Methodists, which resonates with Bangham's account: 'hymns contributed to the experience of identification, inasmuch as music coordinates the physical and emotional responses of singers and listeners, who, though residing in different bodies, experience within those bodies the same rhythmic cycles simultaneously.'¹⁶ Bangham is not simply reporting the facts of the event to Tooth, but implicitly inviting her to participate vicariously through an imagined listening experience of her own. He is confident that through the references to the hymns, she will recognize and affirm the sincerity of the devotion and fellowship he describes and understand the ways in which communal singing contribute to it.

As Whitmore's letter shows, correspondents did not always identify specific hymns when writing about their musical experiences. While the omission of such details limited the scope for the reader to recreate the precise experience in their mind, it did not, however, necessarily restrict them from appreciating the piety or spiritual intensity of the occasion being described in a more general sense, as demonstrated in a letter to the noted Methodist evangelist Mary Fletcher from her niece Mary Whittingham:

We have had this week a Meeting of the pious Clergy for many miles around us, held in our house, and I hope it will be for good; we had also seven ladies, so we employed ourselves together, in reading, singing, and prayers in another room. There were two rooms full at dinner; in the evening we had a great congregation in our large church. We have now got some good music and singing, and at night while we supped in the parlour we gave a supper to the band of singers and Musicians in the kitchen who afterwards played and sung several

¹⁶ McInnelly, *Textual Warfare*: 132.

hymns, and then accompanied such of our friends who went into the town to sleep all the way to the town playing as they went.¹⁷

In this extract, Mary Whittingham, whose husband was an Evangelical Church of England clergyman, makes three distinct mentions of singing, each of which is intended to testify to the spiritual integrity of the participants and events being described and of the life of her husband's parish church more generally. The specific characterisation of the gathered clergy as pious individuals is important, as it implicitly reveals that the Whittinghams considered other local clergy, who presumably did not share their evangelicalism, as lacking in personal piety. Although there is mention of reading and praying, it is singing that stands out as the dominant communal activity and thus the most obvious manifestation of piety. Although the clergy and the women were physically separate for part of the evening, the more detailed description of the latter's activities affirms that there was no division in terms of the devoutness of all of those gathered. Mary Whittingham's reference to the parish having achieved 'good music and singing' in the church exhibits a shared understanding between her and her aunt that such musical accomplishment was a necessary aspect of a thriving Christian community. The description of the way in which music, specifically hymn singing, pervaded the later, less formally religious part of the gathering provides further evidence of Whittingham's understanding, which she is confident her aunt shares, that appropriate music can both encourage and sustain a religious atmosphere and that it is a desirable response to the presence of such a spirit. Although no specific hymns are identified, the music is a key way in which Whittingham is able to communicate her pleasure and satisfaction to her aunt, safe in the knowledge that Mary Fletcher will interpret this as evidence of the success of the gathering.

¹⁷ Letter from Mary Whittingham at Potten vicarage to Mary Fletcher in Madeley, 4 Aug. 1810, Fletcher-Tooth Collection, Methodist Archive, GB 133 MAM/FI/7/16/12. On Mary Fletcher, see Brett C. McNelly, 'Mothers in Christ: Mary Fletcher and the Women of Early Methodism' in *Religion, Gender, and Identity: Exploring Church and Methodism in a Local Setting* ed. Geordan Hammond and Peter S. Forsaith (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011): 123-36.

The listening experiences found in the letters of Bangham and Whittingham are concerned with the impact of the experience on the individual concerned and the small circle of acquaintances in whose company it had taken place. Such examples are common and while the situations they describe vary considerably from small, intimate gatherings to larger public occasions, they are united through a focus on the significance of the experience for largely known individuals. However, those who exercised ministry on a larger scale, including lay and ordained preachers, also wrote about listening experiences in their private correspondence. Their descriptions are marked out by a tendency to interpret the emotional and spiritual responses of congregations at large and to make this closely bound up with their personal reactions and feelings.

Serena Thorne, a preacher in the Bible Christian Connexion, wrote a detailed letter to her father in May 1866, describing a preaching tour of South Wales.¹⁸ Despite the communication challenges caused by the language barrier between the English-speaking Thorne, from Devon, and the largely Welsh-speaking congregations she addressed, she makes clear to her father that she thought her preaching was well received and that she regarded the tour as a success. Hymn singing, as might be expected, featured prominently in the services Thorne attended and the particular character of its performance affected her deeply. The language issue emerges early in the letter and particularly related to the hymns:

The Welshman gave out the hymn in Welsh, and read my text after I had done so in the same language. So strange to be speaking to a very large congregation of whom about half are unable to find out what you are saying, and looking so eager to catch everything too.¹⁹

Thorne is thus unable to understand the hymns, although her initial assumption about the congregation's ability to understand her preaching without the aid of the local minister's translation

¹⁸ Thorne was the granddaughter of William O'Bryan, founder of the Bible Christian Connexion. Her parents, Samuel Thorne and Mary Thorne (née O'Bryan), were also prominent figures in the organisation.

¹⁹ Letter from Serena Thorne in Middle Street, Padstow, to [her father Samuel Thorne], 15 May 1866, Lewis Court Bible Christian Collection, Methodist Archive, GB 133 MAW Ms 92.13.

changes later in the letter. She describes how, after she had preached at a service in Cwm-Afon, the local minister 'arose and gave then an outline of what I had said I suppose; very briefly though, for they gave him to understand that they knew[?] pretty well what I had said.'²⁰ After recounting the three services in a single day in Cwm-Afon, the last of which she estimated drew a congregation of more than a thousand, she gives a general account of the impression that the Welsh hymn singing has made upon her:

Oh the Welsh singing, it is soul stirring. It is *singing* not screaming, the waves of melody rise ever nearer as though they would burst the ear (not as much by force as by the power of perfect melody) & swell up away through the skies to heaven to mingle with the songs of the angels there, and now coming sweetly down in such[?] tender cadences with the soul as bringing to the broken-hearted reconciliation and peace.²¹

Although the description refers to hymn singing in general, it is significant that it follows her account of preaching to large congregations at Cwm-Afon, one of many places that were clearly fertile preaching grounds for her evangelistic ministry. The large crowds and the concentration of three services in a single day would surely have contributed to the intensity of the occasion and the fervour of the singing. She describes its character and effect in richly spiritual terms; the distinction between 'force' and the 'power of perfect melody' appears as a marker of its integrity and there is a strong sense in which the singing is a conduit both for expressing praise to God and for receiving blessings from him. Factors such as these are among those that Hempton identifies as particularly potent in engendering an atmosphere of lively religiosity: 'Much depended on the personality of the preacher, the architectural style of the building, the attractiveness or otherwise of the music and the singing, the social class and degree of familiarity of the attenders, and the impression conveyed by a full congregation, on the one hand, or a half-empty church, on the other.'²² Although Thorne

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c.1750-1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 67.

describes the effect on herself, she also infers its impact upon others present. Whether or not the 'broken-hearted' felt 'reconciliation and peace' cannot be ascertained, but Thorne's assertions indicate a confidence that the spiritual benefits and effects of hymn singing would be shared and recognized by those present and by her father as he read the letter.

Thorne's particular reference to the 'Welsh singing' suggests that her listening experience is informed by common cultural perceptions concerning Welsh musicality. The close interrelationship of singing and Protestant nonconformity was a significant element in establishing music, especially communal singing, as a key aspect of Welsh identity. The rapid growth of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism in the eighteenth century and the fervour of its gatherings were key contributing factors to a tradition and sense of identity that was both self-perpetuating and widely acknowledged; as Barlow notes, the 'idea of emotionalism is crucial for the purpose of understanding singing, a collective practice, not only within the Welsh religious setting but as a marker of social identity for the people of Wales.'²³ This context may, in part, have shaped Thorne's readiness to regard the singing as a marker of religious devotion and spirituality, and helped to affirm her sense of the success of her preaching ministry in South Wales. It is also significant that, because of the language barrier, her reaction could not have been entirely rational; despite not understanding the textual meanings of the hymns she heard sung, she is nonetheless able confidently to ascribe a particular emotional and spiritual character to the singing.²⁴ The importance of actually hearing the music is crucial, in this instance bringing together three distinct aspects that helped shape the listening experience. The broader context of the popular cultural belief in the inherent musicality of the Welsh, the local context of an evangelistic preaching tour and the large scale of the gathering all combined to make this a powerful experience worthy of recording at length.

²³ Rachele Louise Barlow, 'The 'Land of Song': Gender and Identity in Welsh Choral Music, 1872-1918' (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2015): 60. See also XX, "Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation': the Welsh working classes and religious singing': XX-YY.

²⁴ Thorne's account is strikingly similar to John Spencer Curwen's reaction to the singing at a *cymanfa ganu* despite his inability to understand the Welsh language. See XX, "Praise the Lord!": XX-YY.

While the accounts considered so far range from Whitmore's hope that singing will have contributed something positive to the meeting, through Bangham and Whittingham's clear connection between singing and spirituality, to Thorne's rhapsodic reaction, they all share an essential belief in the positive value of congregational song, whether potential or realized. However, this was not always the case and other letters are more circumspect about the role of music in religious activity and the sincerity of the spiritual responses it seems to evoke. Elizabeth Ritchie, a Methodist class leader, wrote to Mary Fletcher about a revival meeting in Sheffield, in which enthusiastic singing was used by those present in an attempt to demonstrate religious conviction:

In many different parts of the chapel some were praying while others were exhorting the persons prayed for, at the same time I counted about twelve times when "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" (which as Mrs Micklewhite told you) was sung when they thought anyone was comforted, or any of the distressed persons told them they were happy. This they call conversion, though I fear many of its subjects know little about either the evil of sin or the object of justifying faith. We left the love feast before it was concluded.²⁵

Ritchie and Fletcher regularly exchanged letters and Ritchie's willingness to express concerns about the sincerity of the revival meeting she had observed indicates the private nature of the correspondence and the trust between the two women. The use of music plays an important role in forming her opinion of the event; the words 'whenever they thought...' carry an overtone of criticism at the willingness of the assembly to break into celebratory song so readily. There is a clear sense in which she recognizes the frequent singing to be symptomatic of an environment that was being manipulated to induce apparently intense spiritual reactions. Her decision to leave before the end of the meeting strongly implies her disdain for the events she witnessed; here, the listening experience

²⁵ Letter from Elizabeth Ritchie to Mary Fletcher, 19 Jul. 1797, Fletcher-Tooth Collection, Methodist Archive, GB 133 MAM/FL 6/7/15

is a key part in her negative assessment of the occasion as an insincere or exaggerated religious experience from which she wished to dissociate herself.

As with the more positive reactions, Ritchie's account emphasizes that listening experiences are deeply invested with meaning. In this instance, the words being sung, the doxology from a familiar hymn by Thomas Ken, cannot be the source of the problem. Instead, it is the context and frequency of their use in apparently attempting to manipulate the mood of the gathering to which she objects. Once again, a listening experience and the particular musical event it describes are used as evidence to support and explain a particular religious viewpoint and interpretation. Like other correspondents, Ritchie relies upon her reader's personal acquaintance with the repertoire, practice and context she relates and uses the listening experience to assist Fletcher in forming her own opinion. More generally, the privately recounted listening experiences discussed all indicate the important role music was recognized to have in religious life and expressions of personal and corporate spirituality. The familiarity with the repertoire and practice of hymnody assumed by correspondents indicates that these listening experience should be regarded as unusually remarkable in some way against a backdrop of a religious culture that was permeated by hymns. The listening experiences both shape and are shaped by events that are attributed significant meaning, whether personally, collectively, or vicariously. It is through accounts such as these that the rootedness of communal hymn singing in Methodist practice and identity, as well as in Evangelical Christianity more broadly, may be more fully understood. Forasmuch as the precise details of hymn selections and the theological meanings of texts are significant factors in formally establishing the Evangelical credentials of a particular hymnal and those who advocate its use, it is the practice of hymnody in particular contexts that enables it to be invested with meaning among the religious community at large. In Astley's terms, it contributes profoundly to the expression of ordinary theology, as will be explored in the final section below.

Listening Experiences in Published Spiritual Life writing

Stimulated by John Wesley in the eighteenth century, Methodism rapidly developed a strong and wide-ranging print culture, which was inherited and pursued with vigour by the various nineteenth-century offshoots belonging to the broad Methodist family. Prominent among the range of publications produced by and for Methodists were devotional magazines, typically issued monthly, in which sermons and articles on aspects of religious and general history designed for intellectual stimulation appeared alongside life writing and accounts of religious endeavours intended to provide spiritual encouragement and sustenance to the readers. The *Primitive Methodist Magazine* is a particularly rich source of such accounts from the nineteenth century and additionally often draws attention to the humble social origins of the subjects of the conversion narratives and obituaries it published. This points to the necessity of considering editorial influence in the selection and characteristics of the life writing that was published and, more generally, the ways in which the magazine's aims and established customs shaped the content that contributors submitted. Calder argues that the *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, edited for many years by Hugh Bourne, one of the dominant figures in the movement, was long used as a means of promoting and perpetuating the denomination's chosen self-identity. He demonstrates that its contents were often chosen to emphasize the hardships and hostilities faced by the early Primitive Methodists and suggests that the printing of obituaries was selective.²⁶ Furthermore, accounts of mission and revival work are highly likely to have been self-selecting; those submitting copy for publication would be likely to emphasize successful activity and the editorial process would surely prioritize those stories that were most likely to give the readership hope and encouragement.

In contrast to the variety of reactions observed in private letters, published recollections of participatory experiences found in conversion and deathbed narratives cast hymn singing in a uniformly positive light, using it as evidence of the spirituality and devotion of the subject. For

²⁶ Sandy Calder, *The Origins of Primitive Methodism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016): 16-18.

example, the account of the death of Dinah Park, wife of a glass bottle maker, makes clear that she was a devout Primitive Methodist and mentions specific hymns that she sung as death approached:

Her last struggle with the enemy of souls was on the 21st, during the whole of the day. Brother Biddel visited her, and began praying and about eight o'clock, she had a glorious triumph, and shouted, "O death! Where is thy sting? O grave! Where is thy victory?" And she broke out into singing, "All glory to Jesus, who died on the tree,/And purchased salvation for you and for me." After singing she repeated that verse, "I'll praise my Maker while I've breath, &c."²⁷

Hymn singing is a mark of Park's personal faith and the identification of particular hymns indicates that her obituarist expected readers to be familiar with them. Two of the texts referred to in this obituary emphasize the great spiritual value accorded to appropriate conduct by both the dying and the mourners in nineteenth-century Britain.²⁸ Although the words 'O death! Where is thy sting? O grave! Where is thy victory' are scriptural, from 1 Corinthians 15, they held a particular musical significance in British Christianity in this period, thanks to a popular set-piece anthem by Edward Harwood, a setting of Alexander Pope's 'Vital Spark of Heavenly Flame', which ends with these very words. The final text mentioned, Isaac Watts' 'I'll praise my Maker while I've breath' was the hymn reportedly sung by Methodism's revered father-figure, John Wesley, on his deathbed in 1791. Thus for many readers, both would have had a deeper meaning even beyond that of deathbed hymn singing in general; the recording of these details is therefore particularly important.

Typical of Evangelical Christianity at large, Primitive Methodism placed a significant emphasis on religious conversion and hymn singing is often noted to have played a part in such

²⁷ Ralph Cook, 'Obituary', *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 8 (Jun. 1838): 236.

²⁸ See Mary Riso, *The Narrative of the Good Death: The Evangelical Deathbed in Victorian England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

experiences. Accounts were frequently included in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine*; William Swain's memoir is a striking example:

The circumstances that led to his conversion were peculiar. Several young men suffered at Derby; one of whom happily found the pardoning mercy of God; and while conveyed through the town to the gallows, he gave out, and sang sweetly, "Behold the Saviour of mankind," &c.

Several were affected; and Bro. Swain so deeply that he sought retirement; and in an agony of soul cried to God, who had made the malefactor happy; and, after several days of sorrow and distress, found peace, and joined a religious society.²⁹

As with Park's deathbed narrative, a specific hymn is mentioned, and the singing is clearly linked to the spiritual outcomes witnessed. Accounts such as these align with the magazine's general purpose of sharing good news stories and encouraging readers in their own religious devotion. Beyond this, mention of specific hymns invites readers familiar with them to have imaginary listening experiences of their own by evoking aural memories. Owing to the separate circulation of hymn texts and tunes, such imagined experiences may have had different soundtracks from the original event, but this would have deepened the personal impact of the accounts for readers, rather than distancing them from the events and effects described.

Accounts of meetings and events from around the connexion also frequently contain references to the powerful impact of hymn singing. In contrast to the life writing examples, these tend not to identify specific hymns, but to refer more generally to singing in the context of the whole event. An account from the Horncastle Circuit in Lincolnshire exemplifies this type of writing:

August 6, 1837. Camp meeting at Horncastle. Met at five in the morning, and had a refreshing season. At eight met for singing and prayer. Then sung through the town,

²⁹ W. Antliff, 'Memoir of William Swain (Class Leader and Local Preacher, Derby Circuit)', *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 8 (Jun. 1838): 227.

kneeling occasionally to pray; and continued our services to the Camp ground. Many left their houses and followed us. The company was large, and God gave his servants great liberty in sowing the seed, which himself watered from heaven. Both rich and poor assembled, to the number, it was supposed, of two thousand. We were favoured with fine weather; and the power of the Lord rested on the Camp all day.³⁰

The lack of detail is probably pragmatic; both in the prayer meeting and the subsequent procession described, singing is likely to have been a prolonged activity, using many different hymns. However, given that such activities were relatively common in Primitive Methodism, such details would not be needed in order for the reader to imagine the event clearly in their own mind. In common with the life writing examples, this account has undoubtedly been selected to further the magazine's aims, and this may well have influenced its author in making explicit the spiritual benefits and sense of divine blessing that were felt and to which the singing contributed.

Quotations from hymns also feature prominently in many spiritual autobiographies, often associated with significant moments in the subject's life. *The Life Story of Gipsy Cornelius Smith*, first published in 1890, is a remarkable autobiography of a Methodist convert descended from a family that travelled around several south-eastern counties in England. A listening experience from his school days, after his parents had settled for a time in Cambridge, provides an early indication of the spiritual significance he attaches to hymn singing:

For some time I was afraid to enter, they stared at me so. Gaining courage, however, I crept inside. My little heart was panting for something I had not got. I wept while they sang the praises of God. I can never forget the words they sang –

“God is in heaven. Would He hear

A little prayer like mine?

³⁰ R. Ramsey, ‘Camp Meetings and Lovefeasts in Lincoln and Horncastle Circuits, 1837’, *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 8 (Feb. 1838): 70.

Yes, dearest child, you need not fear,

He'd listen unto thine.

God is in his heaven. Would He know

If I should tell a lie?

Yes, though you said it very low,

He'd hear it in the sky."

I then felt that I was a sinner, and that God knew everything about me. My heart seemed broken as I thought of my wickedness. I have discovered since that it was the Spirit of God working even in a poor little gipsy lad's heart. I found out that God is no respecter of persons, and that down in the human heart there are chords that once touched, will yield responsively.³¹

Similarly detailed descriptions feature in accounts of his wife's death, his own and his brother's conversions, and in his work as a travelling evangelist. His conversion experience is particularly richly described:

I went off to the meeting, my brother Bartholomew going with me. We found a little mission hall in Latimer Road, Shepherd's Bush. It was a prayer meeting, and several working men were there. They were singing that good old hymn –

"There is a fountain filled with blood"

As they were singing the power of God took hold of me. I was standing up, and my mind seemed to be taken away from everybody and fixed heaven-ward. It seemed as if I was bound in a chain and they were drawing me up to the ceiling. I was unconscious until I fell on the floor, and they told me afterwards that I lay there wallowing and foaming for half an

³¹ Cornelius Smith, *The Life Story of Gipsy Cornelius Smith* Romany & Traveller Family History Society Classic Reprints 1 (S.L.: Romany & Traveller Family History Society, 2000): 5.

hour, like the son that the father brought to Jesus (Mark ix. 17). When I came to myself, I seemed to hear the voice of Jesus saying, "Thou dumb and deaf spirit, come out of him and enter him no more," and the spirit rent me sore, and came out that same hour. Some of my children were there, and, crying, said, "Oh, dear, our father is dead!" Blessed by His name, I had only then commenced to live. My bands fell off, my tongue was loosed, and I immediately rose and told the people that Christ had saved me. My dear brother Bartholomew was saved the same night.³²

Once again, listening to the singing of hymns is the trigger for this religious experience. Notably, both the text of the hymn concerned, and a passage of scripture are quoted; both serve to legitimize the experience. Such an appeal to scripture is unsurprising, given its unique authority in Christianity, but the mention of a particular hymn alongside it indicates not only the impact the singing had on Smith, but his awareness that readers would be able to relate to both aspects of this experience, auditory and emotional. Further evidence of the extent to which hymns informed Smith's spirituality can be found in the penultimate sentence of this extract; the sequence described is remarkably similar to that found in the final couplet of the fourth stanza of Charles Wesley's highly popular hymn, 'And can it be': 'My chains fell off, my heart was free;/I rose, went forth and followed Thee.'³³ It is impossible to prove whether or not Smith intended this as a deliberate paraphrase, although in the context of a retrospective autobiography written for the express purpose of encouraging others 'to magnify the grace of God, and consecrate all their powers to the service of Jesus Christ', it seems feasible that the words were carefully chosen rather than a subconscious

³² Smith, *Life Story*: 17.

³³ John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739): 118. This stanza draws its inspiration from the story of Paul and Silas' imprisonment in Acts 16, which Smith refers to elsewhere in his autobiography, as he describes his own evangelical work while temporarily imprisoned in Baldock. In that account, he describes how they sung another of Wesley's best-known hymns, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing', which contributed to conversion of the jailer's wife. Smith, *Life Story*: 22.

allusion.³⁴ Irrespective, taken together with the direct quotations, it indicates that he expected his readers to be familiar with the hymns that had so affected his own religious life.

The listening experiences found in published accounts differ from those found in private writings in their uniformly positive attitude towards hymn singing and in the level of detail they commonly provide. These aspects reflect the different motivations for writing and publishing, and the anticipated audiences. However, there are also significant similarities. The expectation of familiarity with particular hymns or the uses of hymnody more generally is common to both types of account. At one level, given that they were written either to a spiritual confidant or for a religious publication, this is unsurprising and represents a safe assumption on the part of the authors. However, it also underlines the deep sense of spirituality that such listening experiences were able to evoke and that their potential for doing so was widely recognized. McInnelly's description of the strong bonds literature helped create among eighteenth-century Methodists is readily applicable to their nineteenth-century counterparts: 'Whether in conversation or in writing, Methodists forged a sense of community, individual conviction, and self-understanding by reading their religious lives in and through the narratives of others.'³⁵ These listening experiences point to a dispersed religious community whose shared identity was in part sustained by the ways in which their everyday lives and religious activities were saturated with hymns.

Listening Experiences and Ordinary Theology

The thorough integration of hymns and the listening experiences associated with them into the writings of nineteenth-century Methodists is a powerful expression of ordinary theology, or, the beliefs and processes of believing of its lay members. Astley's emphasis on the processes and contexts through which people's beliefs are formed and expressed helps draw attention to the

³⁴ Smith, *Life Story*: 2.

³⁵ McInnelly, *Textual Warfare*: 73.

potency of listening experiences in shaping individuals' religious thought and awareness. Regarding the way in which faith is learned, he argues that practices and resources warrant careful attention:

This sort of learning can never be plucked out of its context and picked clean; it always carries with it some of the soil in which it was nurtured. If we ignore the learning context of a person's Christian theology, we shall not be able adequately to understand or describe it.³⁶

Hymnody's didactic role was well understood by Methodists. The chief legacy of Charles Wesley was a vast corpus of theologically rich lyrics, written to implant Methodism's characteristic Evangelical Arminianism into the minds of its early followers and to convey the essence of orthodox Christian doctrine in memorable phrases. This aspect of Methodism's hymnody has been widely understood and analysed, as well as being appreciated by other Christian traditions. However, listening experiences such as those discussed above foreground the place that music and musical participation played in the process of learning the faith. While lyrics primarily promoted and assisted intellectual learning, music facilitated experiential learning, enabling individuals to take ownership of their beliefs in a way that was both deeply personal yet experienced in community.

The close connection between the act of singing or hearing and the intensity of religious feeling in accounts such as those by Bangham and Thorne indicates the importance that was attached to such immersive experiences by those involved. While, as in Bangham's account, weight may be given to the appropriateness of the lyrics for a specific situation, the ideas or values they expressed were embodied for the writers through the musical realization of the words. Interpreting these listening experiences therefore requires acknowledgment that they were often experiences in which the authors participated by singing as well as listening. However, this does not marginalize the importance of listening, for the intensity of many of the experiences discussed arises in part from their communal nature, which, in musical terms, emerges from the author hearing other voices in accord with their own. In fact, such accounts point to the ways in which participation through

³⁶ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*: 13.

singing can create a deeply engaged and affective listening experience; while the level of participation may have varied in the accounts described above, they all describe a type of experience that is distinct from that which might take place in a presentational context, such as a concert. Participation heightens attentiveness, which could lead to a thoroughly immersive musical and spiritual experience.

As noted earlier, the legitimacy of such accounts relied on the mutual understanding of the role of hymnody between writers and readers. While some experiences might have been dramatically life-changing, many more were more immediately concerned with the sustenance or renewal of an already existing faith; such experiences, shared in a spirit of mutual accountability and encouragement, belong to the type of everyday religious experience identified by Zahl: ‘minor revelatory experiences of divine guidance in the day-to-day lives of Christians, impulses and feelings that shape the interpretation of scriptural texts, and, at least for some in the nineteenth century, supernatural healings and deliverances.’³⁷ The examples discussed above suggest that hymns could be both the instigator of such experiences, as shown in Smith’s memoirs, and, in the case of Bangham’s account, for instance, the natural response to particular religious feelings.

In developing the concept, Astley outlines a number of characteristics of ordinary theology; several are readily observable in many listening experiences, while consideration of the typical content and language of listening experiences demands a modification of some others. He notes that ordinary theology is a ‘learned and learning’ theology, in that its exponents frequently make reference to the sources that inspired and nourished their faith and acknowledge that their beliefs continue to be shaped by their experiences.³⁸ Listening experiences testifying to the effects of hymns in religious conversion, such as Smith’s, demonstrate that the words and music sung or heard in Christian worship could play a formative role in personal faith. Examples such as a letter from

³⁷ Simeon Zahl, ‘Experience’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought* ed. Joel D.S. Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe and Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 177-95, 178.

³⁸ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*: 58-61.

Benjamin Longmore to Mary Tooth reveal that hymns were certainly regarded in this way; Longmore is eager to discover the details of a hymn he can only vaguely recall from the time of his own conversion and enlists Tooth to help identify it:

When I was a convinced sinner seeking redemption in the blood of Christ I had the privilege of calling upon Mrs Fletcher who's endeavours to teach me the way of faith, were made a blessing – it was in her School that the Father of mercies began to open my eyes to see that, “This is the work of God that ye believe on him whom he hath sent” - & I remember at one of the times I called upon her, she repeated a verse of a hymn that many times since, have wished I could get. If I knew how to tell you what it was, you would write it out for me, but am afraid, as I do not recollect the words, you'll not be able to understand me, but the substance of it was to say – that whoever does *rely on his arm alone* for acceptance does more glorify the saviour than all *our works* besides, if you should by this understand what I mean & will be so good to write it for me & tell me who was the author I shall be obliged & you can give it to me when you have an opportunity.³⁹

It is clear from this account that the hymn made a strong and lasting impression upon Longmore, even though he cannot recall the precise text. The frequency of its repetition by Mary Fletcher was evidently instrumental, pointing again to the value placed on the experience of hymns. Longmore's desire to find out the exact details indicates that it remained part of his identity as a person of faith, or, in Astley's terms, part of his ordinary theology.

Among the other characteristics set out by Astley and readily observed in many listening experiences are that ordinary theology is both significant and meaningful. The significance to the individual authors examined above lies in their determination to set down a record of their experiences; as Astley notes, ‘At a deep level, ordinary beliefs are usually taken very seriously by the

³⁹ Letter from Benjamin Longmore in Coalbrookdale to Mary Tooth, 1 Jul. 1811, Fletcher-Tooth Collection, Methodist Archive, GB 133 MAM/FL/4/13/5. The letter is annotated with a verse of a hymn beginning ‘Retreat beneath his wings’, published in [John Newton and William Cowper], *Oney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779).

people who have them.⁴⁰ Regular private correspondence on spiritual matters was a well-established part of nineteenth-century Methodist culture; the deep and sustained level of communication indicates that correspondents attached considerable significance to the events, emotions and experiences they described, including those related to hymnody. Furthermore, the process of self-examination, reflection and accountability involved in writing about such matters emphasizes the seriousness with which religious practices and the responses they elicited were taken. Referring to the prevalence of the practice of letter-writing among women in the early years of evangelicalism, Ward highlights its role in deepening their faith: ‘Where correspondence plumbed the wiles of the heart it strengthened the women who gathered round all the leading men of God.’⁴¹ The variety of roles fulfilled by the Methodist women directly and indirectly involved in the exchanges of letters indicates that such distinctions by gender were by no means rigid, but the fundamental point about the spiritual sustenance gained from engaging in letter writing remained true.⁴²

The meaning attached to some listening experiences is clear from several of the accounts discussed above. However, it is important to regard the more emotionally charged accounts as representing an exceptional instance of something that was entirely commonplace.⁴³ Hymn singing pervaded Methodist life, so would have been an entirely familiar and expected part of the regular devotional activities of the letter writers and subjects of biographical writing mentioned above. However, on particular occasions such as those highlighted, it was associated with peculiarly intense religious feelings, through which it acquired a meaning beyond that contained in the words sung.

⁴⁰ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*: 66.

⁴¹ W.R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 2.

⁴² Women were prominent in the work of Methodism from its earliest days, and occupied a wide variety of roles in the movement throughout the eighteenth century. The contributions of Mary Fletcher, Mary Tooth, Serena Thorne and others should be understood as continuing this tradition. See, for example, Paul Wesley Chilcote, ed., *Her Own Story: Autobiographical Portraits of Early Methodist Women* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001) and Paul Wesley Chilcote, ed., *Early Methodist Spirituality: Selected Women’s Writings* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2007).

⁴³ A parallel may be drawn here with the *cymanfa ganu* popular in nineteenth-century Wales, also a special event, which, by its nature, encouraged particularly intense experiences. See Helen Barlow, “Praise the Lord!”: XX.

Bangham's sense of being 'constrain'd to sing' and Thorne's emphasis on the quality of the singing at Cwm Afon emphasize that the role that the performative nature of hymnody played in the attribution of meaning. Such meanings are understood in the context of a person's whole life, assuring them that they have a purpose within the context of their religious worldview.⁴⁴ The communal element of congregational song emerges as a key factor in the shaping and interpretation of experiences. As communal gatherings were the main context for Methodists' exposure to hymns, they cannot thus be considered to guarantee a sense of heightened spirituality, yet when such feelings occurred, the presence and participation of fellow believers contributed to the meanings attached to them. Consideration of these aspects of the listening experiences adds weight to Hempton's claims that 'Sensory perceptions were as important as the verbal content of Victorian sermons, even if the latter have proved more accessible to religious historians. Nothing could be clearer from nineteenth-century novels, spiritual autobiographies and the ubiquitous Victorian hymns, however, than the emotional power of religious assemblies.'⁴⁵ Sharing the experience, both during its occurrence and in writing about it afterwards, was an opportunity for affirmation, whether expressed or tacitly implied. This connects closely with two further characteristics of ordinary theology, its religious nature, grounded in the practices of the believer, and its nature as a form of 'onlook theology': self-involving and providing a way of making sense of things observed and experienced. Astley explores this in relation to visual stimuli, but his argument remains valid if hearing is substituted for looking: 'the experience, the looking, is already an interpreting; it is an onlook, and experiencing-as.'⁴⁶ The act of recording the experience in words may well prompt a further level of intellectual interpretation and reflection, but it is clear from accounts such as Thorne's that hearing or participating in vigorous congregational singing could itself be revelatory.

⁴⁴ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*: 68-70.

⁴⁵ Hempton, *The Religion of the People*: 67.

⁴⁶ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*: 85.

Those experiences recounted in private letters also accord with Astley's observation that much ordinary theology is subterranean, in that it is hidden from public view and not expressed in ways that carry some sense of authority, such as through sermons or published treatises.⁴⁷ However, the spiritual biography contained in religious magazines and published autobiographies obviously does not match this characteristic. Ordinary theology is a helpful way of understanding the differences between the private and public writings, described above. Published accounts, driven by their evangelistic or devotional agenda to prioritize positive stories reflected a less rounded image of religious life than can be found in private correspondence. Ordinary theology, expressed in the security of personal communication, acknowledges doubt, as in Whitmore's letter, and also understands that religious behaviour and practice can be subject to manipulation and over-exuberance, as expressed by Ritchie. In this way, it reflects the real experiences and thoughts of ordinary believers. The experience of music, as noted above, could contribute to such concerns and doubts, further emphasising its importance in ordinary theology's work of creating meaning.

As examples of ordinary theology, these accounts of participatory listening experiences differ in several ways from more formal writings about the role of hymnody, such as the prefaces to hymnals. Hymnal editors and committees tended to place greater emphasis on the richness of the hymn texts they included; for example, the preface to the Wesleyan Connexion's 1877 revision of *A Collection of Hymns* draws attention to its inclusion of further hymns by Charles Wesley, describing how 'the force and sublimity of thought, the depth and tenderness of feeling, and the spirit of fervent piety displayed in them, will fully vindicate the judgment of John Wesley respecting his brother's poetical remains.'⁴⁸ Similarly, the compilers of *The Primitive Methodist Hymnal* (1889) note that 'the collections of Watts and Wesley still supply the largest number of hymns for a good hymnal, especially for Methodist worship, yet in these pages will be found selections from numerous

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 70-72.

⁴⁸ Wesleyan Connexion, *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists, with a New Supplement* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1877): iv.

other authors and translators.⁴⁹ Similarly, on musical matters, there is a concern with promoting good standards: the Wesleyan hymnal describes the purpose of the musical selections as ‘to improve the “Service of Song in the House of the Lord,”’ while *The Primitive Methodist Hymnal’s* committee notes that they sought ‘to provide a book adapted to the increased musical culture of our organists, choirs, and congregations.’⁵⁰ While such writings and the accounts of everyday participants both affirm hymnody’s spiritual richness, their points of emphasis tend to be different. Hymnal prefaces seek to establish the credentials of their contents against formal understandings of doctrine, or assumed markers of aesthetic judgment, whereas ordinary theology prioritises contextual significance and the experience of participation.

Alongside the points of convergence between listening experiences and the characteristics of ordinary theology, there is one element of significant difference, which calls for some modification of Astley’s concept. Astley describes ordinary theology as being tentative in its expression, in that its exponents frequently couch the feelings and beliefs they describe in ways that acknowledge their lack of expert knowledge and that convey a lack of confidence in the appropriateness of their expression.⁵¹ This characteristic is closely linked to his description of ordinary theology as being expressed in the ‘mother tongue’, or, using the everyday language familiar to its writers.⁵² While both elements are clearly present in much private correspondence, the custom of quoting hymn texts, sometimes at length, to help convey the spirit and meaning of a listening experience significantly alters the nature of these accounts in relation to ordinary theology.

McInnelly draws attention to the trope of the ‘unspeakable’ in Methodist spiritual writings, arguing that writers relied on a shared understanding that certain intense aspects of religious experiences defied verbal description, arguing that ‘We should not be surprised, then, that

⁴⁹ Primitive Methodist Connexion, *The Primitive Methodist Hymnal with Accompanying Tunes* (London: M.T. Pickering, 1889), iii.

⁵⁰ Wesleyan Conference, *A Collection*: vii. Primitive Methodist Connexion, *The Primitive Methodist Hymnal*, v.

⁵¹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*: 61-62.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 77-82.

Methodists often relied solely on the words of other believers to describe their innermost thoughts and feelings.⁵³ This reliance on the words of hymns demonstrates the high spiritual value placed upon them by many Methodists; Stromberg's claim that the similarly common practice of weaving biblical quotations into personal accounts is 'an ongoing means of linking the sacred and the profane, of construing the present in terms of the eternal' might equally be applied to the quotation of hymns.⁵⁴ McInnelly goes on to comment on the ways in which the musical practice of communal singing, with its dynamic relationship between the individual believer and the community of faith, was a significant factor in generating religious experiences for Methodists.⁵⁵ Several of the accounts considered above give a clear sense that it was through vocal or auditory participation that the words of hymns acquired a deeper meaning at a more personal level.

The words and musical practice of congregational hymnody have important implications for ordinary theology. Quotations from hymn texts can be seen to add a degree of validity and confidence not found in the tentative expressions observed by Astley. It is tempting to bind this tightly to Methodism's unique concept of authorized hymnody, whereby individual hymns and whole hymnals were given formal approval by the conferences that exercised ecclesiastical governance over the various Methodist bodies in nineteenth-century Britain.⁵⁶ Authorized hymns and hymnals were understood to be in accordance with and representative of Methodist theology and doctrine, giving them a higher status compared to other Christian traditions. However, the relationship between the concept of authorized hymnody and localized practice has never been entirely straightforward. Other hymns have always been sung by Methodists and should not necessarily be regarded as contrary to its theology or doctrine.⁵⁷ The sense of legitimacy conveyed in

⁵³ McInnelly, *Textual Warfare*: 73.

⁵⁴ Peter G. Stromberg, 'The Role of Language in Religious Conversion' in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 117-39, 121.

⁵⁵ McInnelly, *Textual Warfare*: 132.

⁵⁶ This practice continued following the merger of several Methodist bodies in 1932 and has remained in place ever since.

⁵⁷ For example, Robert Spence's *A Pocket Hymn Book Designed as a Constant Companion for the Pious* (York: R. Spence, 1781) attained such popularity among Methodists that John Wesley produced his own revision of it in 1785. See Nicholas Temperley, 'John Wesley, Music, and the People Called Methodists' in *Music and the*

the listening experiences is more likely to have derived from the popular acclaim of the hymns in question; in the case of private correspondence, the assumed approval of the reader mattered more than a hymn's official status at an ecclesial level. The quotations may serve to validate the experience being described for author and reader alike. The emphasis on the practice of hymn singing indicates that ordinary theology cannot be limited to solely verbal forms of expression. While hymns inevitably and importantly employ words, to which believers often attached significant value, the listening experiences convey a commonly-held belief that engaged participation in musical performance could create and deepen religious meanings. Musical realization of hymns could, at least on occasion, give voice to the 'unspeakable'. Ordinary theology and participatory listening experiences associated with Christian hymnody are symbiotically related, together providing a meaningful way for understanding and interpreting the emotional and spiritual depth of attachment to hymns displayed by many lay Methodists, and through those hymns to the Christian faith that they encouraged, sustained and helped to spread.

Wesleys, ed. Nicholas Temperley and Stephen Banfield (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010): 3-25, 21. More recently, the report of the Music Resources Group to the British Methodist Conference in 2007, which recommended the preparation of a new authorized hymnal, noted that 'Nowadays, some Methodist churches have moved on from *Hymns & Psalms* and the majority are using a supplementary book. *Mission Praise, Songs of Fellowship, The Source* and other similar collections are widely used.' Music Resources Group, 'Singing the Faith: Resources for Worship' in *Methodist Conference Reports 2007*, https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf07_48_Singing_the_faith_pc.doc (accessed 31 May 2019): 344. Wesley's revision of Spence's book, and the incorporation of many items from the commercial publications mentioned in the 2007 report into the subsequent authorized hymnal indicate their conformity to Methodist theology and doctrine.