JOHN WESLEY, SUPERSTAR: PERIODICITY, CELEBRITY, AND THE SENSIBILITY OF METHODIST SOCIETY IN WESLEY’S JOURNAL (1740–91)*

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It is in fact the Beatle John Lennon, not the founder of Methodism John Wesley, who is famous for once having claimed to be more famous than Jesus Christ.¹ But if we regard Wesley’s career from a social and cultural rather than a strictly religious or theological standpoint, we may be forgiven for wanting to promote Wesley to Lennon’s degree of sanctified celebrity. For instance, both men were hugely enriched economically and symbolically by their public performances, live and recorded. Lennon is renowned partly for using his wealth to secure his personal privacy, leaving the media to its own avid speculation about him. Wesley, on the other hand, though he stated a decade before his death that “[t]wo and forty years ago I wrote many small tracts, generally a penny apiece; some of these had such a sale as I never thought of, and by this means I became rich,” eagerly and publicly disavowed all pecuniary motives, and dispensed his profits through large and small public acts of philanthropy.² Contemporaries reckoned that the evangelist gave away more than $30,000 during fifty years of preaching, a number unprecedented in evangelical history in both its size and the


fact of its public knowledge. In this respect, at least, despite differences in emphasis and scale, the spectacle of Wesley’s celebrity approaches that of Lennon’s. More than the relation to capital, however, what links the evangelist and the rock star is the capacity each embodied during his height of fame as a kind of representative character, a popularly recognized symbol of a specifiable but disparate public association, or “imaginary community”: in Lennon’s case, the emerging “counterculture” of the 1960’s; in Wesley’s, the burgeoning Methodist “society” of the eighteenth century.

If we can agree that the publicity of Lennon’s personal privacy – in live performances, recorded songs, interviews, miscellaneous writings, and other public manifestations – served as one of the means by which the ’60s counterculture achieved self-consciousness as a social body and a culture, recognized its multiple values, histories, possibilities, and identities, then it can I think be claimed that the publicity of Wesley’s privacy operated similarly for convinced and would-be Methodists during the first half-century or so of Methodist association. In what follows I will consider how Wesley’s serially-published Journal cultivated the evangelist’s celebrity as the symbolic embodiment of Methodism in England, enabling early Methodists to identify themselves individually and collectively as constituting a movement of social and cultural, not just religious, proportions: an expanding body defined by a common perspective of and engagement with secular culture, rather than as merely a set of the inhabitants of a place, region, or network of routine social interactions. In performing this function the Journal was not chiefly a vehicle for Wesley’s individual introspection and self-expression, as many of its harshest recent critics, likening it to a modern autobiography, have expected it to be. Instead, the Journal operated as the sort of text it explicitly purported to be, a periodical, a work of journalism in the manner of an organizational newsletter. As such, it was an evangelical instrument contrived to present a persona,

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