Edward Thompson’s death in the late summer of 1993 produced a rash of eulogies and will likely give rise to many new evaluations of his intellectual legacy by the current practitioners of social history. Thompson’s re-figuring of the practice of social history, in particular his re-shaping of the notions of class, human agency, and “popular” culture, were central to the explosion of interest in social history as a discipline in the late 1960s, and his continuing example helped sustain this interest through into the 1990s. In particular, Thompson’s work has been recently invoked to defend the “new social history” from challengers who have taken the “linguistic turn” (Kirk 1994; Mayfield and Thorne 1992; Palmer 1990). Indeed, although Thompson was a vocal critic of rigid models and the systematic application of “Theory”, and even if he chose to downplay its existence in his own work, his own methodology was itself theoretically informed. Arguably, it was his methodological example and his passionate commitment to the contemporary importance of the study of history that made him one of the most influential individual English historian of the last thirty years. But what, if anything, does Thompson’s oeuvre have to offer scholars who study religion?

Admittedly, Thompson’s work on religion was quantitatively insubstantial, consisting most significantly of the passages on the importance of the doctrines of Dissent to the formation of early English working-class identities, and focused largely in his discussion of early nineteenth-century Methodism in his now-classic 1963 The Making of the English Working Class (1980). Nonetheless, his controversial views on the function of religion in an industrializing society are still being debated (Jaffe 1989; Olsen 1990). While his specific arguments about

---

1 Nearly every major social history journal, and many other academic journals produced eulogies and extended appreciations of Thompson. There have also appreciations published in monograph form, see in particular Palmer (1994).

Methodism may now be contested, it is the premises which underlay his discussions that are still significant, for these have been adopted by other scholars in their discussions of the place of the religion in the histories of various cultures. It is for this reason that while Thompson’s work has been severely critiqued and challenged (most recently by scholars who have explored the lack of a concern for the role of gender differences in his work), it remains meaningful and worthy of study. For, as I shall argue here, his underlying conception of the interaction between cultural forms ("culture" is the analytical category under which "religion" was situated by Thompson2) and society does provide a valuable starting point for a study of the nature, role, and function of religious phenomena in both historical and contemporary circumstances. His approach is thus significant in its attempt to contextualize religion as merely one cultural artifact amongst many, and for the way in which he attempted to explain religious rituals and practices within an overarching socio-economic and political framework. Moreover, while there are undoubtedly limitations and conceptual weaknesses in his overall vision, his "culturalist" approach—which converges with, but also pre-dates, the concerns evident in contemporary post-structuralist theorizing about language, ideology, and identity—thus serves as a useful benchmark in the debates about the merits of holistic socio-cultural analyzes of religion.

This essay proceeds by first outlining how Thompson conceived religion and culture and how he viewed the relations among the cultural and the social. Then it examines Thompson’s treatment of Methodism in The Making of the English Working Class, concentrating mainly on how he approached the historical problem of the emergent Methodist social formation during the early stages of the industrial revolution. Finally, Thompson’s approach to the study of religion within society is critiqued within the context of an examination of the narrative, political, and personal underpinnings of his approach to historical scholarship.

1. **Thompson’s theoretical “system”**

As an avowed, if highly unconventional Marxist, one might imagine

---

2 No doubt this places his views firmly in the camp of the "reductionists" in current academic debate on the study of religion. "Reductionism", is however, a charge with very different connotations in social history (usually denoting the reliance of monocausal economic explanations)—and one which Thompson strove to distance himself from for most of his academic career. See Johnson (1981: 82-85).