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## Dr Sargant and Mr Wesley

### A Psychiatrist's Theory of Conversion

IN recent years a number of books have subjected the phenomena of religion, and more specifically of Christianity, to analysis from the psychological and psycho-somatic angle, but none has been more widely read and more heatedly discussed than Dr William Sargant's *Battle for the Mind*. Its republication in a popular paper-back edition has placed it within the reach of all who wish to familiarise themselves with the author's thesis. Dr Sargant, who is a physician in psychological medicine at a well-known London teaching hospital, sets out to enquire into the neuro-physiology of religious conversion and political brain-washing. He finds that politicians, priests and psychiatrists often face the same problem: namely, how to discover the most rapid and lasting means of changing a man's beliefs. He believes that the same mechanistic process underlies each of these apparently diverse projects.

The basis of his entire argument is contained in the opening chapters in which he examines Pavlov's experiments on conditioned reflexes in dogs. Under insistent pressure an ultra-paradoxical stage was reached in which a complete reversal of reaction was produced. 'The possible relevance of these experiments to sudden religious and political conversion', Sargant suggests, 'should be obvious even to the most sceptical'.<sup>1</sup> Now it seems to a mere layman in matters medical that the connection is not quite as transparent as Sargant would like us to suppose, and it is reassuring to learn that such an acknowledged expert as Professor R. H. Thouless is equally suspicious. 'This phrase "should be obvious"', he says in a review, 'seems to cover a considerable leap in thought'.<sup>2</sup> The cases are not so closely parallel as Sargant wants us to believe.

But quite apart from the dubious premiss upon which Sargant's theory rather unsteadily rests, it is evident that when he moves into the field of religious experience he is even less convincing. He apologises in advance for any inaccuracies incident to this excursion beyond his specialised sphere, and here we must take him seriously. And, in

<sup>1</sup> W. Sargant, *Battle for the Mind*, Pan Edition, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> R. H. Thouless in *Theology*, vol. lxi, p. 209.

fairness to him, it must be said that he genuinely endeavours to avoid offending the religious susceptibilities of his readers and claims, somewhat naively, that he is not concerned with the truth or falsity of any particular belief. This indifference is nothing short of alarming, not to say criminal, when he argues that, since almost identical physiological and psychological phenomena may result from healing methods and conversion techniques associated with widely divergent faiths, what matters most is the underlying mechanistic principle which determines human response. Whatever Dr Sargant himself may say in protest, it nevertheless remains apparent that the overall impression conveyed by his book to the lay mind is that he has succeeded in explaining away the spiritual miracle of conversion. He echoes the conclusion reached by Professor J. H. Leuba that 'in religious lives accessible to psychological investigation nothing requiring the admission of superhuman influences has been found'.<sup>1</sup>

The most vulnerable sections of *Battle for the Mind* are those which even dare to trespass on the Word of God and present us with a psychologised version of Acts 2 and 9. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones deals very faithfully with that travesty of exegesis in his admirable little I.V.F. Pocket Book entitled *Conversions Psychological and Spiritual*. Our purpose in this brief article is to examine the evidence adduced by Sargant from the preaching of John Wesley. He tells us that his selection of Wesley for detailed treatment was prompted by his own Methodist upbringing. It was whilst he was involved in the rehabilitation of war-shock victims by abreaction techniques that he happened to pick up a copy of Wesley's *Journal* in his father's house. 'My eye was caught by Wesley's detailed reports of the occurrence, two hundred years before, of almost identical states of emotional excitement, often leading to temporary emotional collapse, which he induced by a particular sort of preaching. These phenomena often appeared when he had persuaded his hearers that they must make an immediate choice between certain damnation and the acceptance of his own soul-saving religious views. The fear of burning in hell induced by his graphic preaching could be compared to the suggestion we might force on a returned soldier, during treatment, that he was in danger of being burned alive in his tank and must fight his way out. The two techniques seemed startlingly similar'.<sup>2</sup> This analysis of Wesley's preaching is expanded later in the book.

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Leuba, *A Psychological Study of Religion*, p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> Sargant, *op. cit.* pp. 18-19.

There are several points raised by Dr Sargant's account of Wesley which must be taken up. In the first place it should be noted that it was the *Journal* for the years 1739 and 1740 to which Dr Sargant turned, and it is well known to students of the period that certain revivalistic features manifested themselves in the early days of the Methodist movement, which almost entirely disappeared later. What I have elsewhere called 'The Years of Visitation' gave way in 1742 to 'The Years of Evangelisation'.<sup>1</sup> No firm line of transition can be fixed, of course, but it is generally agreed that somewhere around the years 1742 and 1743 there was a noticeable consolidation. From this time forward the hysterical accompaniments of Wesley's preaching were only occasional. Dr Sydney G. Dimond has carefully examined 234 individual cases enumerated and reported on during the period 1739-43.<sup>2</sup> Monsignor Ronald Knox disputes the contention that such phenomena faded out altogether after that, but the most he can do is to produce an isolated instance here and there spread over the next forty-five years.<sup>3</sup> The only really notable exception was the Weardale revival of 1772, and it is significant that with reference to some of the signs following Wesley comments: 'Now these circumstances are common at the dawn of a work, but afterwards very uncommon.'<sup>4</sup> The violent emotional consequences of Wesley's preaching, then, were largely confined to the limited period at the outset of the Awakening: they are not representative of the mainstream of his ministry.

An objection must be raised against Dr Sargant's repetition of the word 'induced' in the paragraph quoted above. There is no ground whatsoever for the assumption that Wesley deliberately played upon his hearers in order to produce the effects described in his *Journal*. The injustice to Wesley is aggravated by the attribution of a 'technique'. Nothing was further from his mind. Dr Sargant even imagines that Wesley anticipated twentieth-century scientific research and 'speculated about possible physiological factors'.<sup>5</sup> But the quotation Sargant supplies from Wesley's *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* will hardly bear the interpretation he puts upon it. All Wesley is saying is that it is not surprising that a sinner suddenly faced with the heinousness of sin, the wrath of God and the pains of eternal death should be

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. S. Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> S. G. Dimond, *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival*, pp. 127-139.

<sup>3</sup> R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm*, pp. 530-533.

<sup>4</sup> *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. N. Curnock, vol. v, p. 471.

<sup>5</sup> Sargant, *op. cit.* p. 126.

affected in body as well as in soul. And he hastens on to justify his assertion from the Word of God and claims that 'there is plain Scripture precedent of every symptom which has lately appeared'.<sup>1</sup> 'First of all, Wesley would create high emotional tension in his potential converts', Dr Sargant states: 'but once again contemporary evidence contradicts him.'<sup>2</sup> It was Whitefield, not Wesley, who was the emotional preacher of the revival, and yet it was only rarely that any outburst followed his message. By contrast, Wesley's manner was calm and logical. His appeal was directed to the mind, the will and the conscience. He was no 'ranter'. He avoided exaggerated gestures. He was on his guard against eccentric mannerisms. He constantly warned his preachers against the unseemliness of shouting. 'Never scream', he wrote to one. 'Never speak above the natural pitch of your voice: it is disgusting to the hearers. It gives them pain, not pleasure. And it is destroying to yourself. It is offering God murder for sacrifice.'<sup>3</sup> It may well have been that the very restraint of his demeanour made it the more likely that when he had finished his discourse pent-up emotion would seek an outlet, but to suggest that Wesley adopted this style as a conscious technique is to go beyond the evidence.

In the same connection Dr Sargant observes: 'The increase of suggestibility, often brought about by such methods (he has been referring to what Hecker calls a "religious epidemic" at Redruth in 1814), comes out clearly in the Rev. Jonathan Edwards's account of the 1735 revival that he initiated at Northampton, Massachusetts. Wesley, may, in fact, have read Edwards's account before starting his own campaign four years later.'<sup>4</sup> Once again the phraseology is tendentious, for anyone who reads Edwards's *Narrative* will realise that he was the last man to think it possible to initiate a revival, whilst Wesley certainly had no intention of 'starting a campaign' in 1739, as Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones effectively shows.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand we must challenge the latter's dismissal of the possibility that Wesley might have seen Edwards's report prior to the *annus mirabilis* of the eighteenth-century awakening in Britain, 1739. The entry in Wesley's *Journal* for 9 October 1738, is decisive: 'I set out for Oxford. In walking I read

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 3rd edn. vol. viii, p. 131. Dr Sargant does not manage to supply a correct transcription.

<sup>2</sup> Sargant, *op. cit.* p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. J. Telford, vol. viii, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Sargant, *op. cit.* p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Conversions Psychological and Spiritual*, p. 23.

the truly surprising narrative of the conversions lately wrought in and about the town of Northampton, in New England. Surely "this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."<sup>1</sup> In view of this explicit statement and the confirmatory knowledge we have that Isaac Watts and John Guyse published the *Narrative* in England in 1737 and that it was widely read and instrumental in focusing attention on the need for revival here, we can hardly agree with Dr Lloyd-Jones that Sargant's suggestion is 'pure hypothesis, and there is no evidence to confirm it'.<sup>2</sup> But whilst Wesley undoubtedly knew of the American awakening before he began to take the message of free salvation to the masses of the people, and no doubt prayed that God would bestow a similar blessing in Britain, there is no hint of conscious imitation. Indeed, nothing was plainer to Wesley's own mind than that the exceptional effectiveness of his preaching from 1738 onwards was not due to any psychological technique or attempt to reproduce the conditions of a transatlantic revival, but to his rediscovery of the basic evangelical message in the Word of God, and his fearless proclamation of it. 'As soon as I saw clearly the nature of saving faith and made it the standing topic of my preaching,' he declared, 'God then began to work by my ministry as He never had done before.'<sup>3</sup>

Dr Sargant makes no real attempt to examine the content of Wesley's sermons nor to arrive at a satisfactory theological understanding of the Spirit's work in conviction, yet without this, of course, it is quite impossible to assess the nature of such preaching. He reiterates the common misconception that Wesley's ultimate appeal was couched in lurid terms exhorting sinners to flee from the wrath to come. He refers to the fear of everlasting hell as 'one of Wesley's powerful conversion weapons'.<sup>4</sup> Whilst it is true that Wesley gave more place to this Scriptural emphasis than is allowed in our liberalised pulpits today, it cannot be regarded as an unduly dominant factor. There *were* thorough-going hell-fire preachers in the eighteenth century (though not perhaps so many as in the nineteenth), but Wesley was not one of them. Even when he reaches his application, as we can see from his

<sup>1</sup> *Journal*, vol. ii, pp. 83-84. From Wesley's Diary we learn that three or four hours were occupied in reading the story of the New England revival and that when he arrived in Oxford he apparently sent an account of it to an unnamed friend.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.* p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Works*, vol. viii, pp. 28-29; *Letters*, vol. ii, p. 264.

<sup>4</sup> Sargant, *op. cit.* p. 127; cf. p. 84.

Standard Sermons, his stress is on the ethical more than on the eschatological. 'What sermons do we find by experience to be attended with the greatest blessing?' he asked at the Conference of 1746. And this is the reply he gave: 'Such as are most close, convincing, practical. Such as have most of Christ the Priest, the Atonement. Such as urge the heinousness of men living in contempt or ignorance of Him.'<sup>1</sup> And he epitomises his essential message in these terms: 'God loves you; therefore love and obey Him. Christ died for you; therefore die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore live to God till you live with Him in glory! So we preached.'<sup>2</sup>

We have seen that the more extreme reactions to Wesley's evangelistic preaching were virtually confined to the years 1739 to 1742 or 1743 when the fire of revival was at its height. Thenceforward recurrences were rare. But this is not to suggest that even these outbursts are susceptible of the explanation that Dr Sargant would infer. We do not regard them as the normal effects of Gospel preaching, but the historical records of Christianity remind us that they do in fact appear from time to time when the Church experiences a Pentecostal reinvigoration. We must indeed test the spirits whether they be of God, but they are not to be dismissed out of hand. When George Whitefield first learned of the strange scenes that accompanied Wesley's preaching in 1739—convulsive tearings, violent trembling, strong cries and tears, unutterable groanings, men and women dropping down as dead—he was inclined to be suspicious. 'That there is something of God in it, I doubt not,' he wrote. 'But the devil, I believe, interposes. I think it will encourage the French prophets, take people from the written word, and make them depend on visions, convulsions, etc. more than on the promises and precepts of the Gospel.'<sup>3</sup> But a few days later Whitefield visited Wesley at Bristol, where these phenomena occurred, and Wesley was able to report in his *Journal*: 'I had an opportunity to talk with him of those outward signs which had so often accompanied the inward work of God. I found his objections were chiefly grounded on gross misrepresentations of matter of fact. But the next day he had an opportunity of informing himself better: for no sooner had he begun (in the application of his sermon) to invite all sinners to believe in Christ, than four persons sunk down close to him, almost in the same moment. . . . From this time, I trust, we shall all suffer God to

<sup>1</sup> *Minutes* 1746.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, vol. xi, p. 486.

<sup>3</sup> L. Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield*, vol. i. p. 253.

carry on His own work in the way that pleaseth Him.<sup>1</sup> 'That good, great good, is done is evident,' was Whitefield's verdict. 'It is little less than blasphemy against the Holy Ghost to impute this great work, that has been wrought in so short a time in this kingdom, to delusion and the power of the devil.'<sup>2</sup>

Wesley's own defence of the genuineness of this Divine work is contained in the noble and moving answer he gave to his own brother Samuel, who had queried the manifestations from a distance. 'My dear brother, the whole question turns chiefly, if not wholly, on matter of fact. You deny that God does now work these effects—at least, that He works them in such a manner: I affirm both, because I have heard those facts with my ears and seen them with my eyes. I have seen, as far as it can be seen, very many persons changed in a moment from the spirit of horror, fear, and despair, to the spirit of hope, joy, peace, and from sinful desires (till then reigning over them) to a pure desire of doing the will of God. These are matters of fact, whereof I have been, and almost daily am, eye- or ear-witness. . . . Saw you him that was a lion till then, and is now a lamb; him that was a drunkard, but now exemplarily sober; the whoremonger that was, who now abhors the very lusts of the flesh? These are my living arguments for what I assert—that God now, as aforetime, gives remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost, which may be called visions. If it be not so, I am found a false witness; but, however, I do and will testify the things I have both seen and heard.'<sup>3</sup> Later, in dispassionate retrospect from the vantage point of 1781 he added a discerning comment: 'Satan mimicked this part of the work of God in order to discredit the whole: and yet it is not wise to *give up* this part, any more than to give up the whole.'<sup>4</sup>

Dr Sargant's fundamental failure lies in his inability to recognise the supernatural character of Christian experience. He even endeavours to explain the conversion of Wesley in terms of his theory, although it would seem that almost every item in the circumstances of that epochal event is ranged against him. As Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly points out, 'the fallacy which seems to run right through the book *Battle for the Mind*, is that the Person and work of the Holy Spirit are entirely

<sup>1</sup> *Journal*, vol. ii, pp. 239-240.

<sup>2</sup> *George Whitefield's Journals*, ed. I. Murray, p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, vol. i, pp. 290-291.

<sup>4</sup> A. Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement in the Eighteenth Century Called Methodism*, vol. i, p. 188.

overlooked.<sup>1</sup> Should it not be the function of a valid psychology to recognise the reality of the spiritual? We do not subscribe to the view that psychology and religion must necessarily be at loggerheads. Indeed it is in this very realm of experience that they should be able to meet and embrace each other. For, as Dr Dimond has finely observed, 'in all the history of psychological science there is no saying more profoundly significant than that of Jesus, "Ye must be born again."' <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.* p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Dimond, *op. cit.* p. 207.