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## Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self: Book Review

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*Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain:  
Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self*

*A Review by Robin Runia  
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In her sensitive and thoughtful afterword, Misty Anderson rehearses the investment of literary criticism in “restaging the opposition between a religious past and a secular modernity” (236). She makes clear how the discipline of literary studies has largely refused to acknowledge its own ideology of secularization. Quoting Michael Kauffman, Anderson offers her audience the following call to action: “Anyone constructing a narrative of secularization (even if finally to refute it) needs to evaluate certain ideas, truth claims, or values that may seem more or less spiritual, more or less ‘religious’” (236). Following her own thorough consideration of the relationship between Methodism and the modern self, her plea resonates well.

Within this context, Anderson’s efforts to define and justify the terms of her study are significant. Referencing Locke, she insists on the centrality of experience to modern conscious self-making and rejects the term *subjectivity*. Accordingly, the wide array of cultural artifacts Anderson considers, including popular prints and engravings, novels and pamphlets, hymns and ballads, personal correspondence and periodical literature, reveal the Methodist self as one “which does not satisfy the demand for autonomy and agency that liberalism articulates as a requirement of modern consciousness” (199). That this refutation

of the narrative of secularization does not consistently interrogate the value of autonomy and agency to a liberal modern selfhood reflects the difficulty of challenging such a long and dearly held history. Nevertheless, Anderson's text offers an abundance of analysis and insightful interpretation that successfully reveals the pride of place Methodism claimed in the eighteenth-century British imagination.

Starting with the caveat that her "argument is not that secular and religious capture the complete horizon of possibility in the project of modernity, but that their opposition achieves a cultural dominance that defines the era," Anderson fleshes out her vision of modernity as both project and era by examining texts produced by and about Methodists (11). First, she provides a history of Methodism's origins as a difficult to define group within the Anglican Church. Anderson enumerates Methodism's satirical associations with religious enthusiasm, Catholic mysticism, sacred eroticism, anarchic revolution, and antinomianism. Additionally, she identifies how its emphasis on "spiritual senses" complicates traditional empirical epistemological accounts. Anderson argues that their celebration of justification by faith remained troubling in its potential to undermine traditional notions of social accountability and thereby proved incompatible with modern selfhood.

By detailing historical links to the anti-Methodist satire of Henry Fielding's *The Female Husband*, John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Samuel Foote's *The Minor*, and William Hogarth's *Enthusiasm Delineated*, among others, Anderson next establishes the ubiquity of anxieties surrounding Methodists' perceived feminine somatic receptivity to performance technology. She demonstrates how the unruly body threatened to blur the boundaries between spirituality and sexuality. Specifically, Anderson argues that Methodism "function[s] like a sexuality," naturalizing specific behaviors and offering "a system of practices that could consolidate the self" and demanding the maintenance of cognitive distance within an "excremental Real" (99, 167).

In contrast to the anxieties Methodists provoked, Anderson also presents two chapters on the value their practices and behaviors added to the shifting aesthetic and economic landscapes of the later eighteenth century. With brilliant presentations of Wesleyan hymnody and



its reliance on popular music and distinct rhetorical forms, Anderson argues on behalf of a Methodist self open to a sublime collectivity. She writes, "Fueled by an intimate poetic sensibility that asked singers to inhabit a range of gendered subject and object positions, these group declarations of religious devotion struck at the core of the emerging liberal notion of agency, grounded in individual consciousness and self-possession" (173). Her last chapter reinforces this theme by considering the social cohesion Methodism offered through affective supplement to early capitalism within Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* and Richard Graves's *The Spiritual Quixote*.

While Anderson's book, with its reifications of a "primitive" somatic spirituality, maintains the secularization of self myth which it strives to complicate, its fascinating, carefully researched, and astutely argued pages undoubtedly prove the significance of Methodism to the heart and mind of eighteenth-century British identity.

Anderson, Misty. *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 279.