

**‘None but Presbyterian Baptism’:  
Samuel and Susanna Wesley, monarchy and marriage<sup>1</sup>**

In 1712 Samuel Wesley, rector of Epworth, made his return to Bishop William Wake’s visitation queries. As bishop of Lincoln from 1705 to 1716 Wake held visitations at strictly three year intervals, as required by the canons. Wake was one of those early eighteenth century bishops who developed and refined the process of issuing queries to his clergy. When it came to Epworth, where Samuel Wesley had been rector since 1695, the return gave evidence of Wesley’s pastoral work. He listed those baptized and confirmed since the last visitation, reported a case of fornication which had been prosecuted in the archdeacon’s court, and mentioned that his books had been burnt in a recent rectory fire.

When it came to the response to the question of his residence in the parish the return read:

Wesley is Proctor [in Convocation] for the clergy of Lincolnshire. He spends summer at Epworth, [and] winter in Henry VII’s chapel.<sup>2</sup>

This was to be expected, in the previous few years Convocation had been especially busy and active and meetings tended to last for some months during the winter.

The return also included Wesley’s response to the question about whether all the parishioners in Epworth were baptized: it read [The] only possible un-baptized adult

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<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to Dr John Broad of London Metropolitan University for his kindness in allowing me to see the Epworth entries in his edition of William Wake’s visitation returns which were in preparation for publication. The edition has subsequently been published in J. Broad (ed.), *Bishop Wake’s Summary of Visitation Returns for the Diocese of Lincoln 1706-15* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012), 2 vols. I am also grateful to Dr Peter Forsaith for his comments on a draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that this is a reference to Henry VII’s chapel in Westminster Abbey, perhaps it refers to the Henry VII chapel at Greenwich which was renovated about this time, during the building of the Royal Hospital at Greenwich. John Evelyn lived there in the vestry house also.

is Wesley's wife, who – and here the return quoted Wesley directly - 'has none but Presbyterian Baptism'.<sup>3</sup>

This was a pretty startling matter: the rector naming his wife, Susanna, as the only unbaptised person in the parish.<sup>4</sup> It is the contention of this paper, that in making the return, Wesley was making a clear and important statement to the two most significant people in his life: his wife and his bishop. Wesley's regular absences from Epworth at Convocation suggest that only an uneasy truce had been established with Susanna since their earlier disagreement in 1701-2.<sup>5</sup> It also seems that there is a close connection between Wesley's comment on his wife's baptism, the theological background to 1712 and the bishop to whom the report was made.

The crux of Samuel and Susanna's disagreement in 1701 was that Susanna could not bring herself to say 'amen' at the end of prayers for the royal family. In other words she was a crypto-Jacobite, who rejected the Glorious Revolution and the legitimacy of William III. Samuel seems to have quickly accommodated the new regime in 1688. In the summer of that year Samuel Wesley as a recent graduate of Exeter College, Oxford had composed verses to celebrate the birth of an heir to James II.<sup>6</sup> But some weeks earlier, when clergy were required to read James II's Declaration of Indulgence to their congregations, Samuel Wesley was a curate in a London parish and

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford, Christ Church, Oxford, Wake Ms, 279. Visitation of Lincoln, 1712, Epworth entry.

<sup>4</sup> It is not clear whether the word 'possible' was used by Samuel Wesley or by the transcriber of the visitation return. It is likely that it was the latter, since the return was addressed to a bishop who did not accept that lay baptism was invalid.

<sup>5</sup> For details of Samuel Wesley's breach with his wife, see R. Walmsley, 'John Wesley's Parents, Quarrel and Reconciliation', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, vol. XXIX (1953), 50-57.

<sup>6</sup> Though it may have been an example of a verse that was opaque in its meaning, see W. Gibson, 'Strenæ Natalitiæ: Ambivalence and Equivocation in Oxford in 1688', *History of Universities*, vol. XXXI, no. 1 (July 2018), pp. 127-8.

preached on the text from the Book of Daniel: ‘Be it known unto thee, O King, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.’<sup>7</sup> So Samuel may have wavered between resistance and passive obedience to James II, however by 1689 he has accommodated himself to the new regime and swore the oaths of allegiance and abjuration required by law. Susanna was not required to swear the oaths and does not seem to have reached such an accommodation.

Susanna’s refusal to pray for William III troubled Samuel, and when he upbraided his wife for her failure to say ‘amen’, she admitted that she did not regard William as the rightful king. In outrage, Samuel Wesley left his house, going off to Convocation in London, and he refused to live with her until she conceded the point. In the end, a fire in 1702 (the first of three fires of various intensity to affect the Epworth rectory) brought the pair back together. However, there is no evidence that Susanna submitted to her husband’s political views in the way he wanted. During the dispute, Susanna had consulted two leading Jacobite Non-jurors, Lady Yarborough and George Hickes, which suggests that she was close to some of the leading Non-jurors.<sup>8</sup> It was clear that their advice was that Susanna should submit to her husband.

The assumption in many biographies of Susanna and Samuel Wesley is that their breach was healed in 1702, since, as Charles Wallace put it, ‘the fruits of their reconciliation arrived on June 17 1703, a baby boy christened John.’<sup>9</sup> Certainly Samuel’s

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<sup>7</sup> T. B. Macaulay, *A History of England from the Accession of James II* (London: Longman, Green and Brown, 1849), II: 335. The source of this claim seems to have been Samuel’s son, Samuel Wesley Jr which was recounted in Adam Clarke’s *Memoirs of the Wesley Family Collected Principally from Original Documents*, (London: J. & T. Clarke, 1823), p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> See Walmsley, ‘John Wesley’s Parents, Quarrel and Reconciliation’.

<sup>9</sup> C. Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 13.

comment to Susanna at the start of their dispute, ‘you and I must part: for if we have two kings we must have two beds’, seemed to have been resolved.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems that Susanna did not change her opinion about the legitimacy of the Revolution of 1688. Susanna’s political and religious principles appear to have been erratic. Certainly, as will be seen, her attitudes to authority in the Church were eccentric. It is also clear that she veered between Tory Non-jury and more Whiggish opinions. For example, in a letter to her son Samuel, on 11 March 1704, Susanna wrote her opinions of the issue of self-preservation:

The first thing that seems dictated by nature’s law is self-preservation. I know that Christians generally hold that the glory of God and increase of his kingdom should be first in our desires and designs... But forasmuch as a virtuous life presupposes life, I think the first thing nature teaches us is care of life and to avoid all penury or want of those things that sustain and preserve it. Hence it was that, as soon as mankind became sensible of want and conscious of their weakness when single and alone, they began to form societies, then communities and regular governments; and from the same desire of self-preservation all human laws which tend to the welfare of man take their rise.<sup>11</sup>

This was a classic Whig account of the right of mankind to defend itself. It was exactly the same argument that Benjamin Hoadly, the Low Church champion, advanced in his seminal assault on Non-jury.<sup>12</sup> And Non-jurors like Charles Leslie and George Hickes had attacked him for it. Usually Non-jurors, like Susanna, would have argued that laws and society were of divine origin and thus men could not overthrow their rulers or defend themselves from tyranny. This was one of the principal arguments against the Revolution of 1688 and the legitimacy of William III. It was a central belief of Mary Astell, a contemporary of Susanna’s and whose Toryism and Non-Jury were pronounced.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> W. Gibson (ed.), *Benjamin Hoadly’s Original and Institution of Civil Government, Discuss’d*, (New York: AMS Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> M. Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Profess’d by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London: W. B., 1705), and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in*

In another lengthy letter, Susanna wrote of the right of each man to govern himself and that no human law could ‘deprive a man of that power which God has given him to govern himself...’<sup>14</sup> This was a similarly odd view: High Churchmen would concur that God gave man certain attributes, but it was a distinctly Whiggish view that men and women were able to govern themselves. There was a contemporaneous debate between Benjamin Hoadly and Bishop Offspring Blackall on the degree to which people were subject to higher powers, either in the civil government or the Church.

Equally curious was Susanna approval of Locke and Beveridge, both of whom were Whigs who championed the Glorious Revolution which the Non-jurors deplored.<sup>15</sup> In short, Susanna seems to have held views which were diametrically opposed to the Jacobite Non-jury which had caused her separation from Samuel in 1701-2.<sup>16</sup>

In 1711-12, another disagreement erupted between Susanna and Samuel Wesley. While Samuel Wesley was away from Epworth at Convocation, he entrusted the parish worship to his curate, Mr Inman.<sup>17</sup> Samuel was attending the staunchly Tory High Church meeting of Convocation. In the wake of the Sacheverell trial and the Tory victories in elections to Parliament and Convocation, the latter was busy censuring Latitudinarian divines and preparing to attack the Dissenters. Leading members of Convocation, including Samuel Wesley, were helping to draft the Occasional Conformity

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*this Kingdom in An Examination of Dr Kennett’s Sermon, Jan 31 1703/4 And Vindication of the Royal Martyr* (London: E. P., 1704).

<sup>14</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 224.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, pp. 235, 261 for example.

<sup>16</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 14. However, in 1716, ‘Old Jeffrey’ the poltergeist that haunted the Epworth rectory, revealed his Jacobite leanings as he ‘knocked’ when prayers were read for King George I. This may give some clue as to the origins of ‘Old Jeffrey’. Susanna may have had inklings of her attitudes to others during this dispute since her journal includes reflections on ‘the dangers of feeling ‘holier than thou’’. Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> Mr Inman is untraced and does not have an entry in the Church of England Clergy Database.

and Schism Bills. These would close a loophole that enabled Dissenters to hold public offices and ban Dissenting Academies. It was highly controversial and strongly opposed legislation, which within a few years would be repealed.

At the end of 1711, Inman wrote to Samuel that people in Epworth were abandoning worship in the parish church in favour of the prayer meetings Susanna was holding in the rectory kitchen. Samuel wrote to Susanna expressing his concern, but Susanna held her ground and defended the meetings. Gradually they grew to more than 200 attenders and took up the whole ground floor of the rectory.

In reply to Samuel's initial expression of concern, Susanna wrote on 6 February 1712, that 'in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all families of heaven and earth.'<sup>18</sup> When Samuel persisted in his concerns about the meeting, Susanna boldly replied, on 25 February:

If you do after all think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me any more that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good to souls, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

What may have alarmed Samuel in particular about the meeting was that Mr Inman had referred to it as a 'conventicle' – an illegal Dissenting gathering. The problem was considerable: Samuel was at the Convocation in London attacking Dissenters and their conventicles while his wife was in Epworth holding just such an irregular meeting. When Samuel mentioned Inman's use of the term 'conventicle', Susanna bluntly replied: 'I suppose [Inman] thinks the sermons I read better than his own.' She went on naively:

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 13. All dates are new style.

<sup>19</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 13.

‘what does this calling it [a conventicle] signify? Does it alter the nature of the thing?’<sup>20</sup> She also claimed that, if Samuel insisted on shutting the meetings, the parishioners would not return to the parish church. She wrote: ‘I can now keep them to the Church, but if it is laid aside, I doubt they’ll ever go to hear him [Inman] more...’<sup>21</sup> Faced with such a threat, Samuel relented and the meetings continued until his return to the parish. But to find his wife usurping his curate’s role, and in such a politically embarrassing fashion, must have been vexing and problematic to Samuel. Here too Susanna seems to have been inconsistent; as a Tory and a Non-juror she ought to have held a high view of the authority of the Church and priesthood, but at the same time she usurped them.

Samuel Wesley’s election to Convocation back in 1701 had owed much to his own Tory High Churchmanship. Notwithstanding his own Dissenting background, he was a standard-bearer for the High Church antagonism of Dissent. In Convocation, he had consistently supported the proposals to outlaw occasional conformity, which would exclude Dissenters from public office. In the 1705 election he had dramatically switched his votes to the Tories because of their commitment to crush the rights of Dissenters. It had been the immediate cause of his imprisonment as his Whig creditors call in their debts.<sup>22</sup> Later in 1710 it was claimed that he had written Henry Sacheverell’s speech in his own defence at his trial.<sup>23</sup>

The success of Tories and High Churchmen in the elections to Parliament and Convocation in 1710 marked an opportunity for unrestrained High Churchmanship to

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<sup>20</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Wallace (ed.), *Susanna Wesley*, p. 82

<sup>22</sup> W. Gibson, “‘Mr Wesley’s Business’”, Dissenters, Debt and Distress in 1705’, *Historical Research*, vol. 83, no. 222 (November 2010), pp. 635-49.

<sup>23</sup> This claim is examined in more detail in W. Gibson, ‘The Past is Another Country: Wesley’s History of England’, in T. Campbell (ed.), *Wesleyan Communities and the World Beyond Christianity* (2018), pp. ??.

take hold. An important aspect of this was the debate on lay baptism. This was not a concern at baptism by the laity in extreme circumstances, such as the imminent death of a new-born baby. It was a concern at the systematic and general baptism by Dissenting ministers, who did not, in the eyes of High Churchmen, have valid orders. Such Dissenting ministers were regarded by High Church Anglicans as laymen. So the 'lay-baptism' debate was in reality about Dissenting baptism. The debate had begun in 1708 with the publication of Roger Laurence's book *Lay-Baptism Invalid*. The subtitle gave away its theological position: *An Essay to Prove, that Such Baptism is Null and Void, when administer'd in opposition to The Divine Right of the Apostolical Succession. Occasion'd chiefly by the Anti-Episcopal Usurpations of our English Dissenting Teachers*. By 1712, it had reached its third edition. Like Samuel Wesley, Laurence had been brought up as a Dissenter, had become an Anglican soon after the Glorious Revolution, and rejected his religious heritage.<sup>24</sup> In 1708, aged thirty-eight, he was re-baptized at Christ Church, Newgate Street, and this triggered a furious debate on lay baptism. Bishop Henry Compton of London investigated the matter and Laurence's re-baptism became a test case of whether Dissenters' baptism was valid.

Laurence's *Lay Baptism Invalid* divided the Church along party lines. On one side the Dissenters, Whigs and Low Churchmen took the view that Dissenting baptism was valid and had historically been regarded as such by the Church of England. On the other side, the Tories and High Churchmen saw it as another means to exclude Dissenters from public life. They supported Laurence's view that those baptized by Dissenting

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<sup>24</sup> In due course Laurence was to become a non-juror and died in 1736 having been consecrated a non-juror bishop of the second succession.



clergy were not validly baptized.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, there was a mischievously Jacobite motive in attacking Dissenters' baptism. In the final years of Queen Anne's reign, when she was visibly ailing, thoughts turned to the succession. The heir under the Act of Settlement of 1701 was George, Elector of Hanover, who was a Protestant who would receive communion in the Church of England. The question was raised whether George had been baptized by a non-episcopal Lutheran minister; in fact he had. But for a short while the issue enabled Jacobites and their fellow-travellers to argue that he might not be validly baptized, and therefore his right of succession could be questionable.

In April 1712, as the dispute raged on, a group of thirteen bishops, including Wesley's own diocesan, William Wake, gathered at Lambeth to discuss the issue. They concluded by issuing a declaration which asserted that baptism by non-episcopally ordained clergy was valid. The bishops moved to defend their position. Bishop William Talbot of Oxford raised the issue in his charge to the clergy of his diocese in the summer of 1712. He argued that the tradition and practice of the Church had long supported lay baptism. Talbot asked 'how many thousands of our own Church must this doctrine [of episcopal baptism] unchristian from the Reformation down?' He also argued that people who received lay baptism had been admitted to Holy Orders in the seventeenth century, and that King James I had supported lay baptism.<sup>26</sup> Talbot made clear that he did not

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed assessment of the lay-baptism controversy, see Robert D. Cornwall, 'Politics and the Lay Baptism Controversy in England, 1708-1715' in R. Cornwall and W. Gibson (eds), *Politics, Religion and Dissent, 1660-1832* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> William Talbot, *The Bishop of Oxford's Charge to the Clergy of His Diocese at the Visitation in the Year 1712* (London: Jonah Bowyer, 1712), p. 13.

support irregular baptismal practices, but cited leading Anglican authorities, including Whitgift, Bancroft, Hooker and Cosin, as evidence that lay baptism was valid.<sup>27</sup>

When the bishops' declaration in favour of lay baptism was sent to the High Church clergy in Convocation, they rejected it. This intensified the public nature of the controversy. In print, Joseph Bingham and others asserted the legitimacy of lay baptism, whereas Non-jurors, including Susanna's friend George Hickes, and Thomas Brett argued the case for rejecting it. The debate was to go back and forth until the 1720s.<sup>28</sup> The details of this prolonged controversy are not the immediate concern of this study. Its significance, in the context of Samuel Wesley's 1712 visitation return, is that it enabled Wesley to make a number of points in a single phrase.

First in his visitation return, Samuel Wesley could thumb his nose at his diocesan bishop, William Wake. The lower clergy in Convocation had grown bold in their flouting of episcopal leadership since the occasional conformity debates of 1705. At that time, the Lower House of Convocation had met in defiance of the archbishop's order of prorogation. The lower clergy had repeatedly censured and criticised the bishops for failing to vote for bills outlawing occasional conformity. By 1710 the Tories and High Churchmen had won resounding majorities in the Commons and Convocation elections. This made them (despite their sacerdotal view of the episcopate) more insubordinate to Low Church bishops. By returning a response to the bishop's visitation enquiries which pointing out that his own wife had not been –In his view - validly baptized, Wesley was referring to the lay baptism controversy. Wake's visitation query to his clergy about

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<sup>27</sup> Talbot, *The Bishop of Oxford's Charge*, passim. For William Talbot's churchmanship see W Gibson, 'William Talbot and Church Parties 1688-1730', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (January, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> See J. H. Overton, *The Non-Jurors* (London: Smith, Elder, 1902), pp. 352-4.

whether there were any unbaptised in each parish, seemed meaningless to Wesley if lay baptism was valid. After all, in Wake's opinion, Dissenters could be validly baptizing children in the parish; so how could the clergy report on numbers who were baptised? The reply implied that Wesley held baptism in higher regard than the bishop. The return also indicates Wesley's contempt for Wake, whose views on baptism Wesley clearly regarded as part of the wider Latitudinarian Whig surrender to Dissent. This was why the 'Church in Danger' debate was so strong nationally. By pointing out that, of his parishioners, only his wife was unbaptised Wesley seemed to invite Wake to respond. The Bishop could either indicate that this was not his view and that Susanna was validly baptized, or to go against his own principles and insist that she receive episcopal baptism. As there is no evidence of a reply, it seems likely that Wake kept his counsel and, perhaps, gained some mild satisfaction that one of the standard-bearers of the High Church insurgence in Convocation was harbouring one who had 'none but Presbyterian baptism'.

Secondly it seems likely that Wesley may have been suggesting to his wife the ambiguity of her position. If, as seems likely from the dispute of 1711-12, their relationship was not entirely patched up, this visitation return enabled Samuel to make a point to Susanna. Her irregular conventicle in the rectory was a public embarrassment to him. Samuel's work in Convocation was being undermined because Susanna was holding just such an irregular meeting in his own parish. Worse still, Susanna could not even lay claim to valid episcopal baptism. Perhaps Samuel also saw some of the inconsistency of his wife's views. If she was a Jacobite in politics and a Non-juror in theology, she should have held as high a view of the need for episcopal baptism as Samuel himself. But

Susanna, presumably, did not feel a need to be episcopally baptized, having been baptized by her Dissenting parents. This idiosyncrasy probably arose from Susanna's comparative respect for her Dissenting heritage, which Samuel did not share – at least as far as its baptism was concerned. The episode also illustrates some of the incoherence of Susanna's Non-juring and Jacobite views. Her commitment to the Jacobite cause was part of a range of principles she held, which included those of Whig theorists. But, in their attempt to squeeze Dissenters out of the religious polity, High Churchmen and Jacobites questioned both the type of baptism which Susanna had received and the nature of irregular gatherings of the sort that she had held in the rectory. In their mischievous suggestion that George of Hanover's baptism might be invalid, Jacobites had 'un-churched' men and women like Susanna. So while Non-juring theorists and leaders developed a consistent analysis of Church and State, their supporters and followers often adopted different views which were less coherent.

Another point which arises from his comment is the deduction that Samuel himself had been baptized by an episcopally ordained minister. If this is the case, it seems unlikely that it was by his father, John. It seems probable that John Wesley senior was not episcopally ordained. He had obtained holy orders during the Commonwealth, and his credentials were sufficiently doubtful to cause him to be highly evasive when questioned by Bishop Ironsides of Bristol in 1661.<sup>29</sup> In which case there are two possibilities regarding Samuel's baptism. He may have been baptized by his grandfather, Benjamin, who, although a Puritan, had been episcopally ordained. Alternatively he may have been re-baptized by an Anglican parson once he had abandoned Dissent and decided to conform to the Church.

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<sup>29</sup> Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, pp. 24-31

The significance of Samuel Wesley's 1712 visitation return is the light it sheds on the extraordinary tensions in England in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. The issue of the legitimacy of ejecting an anointed monarch from his throne remained live and immediate. It was the root of the dispute between Susanna and her husband. This was not merely an intellectual or political debate. It had the intensity to threaten the salvation of a nation and of individuals. The Wesleys were not the only family riven by the question of whether William III and Queen Anne were rightful rulers. Samuel Wesley had come to terms with the reality of 1689 and had sworn the oaths of allegiance and abjuration; but Susanna would not have agreed to them. Whatever their private views, for the rector of Epworth to hold up his wife to his bishop as the only unbaptised parishioner suggests that there was an element of resentment and hostility between them. Wesley's concern that his wife was inclined to different views on politics and ecclesiology from his own must have been compounded by the fact that, in Wesley's eyes, she was not validly baptized.

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