**The Study of Religious Writing and Religious Education from the Perspective of a Literary and Intellectual Historian**

**Isabel Rivers**

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I have been invited to contribute to this conference as a representative of the field of English literature with research interests in religion. In my paper I focus on two areas in which I am currently working and have been for some time. These are 1) religious thought and its expression in England in the so-called 'long eighteenth century', 1660-1830, and the literature of dissent, Methodism, and evangelicalism within that period; and 2) the dissenting academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860. I start with an account of how I have come to be engaged in this research. For each of these areas, I outline a series of questions of different kinds that I have set myself at various stages or that have been arrived at in collaboration with others. I provide case studies drawn from my recent work which can be seen as ways of responding to some of these questions, and which I hope will illuminate the broader question set by this conference, 'What place does religion have in the Western research university?'

## 1. Religious thought and its expression in England; the literature of dissent, Methodism, and evangelicalism

The first point I would like to stress is that although I have spent my entire career in departments of English literature, my work has crossed several disciplines. When I'm asked to give a label to myself I usually say that I'm a literary and intellectual historian and that I'm particularly interested in the history of religion and philosophy

and the history of the book. Over the years the periods in which I've been most interested have ranged from the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth, and I've done quite a lot of looking back to classical literature and philosophy. My graduate research and first book was on the relation between poetry and politics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it became increasingly clear to me that I couldn't understand the literature or indeed the politics of these periods without understanding religion. My first experiences as a university teacher when I was 25 years old confirmed me in this view: I was shocked, perhaps naively, at the ignorance of my students about many aspects of their intellectual and religious heritage, and to help address this problem I later wrote a student textbook entitled *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry,* which is still in use, especially in the USA, over 30 years later.

One of my main interests is the relationship between ideas and the languages and forms in which they are expressed. This is the subject of a two-volume book which took me over twenty-five years to write and which has an appropriately long title, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*. I explored in the first volume what happened to the Reformation doctrine of grace from the 1650s onwards in response to an increasing emphasis on human reason and free will, and in the second volume what happened when attempts were made from the 1690s onward to separate ethics from religion and locate the foundation of morals in the constitution of human nature. I covered a large number of figures right across the religious and philosophical spectrum, ranging from the latitudinarian Anglican divine Benjamin Whichcote and the Methodist leader John Wesley to the moral sense philosopher the third earl of Shaftesbury and the philosophical sceptic David Hume. Another of my main interests is the relationship

between books and their readers in the eighteenth century, the subject of two collections of essays by various hands that I've edited. For the first collection, published in 1982, I wrote a piece about dissenting and Methodist books of practical divinity which I researched in tandem with my chapter on Wesley for *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*. I had come to see that it wasn't possible to write about the history of religious thought without understanding that religious books were in a perpetual process of transformation by their editors and interpreters for transmission to different groups of readers, and that this process needed thorough exploration. In some ways that essay on dissenting and Methodist books is the germ of an important aspect of my current research: this is a book I've been engaged on for over ten years, and to which various pieces I've published since 2003 (listed at the end) all contribute. This also has a long title: *Vanity Fair and the Celestial City: Dissenting, Methodist and Evangelical Literary Culture in England, 1720-1800*. It is concerned with those who legally dissented from the Church of England (a status established by the Toleration Act of 1689) and those who sought to reform it from within, with the impact of and the responses to the disparate movements that made up what is known as the Evangelical Revival. It deals with evangelical dissenters, Methodists both Arminian and Calvinist, Church of England evangelicals, and rational dissenters. However, my primary interest in this study is not doctrine or denominations but books. My subjects include the the publishing of popular religious literature; reading habits, book clubs and libraries; seventeenth-century nonconformist, episcopalian, and Roman Catholic literary legacies; literary relations with North America; and specific genres such as biblical commentaries, devotional works, biographies and autobiographies, letters, hymns, poetry, and magazines. I'm establishing what was published, edited and

distributed by dissenters, Methodists, and evangelicals, which were the most popular and influential works, and who read them and how.

So what are the questions I have asked in pursuit of this research? In the introduction to the first volume of *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, in which I am particularly concerned with the relation between ideas, languages, and form, I listed the questions that I asked myself when reading a given author (one of my former graduate students told me that she had pinned this up above her desk, and very recently I had an email from an American graduate student who told me he had pasted the questions into his academic journal). The list includes the following: What form does the author employ—e.g. treatise, handbook, essay, sermon, dialogue? What are the implications of this choice of form? What is the author's purpose in writing? What does the author take the function of books to be? What are his characteristic terms and arguments? Who else is using them in the same or different ways? What is the intended audience of the work, or are there several? Do the author's ideas, arguments, or style differ depending on the form chosen or the audience addressed? Who are the authorities to whom he defers, or whom he recommends? Who are the rival authorities he attempts to dislodge? What group does he identify himself with? What label does he attach to himself? What is the origin of this label? Is the language he uses peculiar to himself, that of a group to which he belongs, or the transmutation of the language of another group?[1]

Christian writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries usually divided religious literature into three categories: doctrinal or speculative (concerned with establishing the truth of specific doctrines and the evidences, natural and revealed, for Christianity), controversial (concerned with demolishing on rational or historical or scriptural grounds the beliefs and practices of rival denominations), and practical

(concerned with helping the individual to practise the Christian life).[2] It seems to me that it is very important to bear these distinctions in mind, because what is meant by religion varies according to the category being employed (these categories are of course not mutually exclusive, thus making interpretation more complicated). My many years of reading controversial literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has persuaded me that religious writers nearly always distort their opponents' views. At the same time, I have learned to be cautious of assuming on the basis of such writing, despite the impression such works give, that opposing sides were inexorably ranged against each other, Christian versus deist or sceptic, Protestant versus Roman Catholic, Arminian versus Calvinist, Trinitarian versus Unitarian. People then as now maintained friendships across these boundaries, and religious works, especially those of a practical nature, crossed them too, though often changing significantly in the process.

Where do I stand in these debates? I have deliberately stood outside them, avoided taking sides, and not obtruded my own religious scepticism. This is partly because of the way that writing about religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been undertaken during my academic lifetime in English and History departments. Some years ago those concerned with such matters tended to be either denominational historians who wrote about their own traditions from the perspective of their particular church affiliation, or social historians who thought religion was to be explained in terms of class conflict and social control.[3] On the whole this is no longer the case, but there are still obstacles to what might be deemed the disinterested academic study of religious literature in its broadest sense. Intellectual historians or historians of philosophy tend to focus on writers deemed to be philosophically important; political historians tend to see theology as an aspect of political thought.

Some approaches to religious writing are essentially teleological, and focus on an assumed trajectory towards modernity. Many literary and social historians take for granted that this was a period of increasing secularisation, either without providing evidence, or misusing it. For example, I recently heard a historian argue that religion was declining in England in the eighteenth century, adducing statements made by evangelicals at the time. This claim showed a failure to understand both theology and rhetoric (an example of a text that could be misinterpreted in this way by the modern reader is John Wesley's sermon 'Scriptural Christianity', preached before the University of Oxford in 1744, in which he invited his audience to agree that there was no Christian country on earth),[4] and ignorance of publishing history, which tells us that the majority of publications in England up to the 1780s were religious.[5] In my own work I am not concerned with showing how we got from there to here, nor with trying to assess the truth or falsehood of religious positions. In *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment* I concentrated on reading seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates in their own terms in order to give as accurate an account as possible of what was said and why it was important at the time, and I quoted a delightful nautical image used by Duncan Forbes in his book on Hume's politics, in which he urged historians of political thought to fall in love with their subjects in the way that the novelist C. S. Forrester 'was in love with the ships and naval tactics of the Napoleonic era', and to make themselves 'equally expert in the spars and rigging and scientific manuals of the old controversies'.[6] And that is what I tried to do, so that I could understand and demonstrate why the ideas of very different kinds of writers on religion took the shape and provoked the responses that they did.

In my current work on the literary culture of dissenters, Methodists, and evangelicals (*Vanity Fair* for short) my principal questions include the following:

Who or what determined what was published, distributed, and read? How large a proportion of eighteenth-century publishing was religious? Was the motivating factor of religious publishing commercial, and if so, what does that tell us about the nature of eighteenth-century culture more generally? How important was not for profit (in modern parlance) publishing and distribution and how influential was the work of religious societies founded for this purpose? What formats were religious books published in? What proportion of religious books were published in cheap duodecimo format, and how can we establish this? What proportion of these have not survived, and what problems does this create for historical interpretation? What about the texts and authors that were chosen for publication? Who was making the decisions, and why were certain texts and authors popular, repeatedly reissued and re-edited? Why were so many late seventeenth-century works edited, abridged, and repeatedly reissued right through the eighteenth century? And what about the readers—how were religious books read? How should we evaluate and compare advice about how to read such books, whether provided by the books' authors and editors, or by those who were recommending them, with the accounts that readers themselves provided about their experience of reading? What are the problems associated with interpreting readers' accounts of their reading, whether in published or manuscript sources such as letters or memoirs? When a reader discusses a book with a famous title, for example the *Imitation of Christ* or *Pilgrim's Progress*, how do we know what version of that book is meant, with what theological or denominational bias? What happened to the texts of previously published books on their journeys through the hands of different editors, abridgers, and interpreters? What did Anglicans do to Catholic books, Arminians to Calvinist books, or Unitarians to Trinitarian ones? How should our knowledge of the ways in which eighteenth-century editors treated manuscripts affect

our interpretation of books presented through the mediation of editors? How do we interpret a literary culture in which religious books and manuscripts, with both lay and ministerial authors, were regularly taken over, edited, abridged and distributed to new audiences for different purposes? Should we discard our modern proprietorial concern with the integrity of the author and his or her control over the original text—what is now known as 'the moral rights of the author'?

In terms of the tripartite division of religious literature that I emphasised above—doctrinal, controversial, practical—my research for *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment* focused on the first two, though without excluding the third, while my research for *Vanity Fair* focuses on the third, though without excluding the first two. The fact that these categories are not exclusive is illustrated by the names of some of the eighteenth-century societies which distributed free books: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, The Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor, The Unitarian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and the Practice of Virtue. The books they distributed taught doctrine as well as inculcating practice (the latter explicit in the title of the Unitarian Society, though its books were largely concerned with defining their minority theology—still illegal in the 1790s). John Reynolds's *A Compassionate Address to the Christian World* (first published by 1730), one of the books most widely distributed by The Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor, was designed as a book for beginners, incorporating both the process of conversion and the basic principles of Christianity. It is now virtually unknown, though between 1750 and 1795 36,384 copies were distributed.[7] Indeed much of what I read and write about is either not known to or not taken seriously by either intellectual or literary historians.

**Case study: Henry Scougal**

An example of the work I have been doing on editions of popular religious works will illustrate how the methods of book history, literary history, and intellectual history can be brought together to tell us as much about the development of religious thought over time as can a focus on philosophical treatises or bodies of divinity. One of my conclusions in the work I have done on the way religious books were edited in this period so that they crossed denominational or theological boundaries is that if we focus on this process, rather than on the stated differences between groups, then eighteenth-century religious culture becomes much more fluid: in other words, if we emphasise book history more than history of ideas, we get a rather different picture. Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, first published in 1677, went through many editorial and denominational transformations.[8] It is possible to follow the work through from its original manuscript through a variety of editions published for different purposes in England, Scotland, and America over a period of 150 years. Scougal was an episcopalian minister and professor at Aberdeen, who died in 1678, just before he was 28 years old, and not long after the publication of his book. His manuscript was originally written in the form of a lengthy private letter for the guidance of a female friend, a Lady Gilmour. The book's first editor and prefacer, Gilbert Burnet, in origin also a Scottish episcopalian, was to become one of the most influential latitudinarian bishops in the Church of England; he was a close friend of Scougal, and he published the book in London, without identifying the author, to advance the cause of a religion that was neither formal nor sectarian nor enthusiastic nor Calvinist. There were several more London editions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but Scougal wasn't identified as the author until the edition of his works published in 1726, which included for the first time the funeral sermon

for Scougal preached by his friend George Garden, later notorious as a Jacobite and a friend of the French mystic Mme de Guyon. Up to 1726 those involved in editing Scougal's work were his close friends and relations, all Scottish episcopalians (at least in origin) who were hostile to Scottish presbyterianism and Calvinist theology and sympathetic to continental mysticism. Within a few years in the mid-eighteenth century Scougal's book was taken up and propagated in different circumstances and with different intentions in Scotland and England, and as a result it had an extremely wide distribution through two separate and unrelated channels, one moderate Scottish presbyterian and the other English Methodist.

Until 1739 there was no Scottish edition of *The Life of God*. In that year the moderate presbyterian minister William Wishart, Principal of Edinburgh University, published an edition in Edinburgh with a preface by himself, and reissued it in 1740 with Burnet's preface as well. Wishart, though descended from a family of orthodox presbyterian ministers, fought for much of his life to move the thought and practice of the Church of Scotland away from its Calvinist inheritance in the direction of English latitudinarianism. He was a keen follower of the moral philosophy of the third earl of Shaftesbury, and much distrusted by the Edinburgh Presbytery, who tried to prevent him from being appointed as minister to one of the city's churches. Wishart recommended Scougal's book for several reasons, notably as he said in his preface, '*The just notions it contains of real and vital religion, in opposition to the common mistakes concerning it'*. Convincing evidence of Scougal's importance to the modernisers in the Church of Scotland is provided by the number of Scottish editions of *The Life of God* published with Wishart's preface.

In England it was the Methodists, initially George Whitefield, but principally John Wesley, who were responsible for a new kind of interest in and readership of

Scougal. In high-church Oxford Scougal was being read in something much more like his original Aberdeen milieu than was the case in Wishart's moderate presbyterian Edinburgh. John Wesley moved from using *The Life of God* in private, as a guide for himself or one or two others, to promoting it in public, as part of his educational programme for his itinerant preachers and the members of the Methodist societies. He published his abridged edition of Scougal in 1744, omitting Burnet's preface and Scougal's letter format; no explanation for the book's publication or exhortation to readers was deemed necessary. He reissued this abridgement six more times.

Three further unusual editions of *The Life of God* indicate the ways in which the book could be shaped to fit the needs and beliefs of three very different constituencies: German-American colonists, English Unitarians, and high-church Anglicans. Benjamin Franklin published a German translation in Philadelphia in 1756. The instigator of this translation was William Smith, an Aberdeen-educated schoolmaster who emigrated to New York as a tutor, was taken up by Franklin, and abandoned his early presbyterianism to take orders in the Church of England. Publication was funded by a charitable society used by Franklin without much success as a means of anglicising the Pennsylvania Germans, whom he deeply distrusted, and ensuring their allegiance.

In 1782 Joshua Toulmin, minister of the General Baptist Chapel at Taunton, who had moved from Calvinism to Unitarianism, decided to bring out a new edition with significant alterations. Unlike Wesley, whose edition (to which Toulmin does not refer) cut down Scougal's text by about a third without fundamentally altering its meaning, Toulmin made his alterations 'either in some instances to improve the style, where the words, in some degree, were obsolete or uncouth—or to bring it still nearer to that freedom from disputable points, which was evidently the aim of the Author'.

He regarded himself as following in Wishart's footsteps, quoting with approval Wishart's hope that the book would promote 'rational piety' in ministers. But what Toulmin meant by 'freedom from disputable points' and 'rational piety' would have been blasphemy to Scougal: all references to Jesus's divine nature were removed. Toulmin also cut echoes of the Song of Songs (a canonical book which made rational dissenters very uncomfortable) and muted the spiritual sensationalism of Scougal's language, a language with which Wesley was fundamentally in sympathy.

The last significant edition of *The Life of God* was published in 1830 in a collection with the title *Piety without Asceticism, or the Protestant Kempis*. The editor, John Jebb, a Church of Ireland clergyman and eventually Bishop of Limerick, had an awareness of the intellectual lineage of Scougal's work not shown by his eighteenth-century editors. Jebb was deeply influenced by seventeenth-century Platonism and latitudinarianism and especially interested in Gilbert Burnet. In the preface to his edition (which includes other authors besides Scougal) Jebb makes clear that he is fighting a battle against religious publications (presumably by evangelicals) that both 'offend against good taste' and 'give erroneous and distorted views' of the gospel; in their place he offers works 'written with great purity and elegance of manner' and containing 'the very "pith and kernel" of inward practical Christianity'. Jebb was using Scougal to show what seemed to him Anglicanism at its best—Kempis (i.e. *The Imitation of Christ*) without asceticism—and the proper direction he thought it should take in the mid-nineteenth century. None of these last three editions—William Smith's, Toulmin's, and Jebb's—had the impact of Burnet's original editions or those of Wishart and Wesley, but cumulatively they show how in passing through the hands of successive editors Scougal's book was transformed from an originally private letter to a female friend, which circulated among other friends,

into a public means of educating new generations of readers, clerical and lay, male and female, rich and poor, and of combatting what its editors from their very different perspectives perceived to be their contemporaries' false representations of religion.

**2. The dissenting academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860**

My second area of research, dissenting academies, began as an offshoot of my work on one of the most important eighteenth-century academy tutors, Philip Doddridge, but for the last six years it has been a large collaborative project, with over thirty people involved, based at the Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies, and funded by three separate grants from the Leverhulme Trust and AHRC. I am the principal investigator for the Dissenting Academies Project with David Wykes, Director of Dr Williams's Library, as project partner. The aim of this project is to publish online and in print detailed and accurate data and accounts of over 200 academies and their tutors, courses, students, libraries, and surviving archival materials for the two-hundred year period 1660 to 1860. The databases are already published at Dissenting Academies Online, and we are regularly adding to them; the multi-authored volume, *A History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860*, is ongoing and will be published by Cambridge University Press. We are concerned with the higher education of Protestant dissenters in the period when the universities of Oxford and Cambridge required religious tests: in order to matriculate at Oxford (i.e. be admitted as a member) or take a degree at Cambridge, students had to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. As a consequence dissenters from the Church of England—initially Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and later Baptists and Unitarians—set up alternative means of training ministers and providing the equivalent of university teaching, in some cases for lay as

well as ministerial students. From the mid eighteenth century this became increasingly formalised, with several tutors and large numbers of students at the most important academies. From the mid nineteenth century, the academies' original purpose to provide a higher education for dissenters was largely superseded by the founding of London and the provincial universities, which were open to dissenters, and by the eventual reform of Oxford and Cambridge. One of our aims is to replace the existing out-of-date histories, and another is to overturn the unthinking regurgitation by modern historians of the false claim that these institutions were essentially modern and forward-looking as opposed to the backward-looking universities. (See the project website, listed at the end.)

At the outset of the project we pointed out that at present historians do not have reliable answers to the following fundamental questions: how many academies were there in the different periods from 1660 to 1860? What was their geographical distribution? How were academies and students funded? Who were the tutors, and how were they educated? Who were the students? How many were there? What were their family and social origins? What was the proportion of ministerial to lay students? What proportion of ministers were educated at an academy or abroad at a university? How many students came from Anglican families or from overseas? When we formulated the second part of the project, on academy libraries, these were the questions we wanted answered: What books were available, whether by donation, acquisition, or inheritance from earlier academies? What did students actually read? What was the relationship between taught courses and independent study? How up to date were the libraries? How did financially stretched academies manage to get books? What was the role of the academies in training leading dissenting thinkers, in both religious and secular subjects? What part did academies play in maintaining

orthodoxy or in encouraging heterodoxy amongst their students? Did particular academies base religious instruction on the Bible only, or combine it with a prescribed theology textbook, or was free study of philosophy and modern Biblical criticism encouraged? What were the effects on the students' intellectual formation or future ministerial careers of prescription or permissiveness? During the two-hundred year period from the Restoration onwards dissenters faced the questions of what kind of curriculum they should be offering, whether they should be teaching lay students as well as ministerial ones, and whether they should have their own religious tests or not. Given that very different denominations were involved (Baptists, Congregationalists, liberal or rational dissenters of Presbyterian origin (Arians or Unitarians), and Methodists) there were very different answers to these questions. In carrying out my own research for this project, a good deal of it on Congregational, evangelical and Methodist academies, I have become interested in the question of how far institutions were damaged or advantaged by operating outside the universities and in some cases with their own religious tests, a question which I think is germane to the subject of this conference.

**Case study: higher education among evangelical dissenters and Methodists, 1760-1860**

Many evangelicals in the later eighteenth century, both within and outside the Church of England, were anxious about the dangers of formal training, yet some evangelical academies were founded then, and metamorphosed in the nineteenth century into major long-lived colleges. After the University of London became a degree-awarding body in 1836, such colleges, by then largely Congregational, were keen for their students to matriculate and take BA degrees. The Wesleyan Methodists, however,

who effectively became dissenters at the end of the eighteenth century though they didn't call themselves such, did not begin to provide formal training for their preachers until 1834, and the nature and purpose of that training meant that it took longer for them to take a positive attitude to universities. Why was this the case?

Although Doddridge can be regarded as having contributed in important ways to the evangelical revival in its early stages, his influential course for ministerial students at his academy at Northampton, which was continued at the Daventry academy after his death, was disliked by later evangelicals. There were three main reasons: the course for ministerial students lasted five years (at Daventry it was four years); his lectures, posthumously published as *A Course of Lectures on the Principal Subjects in Pneumatology, Ethics, and Divinity* (1763) and used in several dissenting academies, were intellectually demanding and required a great deal of philosophical reading--pneumatology means the study of souls, spiritual beings, and mind; and his basic principle was that the students should investigate all sides of an argument.

In the later eighteenth century three institutions for training ministers were founded by evangelicals on principles that were very different from the tradition descending from Doddridge. The Countess of Huntingdon's College, at Trevecka, Breconshire, Wales, opened in 1768; the English Evangelic Academy, Gracechurch Street, London, opened in 1778; and the Newport Pagnell Academy, Buckinghamshire, opened in 1783. Lady Huntingdon intended her college to train clergy for the Church of England, but things didn't turn out as she wanted. She expected her tutors to be Calvinists (she expelled one who wasn't), and students were admitted on the basis of their vocation and profession of acceptable religious sentiments. The main emphasis was on preaching, with academic study secondary, quite unlike the curriculum in the dissenting academies. The course was of variable

length, with the students often going on lengthy preaching assignments to her chapels in different parts of England. Only a few of her students obtained episcopal ordination; after the secession of her chapels from the Church of England in 1782 and the formation of The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, some were ordained ministers of what was now a dissenting sect, but many more became Independent ministers. The Countess had demonstrated, despite its divisive beginnings, that a nondenominational evangelical institution that focused on preaching not academic study could succeed. The year after her death in 1791 the college moved to Cheshunt in Hertfordshire and was renamed Cheshunt College. Originally it retained its interdenominational characteristics, but by the middle of the nineteenth century it became largely Congregational, with a liberal reputation. In 1850 the small evangelical Newport Pagnell Academy was absorbed into Cheshunt.

The beginnings of the English Evangelic Academy in 1778 are somewhat similar. Its aims were set out in the academy's minute book for 1778. Before admission students had to have recommendations, 'give in an account of their faith, experience, and reasons for going into the ministry', be examined by a committee, and give 'a specimen of their abilities', i.e. as preachers. Tuition would be for not more than two years (though later a further six months was allowed). The students were instructed in English grammar, the doctrines of the gospel, and the framing of discourses, and given 'some proper trials of their spiritual Gifts' before they could start public work. A collection of books in English (i.e. no Latin, Greek, or Hebrew) was provided for the academy. The denominational and disciplinary fluidity of the society was emphasised: students could be sent to dissenting churches or Methodist congregations, or respond to invitations, or go to places 'apparently void of all Gospel Instruction'. Doctrinally, however, there was no leeway: the textbook given to all the

students was Thomas Ridgley's *Body of Divinity*, a detailed explication of the Westminster Assembly's Catechism.[9] Like Trevecka, the English Evangelic Academy started in conscious opposition to the intellectual tradition represented by the dissenting academies, but developed rather differently in the nineteenth century. After a few years it removed to Mile End and then to Hoxton, where in the 1790s it was still called the Evangelical Academy. By 1810, it was teaching the wide range of subjects characteristic of mainstream academies. In 1827 the academy moved to imposing premises in Highbury, and became known as Highbury College. In the 1830s, Highbury was connected by royal warrant to the new degree-awarding University of London, as were several other Congregational colleges around the country, including Cheshunt, and by 1850 several Highbury students had taken London BAs.

A similar move towards a more academic education can be traced among the Baptists. In 1810 the Baptist College, Stepney, opened with the backing of the minister Robert Hall, an MA of King's College, Aberdeen. In order to drum up support, Hall published in 1811 his 'Address in Behalf of the Baptist Academical Institution, Stepney', in which he stated that there was now no apology needed for educating young men for the ministry, 'since, whatever prejudices unfavourable to learning may have formerly prevailed in serious minds, they appear to have subsided, and christians in general admit the propriety of enlisting literature in the service of religion.' He adduced 'the recent multiplication of theological seminaries among protestant dissenters' as proof of this, and went on to argue that the current state of learning made this essential.[10] One of Hall's key points is that ministers must come up to the level of education in society as a whole if their function is not to be damaged. In 1850 Hall's words from 1811 were quoted in the *Annual Report of the Wesleyan Theological Institution*, with the comment that these were *in part* the views on which

the WTI was founded, but that its promoters 'contemplated for its Students other objects, of a disciplinary and directive character, even more important than those which he has specified, and having reference to their peculiar designation as ministers *elect* in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion.'[11] When the WTI report was published in 1850, the Baptist College at Stepney was much changed since 1810: the president Joseph Angus had arranged its affiliation with the University of London, and was soon to oversee the college's move to Regent's Park, the admission of lay students, and the end of the requirement that ministerial students should write accounts of their conversion.

How did the development of Methodist ministerial training compare? It was not until 1834, after years of agonising, that the Methodist Conference agreed to the establishment of an institution for the training of preachers who had previously given evidence of their conversion and call to the ministry and who were placed on Conference's list of reserve—in other words, these students had already passed stringent tests and were experienced preachers. In 1834 the Wesleyan Theological Institution opened in temporary rented premises in Hoxton, and in 1839 further temporary premises were rented at Abney House in Stoke Newington. The Centenary Fund of 1839 paid for suitable new buildings: in 1842 the Northern Branch of the Institution opened at Didsbury, and in 1843 the Southern Branch at Richmond. What were the characteristics of the education provided by the WTI, and how did it compare with the development of the Congregational and Baptist colleges? When Jabez Bunting, President of Conference, opened the Southern Branch at Richmond in 1843 he insisted that the institution was not a college, presumably both to reassure those Methodists who still doubted the wisdom of formal training, and to disparage the intellectual ambitions of the nonconformist colleges. The curriculum was a broad

one (unlike those of the late eighteenth-century evangelical colleges). The non-theological part of the course included Latin, Greek, Hebrew, mathematics, and philosophy, though at a fairly superficial level, and some students struggled. The theological tutor, Thomas Jackson, was a remarkable autodidact and a passionate advocate of formal training for the preachers. The system of Wesleyan theology he taught, also described as 'evangelical Arminianism',[12] was wide ranging but prescriptive, with John Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament* forming the core.

Like the evangelical Congregational and Baptist academies as they developed in the nineteenth century, the WTI recognised that the general spread of knowledge and ideas meant that preachers and ministers had themselves to be adequately educated. But whereas the evangelical academies had been interdenominational before becoming predominantly Congregational (apart from the early Baptist academies), the WTI was by definition Methodist. The theology of the first group was Calvinist, of the WTI Arminian. Whereas the dissenting colleges ceased to insist on evidence for conversion, the students admitted to the WTI were those already on the list of reserve. Whereas the dissenting colleges I have discussed began admitting lay students (just as the liberal academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably Manchester, did), the purpose of the WTI was solely to train ministers. And this explains the last major difference. The dissenting colleges embraced the possibility of their students reading for London degrees. In 1833 Coward College, the successor of the line of colleges descending from Doddridge's academy, opened in Bloomsbury in order that the students could matriculate at University College and take their non-theological courses, and a proportion of them earned degrees. In 1850 the three main predominantly but not exclusively Congregational colleges in

London—Homerton, Highbury, and Coward—amalgamated to form New College, London. At New College there was a large number of specialist tutors (now called professors) and a wide range of subjects taught; the students could take London degrees, and there was provision for lay students, though the majority were ministerial. In contrast only a handful of Richmond students began taking the London University examinations in the 1860s, and Richmond had no university affiliation till 1902, when it became a divinity school of the University of London. In the mid nineteenth century, when Wesleyan Methodism was the largest Protestant denomination outside the Church of England, the WTI was run by the Connexion and existed to serve its aims, both in Britain and Ireland, and in its global missions. Providing university education was not one of these aims. To jump to the early twenty-first century, the Methodist Conference has taken the regrettable decision to remove its training institutions from connexion with the universities of Cambridge and Durham, having already done so at Bristol.

Finally, what does my work contribute to the question 'What place does religion have in the Western research university?' The university provides a place where a dispassionate and disinterested scholar can freely research and interpret religious literature, thought, and practice and the history of religion. The unhappy history of the English universities, with their impositions of religious tests on tutors and students, shows how important it is that the modern university should be a secular space. Its role is not to justify or promote the beliefs or practices of a particular denomination. Conversely, its role is not to justify or promote secularist interpretations of religion. It will benefit from the presence of religious societies and churches within its midst, and conversely religious societies and churches which hold themselves apart from such association will damage themselves.

**Isabel Rivers: selected publications**

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**The Dissenting Academies Project**

Based at the Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies, a collaboration between the School of English and Drama, Queen Mary, University of London, and Dr Williams's Library:

http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/academies.html

http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/portal.html

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