

**Isabel Rivers**

**Vanity Fair and the Celestial City**

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**1**

Senior Vice-Principal, Professor Keeble, colleagues, friends, and family. I'd like to start by saying a little about my current research and how I came to be involved in it, and thanking some of the scholars who have helped me over the years. In the early 1970s I decided that I wanted to embark on a large study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious and moral thought, with the intention of replacing Leslie Stephen's hundred-year-old book on the subject. I had no idea at the time how long this would take me: the resulting two books eventually appeared in 1991 and 2000 as *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*. I began this project by reading the voluminous John Wesley, and as a sideline became hooked on Methodist biography and autobiography; then, another offshoot from this research, in the late 1970s I worked on an essay called 'Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity' for a volume of essays I was editing, *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, published in 1982. At this stage the work of three scholars became and has continued to be very important to me: Frank Baker, Methodist historian and editor of John Wesley, who built up an extremely important collection of manuscripts and books by the Wesley brothers at Duke University Library in North Carolina; Geoffrey Nuttall, historian of puritanism and dissent, who transformed knowledge of the seventeenth-century puritan Richard Baxter and the eighteenth-century dissenter Philip Doddridge; and John Walsh, historian of Methodism and evangelicalism and their interactions, who

has done a great deal to change the ways in which intellectual, political and social historians regard religious history. I never knew Frank Baker, but over the years I have benefited from many discussions with Geoffrey Nuttall and John Walsh and from their critical readings of my work. What characterises the work of all three is that they pay close attention to the details of intellectual inheritance and influence, to the language in which religious thought is expressed, and the ways in which ideas are disseminated through manuscript and print. These approaches were particularly valuable to me at a stage when I was trying to work out a new way of writing that combined literary, intellectual and religious history with history of the book.

Another young scholar who benefited from the work of Geoffrey Nuttall was Neil Keeble. In 1979 I came across Neil's Oxford D.Phil. thesis on Richard Baxter in Dr Williams's Library, and knew I had found a kindred spirit. I am very proud to have helped bring into existence his *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England*, published in 1987, and I am also proud to have contributed essays to two collections edited by him, on *John Bunyan* and on *Writing of the English Revolution*. Well before the second volume of *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment* was published in 2000 I knew what I wanted to do next: another big study, building on my essay of 1982 on 'Dissenting and Methodist Books', which would partly form a sequel to Neil's *Literary Culture of Nonconformity*. This is entitled *Vanity Fair and the Celestial City: Dissenting, Methodist and Evangelical Literary Culture, 1720-1800*, and at one point I thought it was going to be my swan song. How wrong I was. I am constantly being sidetracked from my work on this book by a whole new set of projects resulting from my collaboration with David Wykes, the Director of Dr Williams's Library. David and I set up the Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies in September 2004, when I joined Queen Mary, and much of our

effort recently has been focused on setting up a major new research project, together with Knud Haakonssen and Richard Whatmore of the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History, which will result in about six years' time in the publication by Cambridge University Press of *A History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860*. That one really will be my swan song.

## 2

In this lecture I want to set out some of the questions I'm trying to answer in my current book and give you some illustrations of my methods. I've taken the title of the lecture (as of the book) from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* of 1678, in which Christian, the pilgrim of the title, journeys from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, sometimes alone, sometimes with companions, encouraged by guides, discouraged by mocking or dangerous opponents. What sets him off on his journey is his encounter with the figure of Evangelist, who finds him earnestly reading his book, crying 'What shall I do to be saved?' This book, as we know from Bunyan's marginal notes, is the Bible. Halfway through his journey, Christian and his then companion Faithful come to the town of Vanity, where Vanity Fair is kept all year round. In this fair, the narrator tells us, everything is sold: 'Houses, Lands, Trades, Places, Honours, Preferments, Titles, Countreys, Kingdoms, Lusts, Pleasures, and Delights of all sorts, as Whores, Bauds, Wives, Husbands, Children, Masters, Servants, Lives, Blood, Bodies, Souls, Silver, Gold, Pearls, precious Stones, and what not' (ed. Keeble, p. 73). The narrator emphasises that the way to the Celestial City lies through this town where the fair is kept. But Christian and Faithful are not at home in Vanity Fair, and their presence causes a hubbub. They are dressed strangely, they speak a foreign language, the language of Canaan, and they aren't interested in buying anything. They

are arrested and examined; in answer to the question ‘whence they came, whether they went, and what they did there in such an unusual Garb’, they explain ‘that they were Pilgrims and Strangers in the World, and that they were going to their own Countrey, which was the Heavenly *Jerusalem*’ (p. 74). Bunyan is here referring to a key biblical text, Hebrews 11:13-14, in which the men of faith ‘confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.’ On his title page Bunyan summed up his narrative as ‘the manner of [Christian’s] setting out, His Dangerous Journey; And safe Arrival at the Desired Countrey.’ Faithful, his companion, reaches the desired country by the fastest route—after a travesty of a trial he is burned at the stake in Vanity—whereas Christian escapes from prison and continues on his much longer journey, eventually reaching the Celestial City with another companion, Hopeful. In the course of the two parts of *Pilgrim’s Progress* Bunyan provides his pilgrims with a succession of guides to enable them to resist the temptations of Vanity Fair and reach the City. These are either pastoral or ministerial figures, such as Evangelist, the Interpreter, and Greatheart, who give verbal advice and encouragement, or physical objects which the pilgrims can read and interpret: a book, a parchment, a certificate, a signpost, a note of direction, a pillar, a map, which represent either the Bible itself or guides to putting Christian doctrine into practice. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, of course, is itself such a guide.

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, like so many other books of its kind, advocates rejection of this world for the sake of the next. This traditional Christian perspective, in which real wealth is spiritual, goes back, of course, to the parables and teaching of Jesus recorded in the gospels: ‘Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth . . . But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven’

(Matt. 6:19-21). Christian and Faithful turn away from the wares in Vanity Fair because 'their Trade and Traffick was in heaven' (p. 74). On the other hand, the phenomenal success of this book in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (which has continued to the present day) depended on a number of worldly factors, clearly interrelated, including the expansion of the book trade; the growth of the population and the increase of literacy; better conditions for travel and commerce, within the British Isles and Europe, and also between Europe and North America. These worldly developments coincided with and clearly had an impact on an upsurge in new forms of religious activity across the continents, loosely covered by the label 'the evangelical revival'. In my current book I'm exploring what was written, edited, published, distributed and read by protestant dissenters, Methodists, and evangelicals in the period from 1720 to 1800. These constituted a variety of groups who either dissociated themselves from the established church, or who sought to reform its beliefs and practices from within. The numbers of Methodists, dissenters of an evangelical persuasion, and Church of England evangelicals increased considerably towards the end of the century. Their impact in different fields—religion, politics, education, and literature—was much greater than their numbers, and is still not properly understood.

In this lecture I shall be looking at examples of readers and books, but before I do that I want to emphasise a number of key points: the place of popular religious books in the market; the continued republication of seventeenth-century religious books in the eighteenth century; the international, intercontinental dimension of such publishing; and the ways in which books reached readers.

i) My first point is the place of popular religious books in the market. Thanks to The English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), the online electronic catalogue of books

published in English between 1473 and 1800, scholars are now beginning to work out more accurately than before what categories of book were published in the early modern period, and which were the most popular. There are considerable gaps in the record, which means that we have to proceed with caution. For the statistics I shall be supplying, I am indebted to my friend and colleague the book historian Michael Suarez, editor of the forthcoming *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, volume 5, which covers the period 1695-1830. Suarez has generously allowed me to use his figures in advance of publication, and I'm also drawing on my own contribution to this volume. By popular books I mean those that were published in small formats at low prices, that is to say in octavo size, roughly 5 by 8 inches, or duodecimo size, roughly 4 by 7 inches. Octavo books in the period ranged in price from about 1s to 6s; duodecimo books, pamphlets, and tracts, the ones I'm principally concerned with, ranged in price from about 1d to 1s. Works of scholarship or literature or theology that were published in the larger formats, folio or quarto, were staggeringly expensive by contrast—their prices could go up to 10s or even between 2 and 6 guineas for multi-volume folio works. Only a tiny proportion of the book reading population could afford such books.

The number of books published remained fairly steady for the first half of the eighteenth century, increasing from about 2000 to 2,800 titles a year. In the 1760s this figure doubled and went up steadily each decade, until in the 1790s over 15,000 titles were published each year. It is difficult to provide an accurate account of the proportion of books published by size and subject matter, because, as Suarez repeatedly emphasises, the big expensive books are much more likely to have survived than the small cheap ones. Slightly more than half the surviving books published throughout the eighteenth century were octavos. Duodecimo books, which

are almost certainly under-represented in the ESTC, as they are the ones most likely to have been thrown away, constituted between 12 to 16% of the market in the first 40 years of the century; from the 1750s to the end of the century they constituted about 22% of the market.

What proportion of the books published were religious? Suarez has divided them into eleven categories, one of which he has designated Religion, Philosophy and Ethics. In the first half of the century, this constituted the largest single category of publications, decreasing from 34 to 24%. In the second half of the century this proportion decreased from about 19 to 16%, though the numbers of religious publications rose sharply. In the mid 1750s there were about 550 religious publications a year, and in the 1790s about 800 a year. From the 1760s religious books were overtaken by books on Politics, Government, and Law. Literature, Classics and Belles Lettres, to which literary historians devote most of their attention, formed a much smaller proportion of the market, with fiction, for example, representing between 1 and 3.5% of the total over the century.

How many people could read these books? From the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth, the population of England increased from just over five million to eight and a half million; the literacy rate in England in the early eighteenth century has been calculated as about 45% for men and 25% for women, and in the mid to late eighteenth century as about 60% for men and 40% for women, rising in the early nineteenth century to about 66% for men and 50% for women. So there was a growing and fairly substantial potential readership for the small cheap religious books I am concerned with.

ii) What kinds of books were these? They took many forms—guides to the Christian life (devotional handbooks, sermons, catechisms, and practical conduct

books or ‘monitors’), accounts of Christian experience (journals, letters, autobiographies and biographies), and poems and hymns. Several of the most popular—and this is the second of my key points—were late seventeenth-century works which were edited, abridged, and repeatedly reissued right through the eighteenth century. How should we account for this? Two important recent works of scholarship in the field of book history have given explanations for different kinds of cultural time lag. Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001) is a fascinating and richly illustrated study of what working class readers from about the late eighteenth to the mid twentieth centuries read, and what they made of their reading. Rose considers the reasons for the cultural lag—working-class readers were often about 50 years behind current publications in what they read and the preferences they expressed. Although he makes the point that old second-hand books were cheaper than new ones, his main point is about the cultural conservatism that was caused by a variety of factors—the few precious books that families had at home (usually including the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*), the small number of books that were read aloud or circulated in clubs or libraries, and what he sees as the conservative constraint of early religious reading, which adventurous readers outgrew. The second important work, William St Clair’s *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004), is a very detailed account of the impact of copyright law on what was published and read in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focusing largely on literary works (which was, as we have seen, a minor part of the market). St Clair has emphasised rightly that most readers did not read new works, and that if we are to understand the development of ideas in a period we need to know which texts in which editions reached which readers, a view I am very much in sympathy with. He attaches great importance to what he sees as the dramatic effects

on the publishing market of the Lords' decision of 1774 that the booksellers' claim to perpetual copyright was illegal. He has argued (though some book historians have disputed his findings) that many thousands of cheap copies of what he calls 'the old canon' were made available by enterprising publishers to readers who hitherto could not have afforded them. New books that were in copyright were expensive, and reached only wealthy readers; old books that were out of copyright could be mass produced, sold cheaply and reach a much wider readership. Here we have a legal and commercial explanation of cultural lag, to put alongside Rose's account of cultural conservatism.

But do these explanations work for religious books? There certainly was an 'old canon' of seventeenth-century religious books, such as the much reprinted *A Call to the Unconverted* by Richard Baxter (1658) and *An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners* (1672) by Joseph Alleine. But the important point to make is that such books were edited and reissued at crucial moments in the eighteenth century for specific reasons: in response to doctrinal debates, for example, or because of the rediscovery of particular books by leaders of the evangelical revival who were often at odds with each other and who used these earlier books as a means of spreading their own views. This cannot be seen as a manifestation of cultural conservatism or a commercially induced time lag; rather, as has always happened with changes in Christian thought, the new was presented as a proper interpretation of the old. Different versions of the same work were sometimes issued by different individuals with different viewpoints, edited so as to change the meaning, whether subtly or blatantly. There was an established tradition after the Reformation of Protestants adapting popular Catholic books for their own purposes, and eighteenth-century editors similarly felt free to make earlier works fit the requirements of their own different denominations.

Protestants reshaped Catholic books; Arminians (who thought salvation was offered to all) reshaped books by Calvinists (who thought salvation was offered only to the elect); heterodox Unitarians (who thought Jesus was only human) reshaped books by orthodox Trinitarians (who thought Father, Son, and Holy Ghost formed the three in one God).

iii) The third point I want to stress is that the publication of religious books in England in the eighteenth century was not an insular matter. The Protestant evangelical revivals were international and intercontinental: letters, individuals, books, and ideas crossed Europe from east to west and west to east and sailed to and fro across the Atlantic. German books were translated into English, and English books were translated into German, French, and Dutch. Such translations were made not just for the European market but for American colonists of different European origins. No one has done more to encourage English-speaking scholars to view the evangelical revivals from a European and intercontinental perspective than W. R. Ward, the editor of John Wesley's journals, in his meticulously documented study *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (1992) and his recently published, more accessible account *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History* (2006). All students of Methodism know of the importance of John Wesley's encounter with German-speaking Moravians on his voyage to Georgia in 1735, which, after Wesley's return home to England, had a fundamental and longlasting impact on religious ideas and their expression, most obviously in the language of Charles Wesley's hymns. Among the most influential international religious classics were works by the American Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards, especially his dramatic account of the beginning of the revival in New England, sent in manuscript to old England where the dissenters Isaac Watts and John Guyse with a certain embarrassment published the

first cautiously edited version of *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of many hundred Souls* (1737). As Ward says, 'If ever revival seemed to flag, someone somewhere would reprint the *Faithful Narrative*' (*Early Evangelicalism*, p. 140). A little book that illustrates very clearly the mutual influence of English, German, and American religious traditions at this time is a collection of three short works called *Instructions to Ministers* (1744): it contains two works on preaching, one by the English Congregational minister John Jennings, whose educational methods influenced dissenting academies right through the century, and the other by the German pietist August Hermann Francke, founder of an extraordinary group of educational institutions at Halle in Saxony whose impact was felt throughout the Protestant world, together with the life of the American Congregational minister Cotton Mather, the most important historian of puritan New England, tied together with recommendations by Watts.

iv) How did such books get into their readers' hands? The fourth point I wish to stress is the variety of methods. Some commercial booksellers (in the eighteenth century this term denoted publisher) specialised in the work of specific denominations. For example, the firm of Rivingtons specialised in books published by the established Church, and for a period were official publishers to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). The dissenting booksellers Richard Hett and son, John and Barham Clark, Richard Ford, and James Waugh, published moderate Presbyterian and Congregational authors such as Isaac Watts, Elizabeth Rowe, and Philip Doddridge. The Baptist George Keith specialised in Calvinist authors, including the Methodist George Whitefield. Quaker books, especially those by the seventeenth-century leaders George Fox and William Penn, were largely in the hands of two families, Sowle and Hinde, succeeded in the later eighteenth century by

James Phillips, who also published the Anglican abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. The leading publisher of Unitarian books was Joseph Johnson, who had started out as a Baptist, apprenticed to George Keith, and who continued to publish evangelical authors such as John Newton and William Cowper alongside Unitarians such as Joseph Priestley and Theophilus Lindsey. Roman Catholic booksellers, though in this period they operated outside the law (the statute of James I prohibiting the printing and selling of Catholic books remained in force), freely advertised and sold their wares. They included Thomas Meighan and his family, James Peter Coghlan, and the Keatings. They specialised in works for the small Catholic community, such as the voluminous output of the Catholic Bishop Richard Challoner, but the numbers of books and editions published show that these must also have reached a Protestant readership.

These people were all making money out of selling religious books. However, a very important development in the eighteenth century was the systematic publishing and distributing of religious literature on a large scale not to make money but to save souls. The largest and most important distributor was the SPCK, founded in 1698 and still growing strong; it was a major educational force, but it was hostile to dissenters and in due course, when they arrived on the scene, to Methodists. John Wesley was responsible for one of the most effective publishing and distribution systems for a particular interest group: he kept the burgeoning Methodist Societies under his control supplied with books either written or edited by him. Before 1778 he employed printers in the Methodist strongholds, Bristol, Newcastle, London, and Dublin; thereafter he had his own printing press and printer in London. Books were distributed via Wesley's travelling preachers to all the Methodist preaching houses. Over a period of fifty years Wesley was responsible for the publication of over 400

titles, mostly in the form of cheap duodecimo pamphlets, and many in multiple editions. These figures have long been known, but recently Michael Suarez's statistical work with the ESTC has shown that Wesley was editor or author of more publications than any other single figure in eighteenth-century Britain. Through Wesley's letters and journals it is possible to follow through his first reading of a book to his editing and abridging of it and its circulation to the members of the Methodist Societies, whose numbers were increasing steadily in the second half of the century.

These books, however cheap, were for sale, to those who were already self-defined readers of religious books. A very important way of getting such books into the hands of those who could not afford them and who wouldn't otherwise have known about them was free distribution. In the seventeenth century Richard Baxter was an important practitioner and advocate of free distribution; he gave away large numbers of his own books, and his *Poor Man's Family Book* of 1674 is prefaced by 'A Request to the Rich', urging them to give this and similar books away. He was an active member of the Trust which his fellow nonconformist Thomas Gouge established in 1674 to arrange for the translation of English books into Welsh and their distribution in Wales. In the eighteenth century free distribution was an important aspect of the SPCK's activities: the normal practice was for short pamphlets priced at 3d each to be sold at a discount at 20s. per hundred so that the SPCK's members, usually clergy of the Church of England, could give them away. A significant new development was the establishment of tract societies. It is often assumed that these were an invention of the end of the eighteenth century, with Hannah More's shortlived Cheap Repository Tracts of the 1790s followed by the extremely successful Religious Tract Society, founded in 1799. However, an

important precursor was the longlived but now almost unknown Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor. It was founded in 1750, and should properly be considered the first of the evangelical tract societies; it had a wide membership among Church of England and dissenting evangelicals, with a predominantly lay membership, and by the 1790s it had distributed half a million copies of 39 titles. This figure comes from their own records, which I have analysed; most of their editions do not appear in ESTC, because they are very unlikely to have survived. In 1782 Wesley and Thomas Coke founded a similar Society for the Distribution of Religious Tracts among the Poor, which is known to Methodist historians. These societies operated through subscribing members, who in return for an annual subscription were given packets of books to donate; the books were chosen by committee in the case of the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge, and in the case of Wesley's Society they were chosen, of course, by Wesley.

Another way in which books reached readers was through libraries. Most libraries in this period belonged to educational or ecclesiastical institutions—colleges, universities, cathedrals, or dissenting academies, or took the form of parochial libraries for clergy. It is much more difficult to establish how many religious libraries existed specifically for free access for lay people, because such libraries tend not to survive. Some of the members of tract societies established small libraries in their churches or chapels or in Methodist preaching houses. I'll give two examples of libraries which weren't linked to any society: one established by the devotional and mystical writer William Law, the other by David Simpson, the vicar of Macclesfield. Law, author of one of the religious bestsellers of the eighteenth century, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729), established two small lending libraries in his home village of King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire, one for the benefit of neighbouring

clergy, the other for public use. Above the door of the former schoolhouse, also established by Law, can still be seen the inscription referring to the public library: 'BOOKS OF PIETY ARE HERE LENT TO ANY PERSONS OF THIS OR YE NEIGHBOURING TOWNS'. Until they were moved to Northamptonshire Record Office for safe keeping in 1996, the surviving books in this collection, consisting largely of works published from the mid seventeenth to the mid eighteenth century, many of a high church or mystical tendency, were still housed in King's Cliffe and accessible to readers. My other example, which hasn't survived, was unknown until I investigated the sole copy of the catalogue. David Simpson, a good friend of John Wesley, established *A Library of Books for the Use of the Inhabitants of the Town and Neighbourhood of Macclesfield*, as the catalogue published in c. 1780 describes it. Anyone who applied at Simpson's schoolroom could borrow any book in the catalogue; a stranger had to bring along someone known to Simpson to vouch for the book's return. The catalogue represents a substantial library of 1,165 items (Law's original catalogue of books of piety contained 187). In a religious sense this is an eclectic collection, including works by Anglicans from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries (high church, latitudinarian, and evangelical), seventeenth-century nonconformists (who are very well represented), eighteenth-century dissenters, and Methodists. Interestingly, in addition to religious works, it contains much smaller quantities of history, politics, classics, periodicals, poetry, and some fiction.

### 3

How was this multiplicity of religious books, written to guide people on the path to the Celestial City, actually read? We know a good deal about this from two different

perspectives: first from those who gave advice about how to read such books, whether the books' authors and editors, or those who were recommending them, and second from the accounts that readers themselves provided. What is striking about the act of reading seen from both perspectives is how deliberate and strenuous it was. Not only those who had a professional commitment to ensuring that reading religious books was a means to salvation—Bunyan's Evangelists, Interpreters, and Greathearts—but those who devoured these books had a very clear sense of how, when, and where they should be read. Here are three examples from the point of view of the professionals, taken from different denominations. John Wesley in *The Christian's Pattern* (1735), his edited translation of the *Imitatio Christi* by the fifteenth-century German monk Thomas à Kempis, listed some rules for readers. 1. 'Assign some stated time every day for this employment, and observe it, so far as you possibly can, inviolably.' 2. 'Prepare your self for reading by purity of intention, singly aiming at the good of your soul'. 3. 'Be sure to read, not cursorily or hastily; but leisurely, seriously, and with great attention'. 4. 'Labour to work your self up into a temper [in the sense of state of mind] correspondent with what you read.' The Roman Catholic bishop Richard Challoner in his devotional handbook *The Garden of the Soul* (1740) gave precise instructions 'Of reading good books, or hearing the word of God': 'Let not a day pass without employing at least one quarter of an hour in reading the Scripture, or some spiritual book; and a more considerable time on *Sundays* and holidays: advise with your director what books may be most proper, and endeavour to procure them for yourself and family. Begin your reading by an humble invocation of the Holy Ghost, that you may profit by it: read leisurely and attentively, so as to let the lessons you read have time to make proper impressions upon you, and to sink deep into your heart. Pause awhile upon such places as touch you most: and from time to time excite

affections and resolutions in your soul, suitable to the subject you are reading of' (pp. 172–3). The Congregational minister John Mason, in his book of sermons intended to be read in families, *The Lord's Day Evening Entertainment* (1752), after giving advice about how to read the Bible went on to say: 'as for other Books, use none in your Closet that are controversial or difficult to be understood; but only those that are most plain and devotional, most suited to your Capacity and Taste, and most proper to excite a true Spirit of Devotion in the Heart.—Read with Recollection and Thought; and leave off when the attention flags.' (vol. 3, pp. 132-3) There is general agreement on the need for time, care, and the appropriate frame of mind.

Did people actually read religious books in this way? It's easy to be cynical about this. Of course there were readers who read religious books looking for what excitement they could find, and screening out the rest. Bunyan pointed out that some of his critics condemned *Pilgrim's Progress* as a romance (p. 139), and Jonathan Rose in the book I mentioned earlier has several examples of nineteenth-century readers for whom *The Pilgrim's Progress* was an adventure story, not an allegory. George Eliot (herself a fervent evangelical as an adolescent in the 1830s) has a delightful description in her early story of 1857, *Janet's Repentance*, of a character named Mrs Linnet who gets through a large number of religious books by 'confining her perusal to the purely secular portions, which bore a very small proportion to the whole', such as deaths from smallpox, or coaching accidents (ch. 3). William Law warned against the pride some well-to-do readers took in their collections of religious books. In *The Spirit of Prayer* Part 2 (1750) Law gives a damning vignette of a character named Philo, who 'will ride you forty Miles in Winter to have a Conversation about spiritual Books, or to see a Collection larger than his own' (5<sup>th</sup> edn 1770 p. 6).

Conversely, there are also many examples of readers with a thirst for such reading, who read with the concentration of time and effort recommended by the authors and editors. Here are three. The dissenting minister Samuel Bury published in 1720 an account of the life and death of his wife Elizabeth, drawing heavily on the diary she kept all her life; the book went through four editions in five years. She is an example of the kind of well-to-do reader who had a closet (as referred to in the passage I quoted from John Mason), a small room for reading and writing to which she could retire. She read extremely widely, but her favourite reading was the Bible together with the commentaries of the dissenting minister Mathew Henry. From the age of eleven she got up at four to read in her closet (for the last 30 years of her life she got up at five), spent most of the morning there, and retired to it again in the evening (chs 6, 9). There is plenty of evidence of those without such advantages of time and place doing what they could to create them. Thomas Jackson, the nineteenth-century editor of John and Charles Wesley and other early Methodist writers, and an understudied figure of major importance for the dissemination of Methodist literary culture, was a farmer's labourer as a boy with little access to books, and his autobiography, published posthumously in 1873, is full of fascinating details of the stages by which, as a young travelling Methodist preacher, he acquired books and educated himself. In the summer when he was on circuit he read in the fields; in the winter he got up at three and read for several hours before the farmers' families with whom he stayed appeared, and in this way managed to read nearly fifty books a year (*Recollections*, chs 2, 6). This thirst for religious books was shared by some of the recipients of tracts distributed by the societies. Eliza Toms, daughter of the dissenting minister Isaac Toms of Hadleigh, Suffolk, who was a subscriber to the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor for over forty years,

wrote to the Society in 1795 describing the circulation of these books. She provides a very rare glimpse into this world, from which we can see how these books affected even the illiterate: ‘Applications to my father for books are innumerable; not only the poor in this place, but those of ten or twelve villages round, petition for them: it is painful to him to send them away without granting their desire, though he is often obliged to do it, and they wait till a supply comes. . . One, who found good impressions from perusing [*A Compassionate Address to the Christian World*], lent it to her neighbour, who reading aloud was overheard by a man returning from his day's work: he stopped some time, went home and told his wife he must have the book: though he could not read, she was able. The next day they inquired after it, found it was borrowed, went to the owner, who readily gave them what they asked for, and my father has now made up her loss.’ The book to which Eliza Toms refers, John Reynolds’s *Compassionate Address*, is now virtually unknown—only 13 copies survive. I haven’t been able to establish its date of first publication. But it was (apart from the Bible) the second most widely distributed book on the Society's list, closely following Isaac Watts's well known *Divine Songs for Children*. If we are to understand *how* eighteenth-century readers of religious books read, we must recover *what* they read.

#### 4

As an historian of religious books I have little in common with these readers, who, like Bunyan’s Christian, were on their way to the Celestial City, book in hand. What concerns me is the pilgrimages of the books themselves, and what happened to them on their journeys through the hands of different editors, abridgers, and interpreters. Bunyan himself used the metaphor of the book as pilgrim in the verses prefacing the

second part of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1684), tracking the journey of the first part to France, Holland, Scotland, Ireland, and New England. Many years ago when I was comparing John Wesley's drastic abridgement of the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress* with the original, in which, to the fury of eighteenth-century Calvinist readers, the Arminian Wesley modified Bunyan's theology, I realised how important it was to establish exactly what was done to books and why. As the conclusion to my lecture I want to give three examples of the ways in which books were transformed for different constituencies of readers. Two are from the seventeenth century and one from the eighteenth, and their genres—devotional handbook, autobiography, and biography—were among the most popular. *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677) by the Scottish episcopalian Henry Scougal went through more inter-denominational adventures than most books. The manuscript survives in the National Library of Scotland. First edited by Gilbert Burnet, Scottish episcopalian and later Anglican bishop, it was reissued in the eighteenth century by the Scottish moderate presbyterian William Wishart as part of his battle with presbyterian orthodoxy, abridged by John Wesley for his Methodist societies, translated into German in America under the auspices of Benjamin Franklin as part of a programme to keep the Pennsylvania Germans under control, and openly doctored by the baptist Unitarian Joshua Toulmin, who removed all references to Jesus's divine nature, and also cut echoes of the Song of Songs. Finally, it was included by the Bishop of Limerick, John Jebb, in his *Piety without Asceticism, or the Protestant Kempis* (1830), partly to show up what was wrong with some nineteenth-century evangelical publications. All these people admired Scougal's book and were keen to publicise it, but each one made something slightly different of it and had a particular reason for giving it prominence.

My second example is the journal of the evangelical dissenting layman Joseph Williams, of which the manuscript survives in Dr Williams's Library. This is a rather different case, in that the printed versions differ considerably from the manuscript original. In his journal Williams was highly critical of what he saw as the decay of dissent, and though his view of the established church in general was also very pessimistic, it was the English and Welsh Methodist clergy who seemed to him to be providing a true evangelical ministry. He turned to the Methodists, seeking out Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Grimshaw among others. When his heavily abridged journal and letters were first published in 1779, 24 years after his death, the editor, Williams's minister and friend Benjamin Fawcett, deleted all the references to the Methodists, presumably for reasons of denominational loyalty among others. This very popular book thus seriously misrepresented Williams's views of the state of religion in the 1730s and 40s. It wasn't until Williams's great-grandson Benjamin Hanbury got his hands on the papers in the nineteenth century that Williams's Methodist predilections were first cautiously revealed.

My final example is a biography which I have proved to my own satisfaction was the most popular religious life published in the period from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Dissenters, Methodists, and evangelical Anglicans all published collections of examples of holy lives, drawn from different denominations, though only Wesley and Wesleyan Methodists included post-Reformation Roman Catholics. These multi-volume collections ranged in size from folios down to duodecimos, and they are most likely to have been held in lending libraries, though many of the lives were available in individual cheap versions. They included laymen as well as ministers, and some women. A few years ago I spent many happy hours trying to work out the criteria for inclusion in these large and

varied collections, and what they could tell us about what their compilers and readers thought was the exemplary Christian narrative. I would like briefly to suggest reasons for the popularity of the biography that was most often included, that of John Janeway. Janeway, a member in the 1650s of the Cromwellian Church of England and a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, died of consumption at the age of 23 before he could begin the ministerial career for which he was destined. His life, written by his brother James and published in 1673 under the title *Invisibles, Realities*, with a preface by Richard Baxter, was much abridged in the biographical collections. The original narrative includes Janeway's letters of advice to friends, his sayings, and his affectionate leavetaking of his brethren in his last illness and his rapturous dying speeches. The later abridgements focus particularly on these last two elements. Janeway's life evidently provided for over a hundred and fifty years a distillation of the essential ingredients of dissenting, Methodist and evangelical literary culture: a demonstration before witnesses that life is a pilgrimage to Bunyan's desired country and death an ecstatic entry into it.