

Influencing and Influenced by the World: Methodism on the Shore

by

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Excessive debt in the twenty-first century United States is on its way to becoming the global Fifth Horseman, riding close behind war, pestilence, famine, and fire.

From Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy* (2006)

Several years prior to the beginning of the Great Recession, political analyst Kevin Phillips warned about a pending economic disaster. In *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (2006), he argued that a group of “paper entrepreneurs” in the finance, real estate, and insurance sectors had combined to orchestrate a “perverse transformation” in the nation’s economy from manufacturing to finance. The resulting “debt-and-credit industrial complex” set the global economy up for a wild ride down a mountain of questionable private and public debt.

Phillips maintained that concerns about maintaining a reliable energy supply and the worldwide upsurge in fundamentalist religious belief combined with “borrowed money” to create a potent and dangerous mix. His analysis should not be taken lightly. In the 1960s, Phillips devised the Re-

publican “Southern Strategy” that resulted in the election of Richard Nixon. Later published as *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), he outlined how the Sunbelt would become a GOP stronghold.

Phillips admitted that he underappreciated the influence of religion on politics in the 1960s, as did many secularists on the left. He subsequently learned, however, that mixing religion and politics was “as American as apple pie.” In interpreting the history of religion’s impact on politics, Phillips looked to explain the evolution of a worrisome American Theocracy at one point in time. By contrast, history presents many examples of religion serving the public good. As an example, look no further than the development of Methodism on the Eastern Shore.

Beginning with John Winthrop’s founding of a “City on a Hill,” American religious leaders have attempted to influence the world.

Seventeenth-century Puritans also understood, however, that they faced a dilemma. How can you live in the world and not be adversely influenced by it?

Methodism arrived on the Eastern Shore just as the world was being turned upside down during the American Revolution. In the 1770s, pioneering circuit rider Francis Asbury planted the seeds of Methodism on the Shore. Other preachers like Freeborn Garretson in Caroline County continued to carry the message that salvation could be obtained through a direct personal relationship with God. That message resonated with Americans seeking their independence from Britain. The quest for individual liberty dovetailed nicely with a longing for personal salvation.

As important as the Methodist message were its messengers. During the Revolution, the Anglican Church became identified with the Loyalist cause and subsequently suffered a decline in membership. Moreover, Anglican ministers preached at their congregations, as opposed to the energized style of the Methodist circuit riders, who traveled from place to place holding services in private homes. A contemporary drew the comparison between the latter and their Anglican counterparts: "The people used to ill-read services and dull written sermons

flocked to hear these marvelous preachers who prayed without book and preached without manuscript; who went on horseback to the people instead of waiting for these to come to them."

By the 1830s, thanks to the work of Garretson, Asbury and others, Methodists and Baptists displaced Anglicans as a leading denomination from the Chesapeake south. Kevin Phillips recognized that the late 18th and early 19th centuries were a harvest time for evangelicals. Between 1776 and 1806, for example, the number of Methodists grew from just a few thousand to approximately 130,000 nationally. Their preaching style and beliefs had influenced the American fight for independence while patriot feeling had, in turn, aided in Methodism's growth.

In the early 19th century, the camp meeting sustained that growth. On the Eastern Shore, camps were established early on. The Wye Camp in Queen Anne's County, for example, dated to 1810. Rev. Henry Boehm, who rode circuits on Delmarva, later recalled, "Worshiping in the groves, God's first temples, was a novelty, and called out people by the thousands."

Some observers labeled early Methodist camps as "wild and weird." A raised preachers' platform stood among homemade tents. At night, torches illumi-

nated the preachers and their listeners, creating “a sight that once seen would be stamped upon the memory. Especially vivid would be the remembrance of the midnight sermon when the preacher thundered forth the terrors of the law and portrayed the final judgment.”

Responding to preaching directed “straight at the sinner’s heart,” camp participants expressed the power of the Holy Ghost with shouts, groans and tears. Some experienced “the jerks,” a spasmodic quaking of the entire body. Accounts of camps on the Shore often observed that the sounds of those seeking salvation could be heard miles away. Both the anonymity of the crowd as well as the setting encouraged emotional release. Many campers had never been in a crowd of more than a few hundred, but gatherings on the Shore could attract thousands.

Adherents of the Holiness Movement eventually dominated Methodist camp meetings. They believed that salvation could only be achieved through a “second blessing” of the Holy Ghost that occurred after conversion. They also insisted that Christian Holiness manifested itself in the way you lived. At a camp in Maine, for example, Francis Willard removed her jewelry and finery after receiving the second blessing, separating herself from worldly things.

She later founded the Women’s Christian Temperance Union that eventually had branches in most towns on the Shore. She rejected worldly things and, in turn, sought to deliver the world from “demon rum.”

After the Civil War, camp meetings evolved into institutions that combined religion and recreation and offered a platform for a variety of reformers, including advocates of prohibition, aid to the urban poor and improved sanitary standards in cities and towns. (Cleanliness is next to godliness.) Ocean Grove, New Jersey, stood as the “Queen of Camp Meeting Resorts” with a summer population of thirty thousand and an auditorium that held ten thousand. Tents around the auditorium included several rooms and a small porch. Some campers constructed comfortable cottages, and hotel accommodations were available. In the 1870s, the Grove served as the model for establishing Rehoboth Beach.

On the Eastern Shore, camp accommodations also grew more pleasant. In 1890, the *Denton Journal* ran an article focusing on “Camp Meeting Girls.” They changed summer gowns three times a day, in part, to attract young men. Meanwhile, their mothers busied themselves in a series of tents connected together to create separate bedrooms and a parlor. The latter could be fur-

nished with wicker settees, a flowered carpet, shelves loaded with bric-a-brac, and a "little cabinet organ."

Clearly, worldly things had wormed their way back into camp meeting. Partly, the explanation lay in the increasing prosperity of Methodists who adhered to the Protestant Work Ethic of "Industry, Sobriety and Thrift." As businessmen and farmers, they made, sold or grew things. These were no "paper entrepreneurs" creating wealth based on dubious credit.

In addition to their accommodations at camp, Methodist prosperity was evident in the churches. In 1910, for example, a new granite façade appeared on the Ebenezer Methodist Church in Easton. Some regarded such embellishments as evidence of the "Episcopalization" of their denomination, along with sermons delivered by an increasingly educated clergy.

In 1865, remembering services at the Wye Camp Ground, Rev. Boehm worried that his denomination had "retrograded." He observed that people and preachers in the old days were "patterns of plainness." The preaching was more direct and "aimed at the heart." By contrast, Boehm insisted, "We conform more to the world, and have lost much of the spirit of self-denial they possessed."

At the time Boehm recorded his reminiscences, the Methodist

Episcopal Church split. Supporters of the Confederacy during the Civil War established the M.E. Church, South. After news of Lee's surrender was read in 1865 in the Oxford M.E. Church, the story goes that Southern sympathizers left by the windows to avoid walking under an American flag at the church door. They started a Methodist Protestant Church congregation in town. Finally, Eastern Shore blacks already attended their own African Methodist Episcopal Churches. The split among Methodist denominations lasted into the 1950s, when the United Methodist Church was organized. After a large new United Methodist church opened in Easton, the granite from the old Ebenezer Church was sold to the Episcopalians to expand their parish hall. Thus the Episcopalians were "Methodistized."

Kevin Phillips noted that mainline congregations like the United Methodist Church lost ground at the end of the 20th century to fundamentalist denominations that stressed the inerrancy of the bible and evangelized a search for personal salvation. It was these churches that he classified as espousing "radical religion" and contributing to global economic and military peril.

The Methodist experience on the Eastern Shore illustrates the challenges inherent in influencing

the world while also being influenced by it. Not all the outcomes, however, seem perilous. In the 18th century, the preaching of the circuit riders reinforced the effort to gain American independence. In the 19th century, many Methodists opposed slavery and supported the Union cause. By the early 20th century, camp meeting speakers outlined efforts to aid the poor and reduce alcohol consumption that constituted a real social problem. Certainly, outside events such as the Civil War split congregations. With growing prosperity, church edifices and camp meeting accommodations exhibited a creeping worldliness. Phillips pointed out that some 21st-century preachers link financial fulfillment with personal salvation, connecting the debt and credit revolution to the quest to be born again. We forget at our own peril, however, that these are the same kinds of folks who brought us “Industry, Sobriety and Thrift.”