

Acting Methodist: A history in theater

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

Mario Cuomo, no mean rhetorician, is no expert on Christian denominations. Analyzing Hillary and Bill Clinton's rhetorical styles, Cuomo said: "She is more a Methodist and he is more theatrical." I scurried to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* to see if it listed the Theatrical Church. But there was nothing in between the Syrian Orthodox Church of America and the True Orthodox Church of America. I can't write about an unregistered church, so let's talk about Hillary's. Based on the few times I've been around her, I'd say she is United Methodist to the core. But is Cuomo correct to imply that Methodist means untheatrical?

Peter Cartwright, the preeminent frontier Methodist revivalist who ran against Abraham Lincoln for the Illinois legislature in 1832, was not untheatrical. Cartwright boasted of having out-debated an infidel on a riverboat by grabbing his beard and wrestling him to the ground. That's taking rhetorical persuasion to an extreme. When someone asked Cartwright, "How is it that you have no doctors of divinity in your denomination?" Cartwright replied: "Our divinity is not sick and don't need doctoring." (I owe that one to Doug Adams's *Humor in the American Pulpit*.)

Take as another example of Methodism the politically savvy Samuel P. Jones, who was trying to defeat Samuel M. "Golden Rule" Jones as mayor of Toledo in 1899. Is this Jonesian Methodist outburst untheatrical? "Half of the literary preachers in this town are A.B.s, Ph.D.s, D.D.s, LL.D.s and A.S.S.s." Adams quotes Sam Jones's response to charges that he was too theatrical: "I hold up the looking glass, and you people laugh at your carcasses."

Diane H. Lobody, a church historian, introduces us to female Methodists, notably Catherine Garretson (1752-1849), a blue-blood (Livingston family) convert to Methodism, who learned to take on all comers. A Dutch Reformed pastor invited her family to Holy Communion, but drew back when he learned she was a Methodist. "We entered into some arguments on the doctrines of the Methodist Church." He

told her some “absolute falsehoods of the Arminian Creed, and then he said he did not believe any one of that sect would ever go to heaven.” She turned the other cheek and said the Methodist-Arminians believed many Calvinists would go there. Untheatrical?

David Hempton in his fine new *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* is explicit on the subject. Reporting on Methodist love feasts, camp meetings and “prolonged outdoor revivalistic extravanganzas,” he summarized: “Each had a different theatrical style and contributed something distinctive.” Governor Cuomo, welcome!

Nineteenth-century Methodists on the frontier got beat up in scenes that make for good theater. One old history book totted up the damages: “Washburn was hooted through the villages. Hedding cursed with outcries on the highway. Dow’s nose was publicly wrung. Sabin was knocked down, and struck on the head, to the peril of his life, with the butt of a gun; Wood was horsewhipped; . . . Willard, wounded in the eye by a blow, the effect of which was seen through his life; . . . Kibby, stoned while preaching, and Taylor drummed out of town.”

John Wesley, the great first Methodist, knew a thing or two about theatrics, as this story suggests: “It is related of Mr. Wesley, that, riding one day to preach, he met a pompous country magistrate, mounted on his stately charger, who, looking with ineffable scorn upon the little apostle of Methodism, exclaimed in a rough tone of voice, ‘I shall not give the road to a fool.’” Wesley very calmly reined his horse to the left and quietly replied, “*But I will.*”