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HOLINESS MOVEMENT

The Holiness Movement (HM) was the dominant force in nineteenth-century American Protestantism. Although the HM eventually spawned a family of denominations which remain to this day, its influence in the nineteenth century extended to a much broader swath of American religion, including every major Protestant tradition except for Old School Presbyterians. Varying terminology was used to describe holiness in different segments of the HM, but its central concern was to promote the sanctification of Christian believers through a definite second work of grace subsequent to conversion. The HM was also marked by an emphasis on the active outworking of personal holiness through various social reform efforts.

History

The HM was part of the American revivalist tradition, which had roots in the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, and the frontier camp-meeting revivalism which emerged in the early nineteenth century. Historians usually trace the beginnings of the HM as a distinct movement to the “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Christian Holiness,” an interdenominational parlor-room meeting in New York City led by Phoebe Palmer. Although Palmer was a Methodist with many connections to high-ranking Methodist leaders, her meetings were attended by leaders from other traditions, such as Edgar Levy (Baptist), Thomas Upham (Congregationalist), William Boardman (Presbyterian), Asa Mahan (president of Oberlin College), and Charles Cullis (Episcopal). Through such influential relationships, the HM emphasis on a definite second work of grace was spread through American Protestantism, though several distinct strains of HM teaching emerged (Wesleyan, Keswick, Oberlin). Wesleyan teaching on Christian “perfection” blended with American Revivalism and was supported by general ascendancy of Arminian theology, producing a dramatic and expectant atmosphere in the period leading up to the Civil War. This expectancy contributed in part to the association between HM leaders and social activism on such causes as the abolition of slavery, relief for the poor, temperance and women’s rights.

The dramatic central event in the history of the HM was the Layman’s Revival of 1858, which resonated across the United States, as well as in Canada, and Britain. This revival began with a series of daily prayer meetings organized by

businessmen in New York, which soon spread to other cities. These interdenominational events were supported by a wide spectrum of denominations, and they were supported by mass revival campaigns by itinerant preachers such as Phoebe Palmer and James Caughey.

In the postwar period, the focus of the HM shifted from informal, lay-led initiatives to formal, clergy-led mass revival efforts, organized by the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness (founded 1867) and its Methodist-dominated leadership. The new Association took on a leading role within the movement, and continued to hold sway the 1870s. However, from 1875, as the HM continued to solidify its institutional structures, it lost its non-polemical, activist, and interdenominational character, and started down the road to eventual schism and denominationalization.

Enduring Legacy

The most obvious aspect of the HM legacy is the denominational family that it birthed. Denominations such as the Free Methodists, Nazarenes, Wesleyans, Salvation Army, and Church of God are enduring testimony to the HM's impact on US Christianity. It is also significant that the Pentecostal churches, now arguably the dominant force in global Protestantism, emerged from within US Holiness circles. A less obvious legacy is the social activist strain of US Christianity, now more associated with liberal Protestantism than conservative Holiness denominations. By the time of the emergence of the "Social Gospel" movement in the early twentieth century, Holiness teaching had turned increasingly to matters of piety to the exclusion of its earlier emphasis on social activism. However, as Timothy Smith, Melvin Dieter, and Donald Dayton have argued, liberal Protestantism's social emphasis and the Holiness Tradition's pietistic emphasis have common roots in the nineteenth-century HM.

References and Resources

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