

Beginning of Holiness Movement Today:

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Similarities in Societal Secularity

When I was first introduced to Sheila, it was an unforgettable experience. It was on a US Airways jet at 38,000 feet altitude, flying at cruising speed. The year was 1987. Though I had never met her before, I felt as if I had known her for years. My encounter with Sheila was, and is to this day, one of the richest and most frustrating experiences of my life. For Sheila Larson (her *nom de case study*) was one of the characters introduced to all of us by Robert Bellah and his associates in *Habits of the Heart*, written to epitomize and describe the highly subjective, privatized religion of so many Americans. Sheila is a picture of a brand of American secularism that to this day haunts me and drives me to my knees.

As Bellah describes her, she is a young nurse who has received a great deal of therapy. We don't know for what, but that really doesn't matter. Sheila, like many Americans, professes no allegiance to any particular church or denomination. In fact, unlike many in our culture she is comfortable in recognizing that her religion, or her "faith" as she calls it, is of her own making, and, seemingly without hubris and with a theological naiveté, she calls her faith "Sheilaism."

Listen to Sheila's own words: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Bellah writes, "Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. As she defines her faith, 'my own Sheilaism,' she said: 'It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.'" If that is as close as we come these days to working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, then Bellah is correct when he says, "Sheilaism" somehow seems a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life, and what that tells us about the role of religion in the United States today."

Many, if not most of us, would see Sheila Larson as strong anecdotal evidence for what we have come to regard as the secularization of the Church. Our task is to narrow the field somewhat to ask about the presence of "Sheilas" in our Nazarene congregations remembering that she is a model of but one type of secularization in the Church. In this paper we will try to frame our discussion against the backdrop of the early years of the Church of the Nazarene and the Holiness Movement attempting to speak from the perspectives of both the historian and the sociologist and the heart of a pastor.

A great deal has been written about the social currents that became the turn of the century American experience and gave birth to the Holiness Movement. A brief review of these should suffice to save time by not replotting ground already well turned.

Immigration, Migration and Mobility. The Holiness Movement was set in a time of massive immigration and migration with all the social dislocations and relocations that go along with it. Both newcomers to our shores and those pushing the edge or filling in the remaining frontiers were on the move. Mobility socially ("Irish need not apply" gave way to "Italian need not

apply”), geographically (“Sooners”) and politically (the South transformed from Republican to Democrat) were the order of the day.

Urbanization. While it would take to the middle of the Twentieth Century to reach the point where more Americans lived in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas than in rural ones, the move to the cities was on. That was where the jobs were in the newly emerging industrial economy. With urbanization the ills and sins of society were compacted and magnified. The poor and even underclass were now in concentrated areas, missing out on the upward mobility enjoyed by so many others.

Industrial/Technical Revolution. Americans were leaving the farm looking for more stable jobs and income. Immigrants were often going right to the mills, mines and factories never to be in touch with America’s rural tradition. Workers not only competed with each other for jobs but with machines. Work became depersonalized (people were human machines), compartmentalized (a worker only did one or two functions in the overall process) and standardized (artisanship and craftsmanship literally went out with the horse and buggy).

Affluence. With jobs plentiful during boom cycles, there was more money and more discretionary income. The industrial economy called for a new class of worker, the manager. These were the people who ran the human machines. The growth of this middle class between owner and worker paralleled but was different than the old middle class of shopkeeper and professional.

Religious Movement. The Methodist and Baptist Churches that had eclipsed the older “Main Line” Congregational, Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches were themselves eclipsed by the Holiness Movement and the newly emerging Holiness and Pentecostal Churches. Parachurch organizations were spawned by the dozens for social change, doctrinal emphasis and denominational renewal. This was a great era of Revivalism. Cults were on the rise as well in the freewheeling market place of American Religion.

It may not be great historiography, but as we approach the turn of another century, we can say with a surprising degree of accuracy, “What goes around, comes around.” In each area discussed there is a striking parallel to the social currents at the turn of this century.

We are in an age of great immigration. According to Warner nearly as many people entered the country in the past quarter century (1966-1990) as did between 1890 and 1914 (14 million compared to 17 million). These new immigrants are far more heterogeneous racially, ethnically, linguistically and religiously than those coming to America a century ago.

Urbanization has continued apace and incorporated suburbanization in many ways. The revitalization sometimes seen in major city downtown areas usually leave the poor out of the prosperity and benefit the upper middle class in gentrification. Previously the culture and economy changed from agrarian to industrial it is now on the downhill side of the change from industrial to information/service. Workers still compete with machines for jobs. There has been a decline in the importance of the manager class due to companies going lean and mean and the rise of a technical class of workers serving the computer and electronics industry.

Even though there is talk that future generations will not achieve the prosperity of the World War II generation and the Baby Boomers waiting to inherit their money, the sheer affluence of this age is mind boggling by any past or present standard.

Having made these comparisons, how did secularism manifest itself in the era of the Holiness Revival, and how did the Movement respond to what it perceived to be secularizing forces in the culture? What can we learn from earlier efforts to confront secularizing forces in the Church today?

As for religion and spirituality, we face an even greater *potpourri* of options in this realm than our turn of the last century forbears. They too lived in a day of religious innovation, parachurch organizations, the secularization of older denominations and the beginning of new denominations (in our case, often protodenominations like the Vineyard or the Willow Creek Association). We contend with Eastern religions and a host of New Age cult derivatives.

So, in reality, Sheila's world is not that much different than her great-grandmother's. The differences seem to be more of degree than kind. Thus, from the perspective of the historian and the sociologist maybe the sky isn't falling, even though many pastors, Church leaders and lay people think it is.

If we could use our imaginations to fill in and complete Sheila's story, it may have been some of the same needs that brought Sheila to a Nazarene church as propelled her great-grandparents toward the Holiness Movement. Mobile and migratory great-grandparents left the farm for the greater economic opportunity and security of the city. Once there, the poverty and morality of the urban landscape overwhelmed them. Their anxieties over their own dislocation brought them to a Holiness Revival tent meeting where they were saved. From there, they were nurtured in one of the churches which was a precursor to the Nazarene Church. The Church became the living expression of their new faith. It was their new identity group. It was their safe haven in a wicked world. It was where they wanted to raise their children.

In the Church's many revivals, Sheila's great-grandparents heard "full salvation" preached. They came to know it as Entire Sanctification. It was during a two-week revival meeting on a night when the glory came down that her grand-parents went to the altar, sought the blessing, prayed through, died to self, put their all on the altar and got sanctified. They devoted the rest of their lives to serving the poor and sharing the Gospel. When their Church became a part of the newly formed Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene, they saw that they were a part of God's plan to bring centers of holy fire to every city in the nation.

Sheila's grandmother was raised in the Church, almost literally. She was there just days after she was born, and her parents took her to the mission and orphanage where they held services. To be a part of the Church meant a sharing of life in profound ways. Adherence to a list of rules helped keep everyone on the same page. Things that Sheila's great-grandmother would never have dreamed of doing, list or no list, now were explicitly taught as the marks of true Holiness. In fact, Sheila's grandmother heard frequent sermons about conserving and preserving the Holy Fire that Sheila's great-grandmother found rather odd, if not for their content then certainly for their frequency. She had always seemed to get the glory when she

worked at the mission. Saving people had a way of doing that. But the mission was gone now, along with the orphanage. Indeed, at the last General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene, the buzz had been that there wasn't enough money to feed and save souls so we had better use our resources to save them. They did manage to pass a resolution condemning "promiscuous mixed bathing."

Sheila's grandparents liked the Nazarene Church because it gave them a foundation. They had seen splits in other Church groups in their community over "Modernism," but that wasn't going to happen to the Nazarenes. They didn't even have a seminary to educate their preachers. Keep our preacher boys close to home and they won't be going off on these foolish notions.

As far as the grandparents were concerned, Sheila's mother was safe in the bosom of the Nazarene Church. The devil wasn't going to get their girl. No way! They didn't let her listen to popular music, go to shows, attend movies and a host of other things. Why the General Assembly had even warned the Nazarenes to avoid the use of jazz-sounding music in church services and the dramatic arts on their college campuses! Furthermore, sports were, at most, to be intramural sports if played at all.

Sheila's grandparents saw the end of the depression. Living through the depression had left its mark on the family. Granddad had worked on a construction gang in the WPA. President Roosevelt told everyone that they needed the Government to get them out of the economic disaster. Many Nazarenes received help from the Government in those years. The Church didn't seem to be quite as close-knit as it used to be. The earlier repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment of the Constitution left the temperance folks, many of them in the Holiness Movement feeling as though they were being blamed for all the ills that it had spawned.

Sheila's parents were two Nazarene kids who met at teen camp. They never much questioned the doctrine they were taught. Of course there was a God, although they didn't see why He had asked Nazarenes to be so restricted in their life style when their Methodist and Presbyterian friends went to church and could still do all that "stuff." There were many trips to the altar with guilt-ridden hearts, but they never seemed to get "it" like the Evangelists said they should.

Sheila's dad went to war in the Pacific. Her parents married before he shipped out, but they postponed any attempt at beginning a family till after the war. She was the last of three kids to be born to the Larsons. She was born under the sign of Eisenhower prosperity. Mom and Dad Larson relocated after the war to a major northern city where Dad got a job in a large manufacturing concern. He became a foreman and then a manager of other foremen. Her parents didn't always go to Church though when they did it was a Nazarene Church.

When Sheila was in elementary school her parents were divorced. Sheila's grandmother came for a while to stay and provide some stability as her mother went out to work. During the time of separation preceding the divorce, her mother had gone to the Nazarene Church frequently, but after the divorce when she asked to join the Church, they told her that divorced people were not eligible for membership unless they were the innocent party in adultery. The family never went to Church again except when they were visiting Sheila's grandparents. So Sheila made up her own faith. It was really little pieces of many other people's faith put together like

one of those omelet buffets where you tell the chef at the griddle what ingredients you want and he cooks it for you.

Sheila isn't Sheila Larson any more. She's married. She's in her late thirties and has two kids. That's what did it for her &#acute; the kids. When the second child was on the way somehow as she looked over the suburban landscape of drugs, drinking, divorce and delinquency, "Sheilaism" was no longer a comfort to her. She sensed the need for something that had more power to it than "just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself...take care of each other."

That was when our lives intersected. Two parents from the "Burbs" standing in line at the soccer league registration. I was telling her about all the stuff our Church did for kids and families. She was interested.

"What church are you from?"

"The Church of the Nazarene."

"Oh. Aren't you the people who don't go to movies?"

Can you make a Christian out of a Sheila? Not easily. Can you make a Nazarene out of a Sheila? Exponentially more difficult!

When we speak of secularization in a culture, we need to be culture-specific. Some definitions, such as Berger's classic, "By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions in modern Western History," (1969, p.107) seem to work better at describing European secularization. The State and the Church are seen to be parting company. The Church, and therefore the Christian Faith, is judged to be losing influence and power. Ironically, that the Church ever sought the power of the State to do its bidding may itself be a sign of secularization.

In the American experience it is not the Church in bed with the State, but rather the Church in bed with the Marketplace. Europe gave us Cardinal Richelieu; America gave us Jim Bakker. That is the price of constitutional disestablishment. But now we want to be both Bakker and Richelieu. We want to be skilled in the manipulation of market forces (read that marketing and Church Growth) to produce conversion, but if that fails in bringing about the desired results, then we want to be sitting over King Louis' shoulder telling him how to rule his loyal subjects. Sheila and her kind will not be so ruled!

Crow and Houseal suggest that in a broader sense secularization may be discussed as a:

1. Transfer of things or ideas from the sacred realm to the profane.
2. Transfer of functions from the church to the state.
3. Declining trust in religious explanations and erosion of belief in the supernatural.

Using these broader definitions we could conclude that secularization need not be seen as an inevitable entropic force which describes the dissolution of religious faith and vitality. Rather it could be seen as a constant struggle of secularizing and sacralizing forces at work.

Take the notion of a declining trust in religious explanations and erosion of belief in the supernatural. By this definition America is re-sacralizing at a rapid pace. The Nielson ratings for "Touched by an Angel" and the multitude of books sold on the topic, Christian and otherwise, indicate a definite reemerging of a belief in the supernatural. In fact, while much of the Academy in Evangelical circles is still fighting battles with modernism, our people have joyfully moved on to a postmodern world of belief in all sorts of supernatural phenomena. Sheila has no trouble believing in angels. Her pastor has trouble in getting her to shape that belief biblically.

There is certainly a movement for the state to limit its role in the lives of its citizens. The President proclaimed that the era of big government is over. What once were ministries that enriched the fabric of the Holiness Movement were taken over by the state during the Depression. There is now a window of opportunity for Nazarenes to reverse the secularizing of an earlier generation that ceded care of the poor to state and federal welfare programs.

Many would say that the adoption of marketing techniques to evangelize and grow churches has been evidence of secularization. As pointed out earlier, that has been, and probably always will be, a tension in American Christianity. But while marketing can fill churches, it cannot make disciples. If people are attracted to churches through need-based ministries but are never moved on to maturity, then they will be gone when the need is met. Sheila will stay till her kids have left the nest, but what then?

Indeed, it could be argued that the reliance on marketing methods to fill churches has produced the life style enclaves of which Robert Bellah speaks. This he uses in contrast to community. A lifestyle enclave is said to exist when people share certain features of private life and express their identity as an enclave through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities which often serve to differentiate them from others who do not share the similarities (Bellah 1985). Do we want to become a Dobsonian, Republican suburban lifestyle enclave? The kind of life-change that Nazarenes have typically sought in their converts will only come from people who are invested in true community with one another.

For people to be in community they need a "language," to use Bellah's term, that is adequate to express the ideals of that community. By language he means "the modes of moral discourse that includes distinct vocabularies and characteristic patterns of moral reasoning." We need to give Sheila a second language. Her first language is the highly subjective individually expressive tongue of therapy. She is fluent in "Oprahese". In fact, that is the official language of "Sheilism."

Too often people like Sheila hear us speaking as though therapeutic language was the only means of discourse and communication. She needs to be given a second language, the language of grace. Grace language is biblically informed and shaped. The word "community" is a grace word invested with uniquely Christian meaning. Understood properly it means sharing

the life of the Trinity; it means sharing in one another's suffering; it means sharing our resources; it means sharing in ministry. I guarantee you that Sheila has no words in her first language to do justice to that. But remember, because "the Word became flesh and lived among us," she must see community enfleshed by us.

This business of language is critical. In *The Good Society*, Bellah states, "Institutions are very much dependent on language: what we cannot imagine and express in language has little chance of becoming a sociological reality." The corollary to that would be what we imagine and express badly will distort the institutions we seek to form making them sociologically ineffective. I once was talking to my brother, a Baptist pastor, and I kept using the word "team" to describe my Church and my leadership. He eventually stopped me and asked me why I used that word to describe the people of the Church. I said that it was because it communicates such ideals as working together, skill development, and *esprit de corps*. "That's OK," he said, "as long as your team works like a body." He was kindly reminding me to speak in my "second language," as Bellah would call it. Why? Because a team has stars and a body does not. On a team one player can "show boat" and act independently of his teammates. In a healthy body all the parts have a role to play that produces maximum well-being for all. Some players sit on the bench. They're "red-shirted" when they are injured. The body protects its weaker parts, and when one part hurts it, affects the whole body.

My brother could be accused of splitting hairs and playing word games if he wasn't so right. Of course, someone would say I was just exegesis my culture. I was building a linguistic and conceptual bridge for people to walk across into the truth of God's Word. Sadly, I think all too rarely, do people really walk back across those language bridges that we try to build? So we have churches and ministries that are developed as teams with stars and hype and promotion and competition and on and on.

In appealing for a language of grace for Sheila, we are not engaging in nostalgic reductionism. It would take more than a few words to make the language of grace effective, and the meaning of those words must be properly understood. We don't want her to be converted into a religious Forrest Gump. ("It's just like my pastor always says, 'Simple is as simple does'.") Sheila actually has an amazing capacity for understanding the creative tensions that exist in life, and she will surprise even a theologian at her ability to think through complex concepts. (A sociologist wouldn't be surprised because they listen.) But you must find a way to intersect her life and engage her heart.

On Sunday mornings I look out over our congregation and see run down, stressed out, wound up people. Now if we can begin to comprehend and appreciate the richness of the grace word "Creator", then we realize we are creatures or those who have been created. Understanding that we are made in the image of God we can revel in the creative and mastery energies that God has placed in us. We see that God rested on the Seventh Day. He gloried in His creation. He reflected. He contemplated. Now since God is omnipotent we know He didn't rest because He was tired. We need a day to rest like God did so that He can re-create in us the drive for mastery and energy for creativity.

Sheila is desperately in need of re-creation, but because of the poverty of her second language, all she gets is recreation that often leaves her mentally and physically depleted.

Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games*, according to Alexander Cockburn writing in "The Nation," teases out the socially subversive and constructive elements in play and sport.

In the early days of the Holiness Movement there was a "second language." To the extent that it did not help in communicating with the broader Christian and non-Christian community one would imagine Bellah characterizing it as ineffective. It was often self-focused and sprang from the expressive individualism that characterized so much of American revivalism. But that language gave them an identity and reinforced a theology and common experience. Sheila's great-grandmother heard terms like "rechristianize Christianity" and from that she took her marching orders.

One of the great grace words is the word "holiness." To those early Nazarenes they were first, foremost and always God's Holy People. It is a rich word pregnant with biblical meaning. Though outsiders may have used the term derisively or called them "holy rollers," the early Nazarenes wore the label with pride. We are all called to be holy, as God is holy. The prayer of Paul was that the whole church would be sanctified wholly. The work of holiness is a work of grace.

The word (really name) "John Wesley" and the adjective "Wesleyan" are not grace words. They are tradition words, narrative words and words that inspire us to many things, but they are not grace words. Sheila needs grace words. Narrative words have their place: "The religious groups that seem to work best in cosmopolitan America are those that recognize the mobility of their members and bring them into contact with the great cultural traditions by incessantly and elaborately recounting the founding narrative" (Warner 1993). Those who have preceded us at the turn of the century were far more apt to call themselves Holiness than Wesleyan. Let's let Sheila use it too. "Wesleyan" helps Sheila develop a sense of continuity and if she cared it would help to locate her Church on the theological map. "Holiness" tells her what she is and is becoming by God's grace, and, not only for her, but also all those who share the journey.

One more thought about grace words and second language. As Americans form their "habits of the heart," is it possible that the Church could take the lead in making the language of grace the language of our cultural discourse? Much of the time we alienate the very people we try to reach and influence because we speak in "first language" terms. That language is highly therapeutic, individualistic and framed in the rubric of rights and tends to lead to a zero sum attitude.

I listened to film director John Watters as he was interviewed on the NPR program, "Fresh Air." The conversation turned toward his early years as a young Roman Catholic and the influence it had made on his life. He spoke with admiration of Mother Theresa of Calcutta for her work among the poor and then said something to the effect that his admiration ended when she started preaching about abortion. No surprise there!

Is it possible that what might be considered a typical knee jerk liberal Hollywood reaction was relatively inevitable because the abortion discussion has been framed by both sides almost exclusively in "rights language?" The right to choose. The right to live. Rights language leads quickly to an impasse between people and to the courts for resolution. I'm not saying that

"rights" is not an issue for I believe it is. I am saying that stewardship is also an issue in both the biological and moral ecosystem of our culture and the world. Stewardship is a word from the language of grace.

The fullest meaning of stewardship is rooted in the biblical narrative of creation. It is a word that recently has been used by the environmentalists to describe our responsibility for the ecosystems of our world. What will probably happen is that the word will be "Oprahsized" into a synonym for gentrified "tree hugging" or "Trumped" into a euphemism for asset management (expressive individualism and utilitarian individualism, respectively). That is unless we as Christians can empower the word with biblical connotation. That will not be easy, and shouting bumper stickers and sound bytes at others will not do it.

When Sheila's great grandparents moved to the city, they left behind a small town world of safe relationships, commonly held values and shared life experiences. In the cacophony of the city they managed to hear some beautiful music. It was the message of the Holiness Revival. Like any beautiful music each chord is made up of several notes. The chord that they heard consisted of notes like sanctification, saving, similitude, stewardship and separation.

Holiness unto the Lord. May the God of peace sanctify you wholly.

Save people from sin. Rescue the perishing, care for the dying. Save the Church from its self-destructive worldliness.

It is required of a steward to be found faithful. God gives this nation and this city as a trust. Christ has given these precious lives to us. The world is our parish.

Nothing to the right; nothing to the left; Jesus only.

Come out from among them and touch not the unclean thing. A vessel of honor. We are a chosen nation, a royal priesthood.

Sheila never heard the beautiful music. Her mother only heard the note of separation, and it was out of tune. Her grandmother heard the beautiful music but forgot how to play it.

Sheila and thousands like her need to hear the beautiful music again. All the notes and in tune.

Sheila, you can know God. Not the one you dreamed up. No, I mean the One to whom you were never introduced. He has a special love to give you that will revolutionize how you know Him and even other people. You can begin to become what your Creator intended you to be all along. Here's my hand. Let me pull you up out of your self-defeating sinful ways. Let's go on a journey together. We'll meet Jesus at the cross, leave this old stuff that keeps us so far from God and follow wherever Jesus leads us. Let's see just how close to God we can be by letting His Son live through us. In fact, let's find all the other people we can who want to do the same and we'll all go out and find even more people to add to this journey. We'll make it a parade, a parade for God. God loves parades that are for Him. Oh, and while we're on the journey, I've been meaning to tell you a few things about your great-grandmother...

