

Sociological Implications of the Doctrine of Holiness Evangelical and Holiness Churches in Contrast

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Proudhon wrote a book entitled "A Philosophy of Misery". Marx responded to it by his "Misery of Philosophy".

The introduction of this paper is in the same vein. I wish to propose that one of the implications of the holiness church is its strong opposition to the Spirit of Capitalism. Such a statement is deliberately provocative towards a common assumption of sociology which has been allowed to grow because of the poverty of opposition to it. It is my hope that we have gathered because of common interest in such a determined declaration against the acquisitive materialism which characterizes much of capitalism today; that the formation of this association within the Church of the Nazarene indicates a rather brutal halt before we engage ourselves in a return to our origins. The subject chosen for the conference implies just such a positive occurrence.

For many years economists and sociologists have insisted (increasingly) on the alliance - or collusion - of the Protestant church with the spirit of capitalism. This insistence has been so prolonged and forceful that we have largely become incapable of recognizing the profound difference which exists between holiness churches and other Protestant churches. John Wesley and his followers are perhaps most typical of the vision to which I refer. He promoted a radical reform of the total society through small group action with specific insistence on the doctrine of Christian perfection.

We easily class ourselves as an evangelical church and have become comfortable in the security of that identity. We have abandoned our own heritage in order to be accepted as legitimate. And the negation is so great that we seek to point out the similarities which exist between us rather than calling attention to our holiness distinctive. This occurs first in Theology but applies equally to the sociological identity of the Church of the Nazarene. We began in ministry to the total man. We distributed clothing and food to the poor of Los Angeles. We provided medical attention and education.⁽¹⁾ Then, in reaction to the "liberal controversy", we ceased many of these activities and only now are we painfully reasserting ourselves in areas where we formerly led the way.⁽²⁾

If we allow ourselves to be polarized as simply evangelicals and do not renew our commitments to our own identity we are in danger of being drawn into a closed circle of logique nourished by its own convictions. We run the risk of installing our church in a unassailable system of interpretation.

I therefore want to break with those familiar ways of speaking and thinking and seeing which have succeeded in becoming considered self-evident, which engender confusion and from

which it is increasingly more difficult to escape because such action seems to appear as an attack on reality. In effect, our very perception of history is deformed by these accepted interpretations. If we can break out of the subjection to the tyranny of legitimacy, we can transform our proclamation into a declaration of hope in a world of despair.

In order that we might glimpse some of the distinctions I have borrowed heavily from notes on this subject offered by Professor, Dr. Jean Bauberot, Directeur d'Etudes en Sociologie des Religions at the University of Paris.⁽³⁾

The distinctions which mark the holiness church may be illuminated in several symbolic but striking scenes. Alongside the ancient traditional imagery of the holiness people, and superimposed on that mystical entity of Christian perfection, a series of new convictions invaded the holiness churches during the early half of the twentieth century and continue to mark most sectors of the conservative church in America today.

Scene 1: The church has become an insignificant institution in a society that is sated with well intentioned organizations. It is perceived as talking a lot and getting nothing done. The little that the church has to say is not listened to and its efforts in favor of social reform or social justice are often too little and too late. The mass media turn to the church when they want something folkloric for their audiences.

Scene 2: Fear and Terror dominate this scene. The world hesitates between revolution and fascism. Many believe that the revolution has, in fact, its birth in fascism. And the Christians hesitate as well, divided among themselves and leaving the central message of Christianity for the extremes of doctrine and of action. They leave conservatism for evangelical reaction and Catholic subversion. And the picture is so distorted by the media that we have difficulty discerning the reflection from the reality. New theologies proclaim utopia, a self-sufficient man, and a dead God. Self-avowed Christians serve as revolutionaries and militate for socialism in its different forms from reformism to leftism through every shade of 'red', while conservatives retreat in disarray from every association with the "liberal" church.

Scene 3: Identity Crisis. A bewildered humanity, driven by overwhelming but anonymous forces, cut off from its past, pushed toward the future, betrayed by both progress and tradition, abandoned to itself only to discover that it is manipulated without any knowledge of how to defend itself. A humanity deceived, discouraged, revolted, aggressive and often without hope for it has lost faith even in itself and lost all confidence in others. Modern man no longer knows who he is and no longer has any reason for being: he classes himself among those things which are disposable after use. Does this scene offer a chance for the church? Certainly! It offers a chance for anyone who is dynamic (Bauberot uses the term "savage") enough to carry his battle for liberty to the streets. And if the church does not respond then it offers a chance for the magician, the fanatic, the zealot, the bizarre, the abnormal, the insane. "Today the soul of Western Man is for sale," according to the Religious Editor of *Le Monde*.⁽⁴⁾

Scene 4: Evangelical Reaction. A disoriented conservative branch of the church steels itself against the new "liberal" theologies. A determined stand must be taken by all who are not "liberal". The evangelicals must be radically different. In an effort to separate itself from "pink" theology the evangelical church ceases all dialogue with that branch of the church. Conflicting

views on the Bible as the inspired Word of God is the wall of division, but the rejection goes so far as to refuse any action which is found in the "left-wing" of the church. Social responsibility is now the domain of those who preach a "Social Gospel" and the evangelical church assumes that social ministry is a good way for "those unbelievers" to spend their money. However, certain exceptions, such as hospitals, clinics, day schools, and orphanages are tolerated on mission fields.

Scene 5: Holiness Church Identity Crisis. Suddenly, the holiness people find themselves called upon to proclaim their true identity. If they are conservatives they must reject the teachings and the ways of the "liberals". And the declaration of conservatism by the holiness churches will be interpreted as a statement of loyalty to Christ. But what about the ministries which have characterized the holiness church from its earliest history. How can holiness pastors continue to preach the Gospel to the poor when that is the task of the "liberal" church? Evangelism is permissible and expected but social action is suspect and particularly so if it launches an attack on the institutional root of the poverty. Some accuse the holiness church of seizing this opportunity to climb socially, while denying its own social origins.⁽⁵⁾ How can holiness people be socially responsible without it appearing that they, too, have joined the ranks of the modernists? Holiness churches can still keep a token force in the skid-row section, but legitimacy demands that they tow the line.

The world waits for a ministry to the total man. They thought they had found it through holiness churches, but the twentieth century holiness movement is caught in the web of legitimacy provided by evangelicalism. The conception of a transformed society (Wesley and Bresee) is lost and official opposition mounts against feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, providing jobs for the jobless, and other forms of inner city social relief. Those things will be taken care of by Government or by liberal churches. We have created agencies to handle these matters.

Scene 6: A kaleidoscope of images, of information, and of ideas. Words have lost their meaning. We hear them and are no longer able to sort out what is meant by them. This is further complicated by our inability to find words to express the things which we are experiencing. It is equally true in life as in religious experience. The church is today experiencing a general crisis of communication.

The circle is closed. The church wants to come out of its insignificant posture in the world. It finds words to express its desire and uses those words in a frenzied sort of vain repetition. The church strives ineffectually to speak peace to a troubled world, liberty to the captive but can no longer say the words which mean that there is "a new heaven and a new earth"... or, having said them, is not understood.

The weight of evidence shows us an accelerating loss of control. The Evangelical Church has taken over the evangelistic drive of the Holiness Church. It rushes on to build larger congregations to assure itself that it is legitimate. Evangelicals seek to give eternal answers to the questions of modern man, but stop short of the ultimate claims of Christ, the total transformation of society through the holiness of God's holy people. Spiritual initiative, movement, and life itself have escape it because it fails to recognize the illusions described above. The Christian era is drawing to a close in much of the western world. In Europe, where

it flourished there subsist only fragments of Christianity and the dispersion of efforts to revive it is so great that it is difficult to grasp any idea of unity, whatsoever. The unity of love offered by the doctrine of holiness is lost as we seek an institutional unity.

Is there a place of responsibility for the holiness church? Does a chance exist for the Church of the Nazarene to offer this message of hope in a world of despair?

There can be no doubt. While we are an evangelistic people, it is imperative that we give up the illusion of legitimacy offered by the name evangelical. Holiness people are made respectable by the unequivocal adherence to the holy life to which Christ calls us. We must reaffirm our ministry to the whole man. We have begun to do so in little ways, but it is time for us to strengthen our efforts by a call to the simplicity of the life of holiness which enables us to run against the normal perception of Protestant America. Wesley's injunction to "Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can" for the building of God's Kingdom must be at the center of our social responsibility. When men are in need of any kind, the holiness message calls us to respond in the measure that is possible to us. When we are in luxury - and all of us are in luxury by comparison to the suffering of the world - then the doctrine of holiness calls us to give our luxury away in the name of Christ.

If we return to our holiness position, it will affect even our way of doing evangelism. We will leave off manipulative efforts to move men toward Christ, and will again call them to holy living. The call of holiness is so effective that men will seek salvation in order to possess the blessings offered through Christ's provision of holiness.

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Many theologians submit that the debate over inspiration of Scripture is a two-sided issue. Bauberot advances the thought that the holiness church combines the best elements of both camps. The doctrine of holiness proposes a radical transformation of man, individually and collectively. It rejects the materialistic humanism of liberalism while holding to the necessity of social responsibility. It endorses the view of the Bible as the inspired Word of God while rejecting certain sectarian characteristics of what Bauberot would call "evangelicals."

1. L. Smith, *Called Unto Holiness*, (Nazarene Publishing Timothy House, 1962), chapter 5.
2. See World Vision reports of Haiti project; Tom Nees and the Community of Hope in Washington D.C.; establishment of Disaster Fund by the Division of World Mission; Official acceptance of social ministry in recent issues of the Herald of Holiness.
3. Prof. Dr. Jean Bauberot, *Histoire et Sociologie des Protestantismes*, class at the Universite' de Paris, 1980-1981
4. *Lendemain de Fete*, Le Monde, 7 January, 1976.

5. Bauberot cites Liston Pope, Millhands and Preachers, on the transition from church to sect as supporting this accusation.