

## **Nazarenes and the Urban Ethos: An Exploratory Essay**

By Stan Ingersol  
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For a historian, reflection on the Nazarene encounter with the urban ethos is guided by the realization that there are multiple dimensions to urban existence and to the way these influence the texture and shape of religious life. Historical reflection means resisting the tendency to evaluate urban religion on the basis of too narrow a set of issues, for the impact of urban culture is broad, and fair assessment involves looking at many different strands of evidence. It means sifting the data to determine attitudes toward music, the arts, and journalism. It means evaluating a given religious movement's acceptance or rejection of the educational agenda of its urban environment, and its understanding and appropriation (or non-appropriation) of leading intellectual currents. It certainly includes responses to the ethnic encounters of the metropolis and basic attitudes toward the economic organization of its setting. And it means considering responses to the seemingly intractable social problems often connected with the city.

Practitioners of "the New History," who challenged the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, have shaped reflection on the urban context by contemporary students of American religious history. The New History's three key points of orientation are summarized by John Higham:

- (1) emphasis upon "the recent past, thereby explaining the origin and character of present conditions;"
- (2) widening the scope of history from political, constitutional, and military developments to social factors and everyday life; and
- (3) "alliance with the social sciences."<sup>1</sup>

From the 1930s through the 1960s, one of the leading practitioners of the New History was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., of Harvard University; one of his students was Timothy L. Smith. Schlesinger's influence on the discipline of American history was broad and deep. He and his students emphasized the pluralism within the

American cultural experience and directed their attention toward foreign immigrants, ethnic minorities, and movements of social, political, and religious reform. In contrast to the Turner school, which regarded the frontier experience as the determinative factor in American institutions and behavior, Schlesinger emphasized the urban matrix as the key shaper of modern America. The urban scene was also a fundamental category in studies by his students, including those of pre-Civil War society in Alice Felt Tyler's *Freedom's Ferment* and Timothy L. Smith's *Revivalism and Social Reform*.

This is worth bearing in mind when Smith's history of the early Church of the Nazarene is considered in relation to the other histories of the denomination that preceded and followed it. J. B. Chapman's denominational history—the earliest—pressed the data of history into the service of an apology for the church's right to exist and a defense of its spiritual character. W. T. Purkiser, who like Chapman had slender training in historical method, did not ask—and consequently could not answer—many of the questions a professionally trained history would pose. Maury E. Redford, who was trained in historical methods, did a commendable job of collecting primary sources and organizing the data of Nazarene history into a coherent narrative, but he refrained from interpretation, leaving his work without a compelling thesis. On the other hand, Smith's *Called Unto Holiness* had a clear thesis that masterfully tied together the denominational story. In his reading of the evidence, the Church of the Nazarene was born out of compromise between similar but slightly different visions of the Christian life. The resulting tension between the two visions was often creative but also the source of severe problems. Smith contended that "neither the origin nor the subsequent history of the Church of the Nazarene can be understood without a knowledge of the two holiness traditions, urban and rural."<sup>2</sup> The distinguishing characteristics that he saw in the urban-holiness contribution to the church included a national vision, an educational bent, and a greater sense of understanding and empathy with original Wesleyanism. Smith identified the urbanized sectors of the early denomination with the two northern groups that merged at Chicago in 1907: the eastern-based Association of

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<sup>1</sup> John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973): 112-114.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy L. Smith, *Called Unto Holiness* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962): 28.

Pentecostal Churches of America and the Pacific coast-based Church of the Nazarene. Presumably to counter existing unfavorable stereotypes of the holiness movement, Smith emphasized that both groups had their centers of strength in cities or outlying suburbs. By contrast, the southern group that united the following year with the Pentecostal Nazarenes was portrayed as predominantly rural and characterized as rigorous in its stand against formality and worldliness. The ranks of the rural Nazarenes were steadily supplemented in following years through aggressive evangelism and growth in the Southwest and Midwest, and, in the 1920s, by the accession of a sizable body of Methodist fundamentalists from the Dakotas. For Smith, the union of the rural and urban holiness traditions was an achievement of the first rank and the key to understanding Nazarene history. In subsequent years, tensions within the denominational system were affected by this interplay of factors, flaring up around such issues as the proper balance between superintendency and congregationalism, and personal ethics and lifestyle.

Smith's use of social history, and his consideration of urban versus rural mindsets, was pursued in the 1970s by H. Ray Dunning (in his doctoral dissertation at Vanderbilt titled "Nazarene Ethics in a Theological, Historical, and Sociological Context"), Charles Edwin Jones (*Perfectionist Persuasion* [1974] and the essay "Disinherited or Rural? A Historical Case Study in Urban Holiness Religion [1972]), and Robert Mapes Anderson's study of Pentecostalism (*Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* [1979]).

Despite disagreement among these scholars over the broader way in which the holiness movement is related to the urban environment, there is no lack of consensus that the Church of the Nazarene's rise was tied intimately to the expansion and development of America's urban culture. Those affected by emerging trends of the 1960s are prone to speak of Nazarene urban involvement in terms of a pattern of "primitive involvement—withdrawal—re-engagement." But the point should be made that Nazarenes have always had an urban presence, have always engaged the city—and been engaged by it in turn—throughout our short history.

What has changed through time has been the shape, or style, of Nazarene urban ministry. The most distinctive (and perhaps the *defining*) characteristic of

early Nazarene urban presence was a pattern of social ministries that has become a source of inspiration for latter-day heirs of the vision. This pattern of social Christianity included storefront missions, family-oriented churches for the urban poor, medical and material support for those who were indigent, homes for pregnant but unwed women, and orphanages and training homes for needy children. At the political level, engagement also included widespread support for the politics of the temperance reform movement.

Yet the distinguishing style of the founding Nazarenes began to wane even before they had passed from the scene. Even as the denomination was establishing a General Orphanage Board and a General Board of Social Welfare (1919), the local ministries related to these boards were closing frequently. In 1913, a special issue of *Herald of Holiness* was devoted to the church's rescue work ministries, and a column in that issue listed nine homes for unwed mothers operating across the nation, with a tenth in the planning stages.<sup>3</sup> Other rescue homes identified with the early Nazarenes operated earlier or later in the decade at Memphis, Nashville, Wichita, Portland, Seattle, and Lake Charles (Louisiana). Orphanages at Greenville and Pilot Point, Texas, and numerous urban rescue missions round out the pattern of social involvement. Nevertheless, when the church's first official *Yearbook* was published in 1923, only four social ministries were listed. Two years later, the 1925 *Yearbook* listed only three; a home in Memphis had closed in the interim.<sup>4</sup>

What accounted for the sharp and precipitous decline in such ministries? One may be tempted to look toward the rural holiness tradition and its fundamentalist impulses as a source for this decline, and there is no denying the suspicion and antipathy with which the rural holiness folks regarded the city. But there is ample evidence that this antipathy was a motivation *for* social ministries, particularly among Nazarenes in the Southwest. The rescue homes at Arlington, Peniel, Pilot Point, and Bethany were all located in suburban or village settings and

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<sup>3</sup> The homes for unwed mothers were located at: Arlington, Texarkana, and Pilot Point, Texas; Bethany, Oklahoma; Swampscott, Mass.; Kansas City, Missouri; Hutchinson, Kansas; Chicago, Illinois; and Oakland, California. A tenth home was being planned by members of the Southern California District.

<sup>4</sup> The existing ministries in 1923 were: the Orphan's Home at Peniel (Greenville), Texas; the Bethany Training Home in Memphis; and the Rest Cottage ministries for unwed mothers at Kansas City and Pilot Point. It should be noted, though, that the Berachah Home for unwed mothers at

drew clients from Dallas, Fort Worth, and Oklahoma City. Mrs. Johnny Jernigan, who became involved with rescue work at Pilot Point and later founded the rescue home in Bethany, related an early incident in her career that was paradigmatic of the mindset. Her account, titled "A Long Night in the Slums," told how she boarded a train for Little Rock, there confronted the matron of a house of ill-repute, took one of the working girls of the house back with her to the depot, and brought the young woman to the Rest Cottage. Her solution for the victims of urban decay was straightforward: it was a strategy of *extraction*.

Reflection on the distribution of the homes listed above makes clear that the urban holiness tradition had no monopoly on social ministries. Nazarene social ministries were present on both coasts and throughout the South and were supported by those stemming from both rural and urban traditions. Indeed, the two rescue homes that were longest-lived were both located in north Texas (Arlington and Pilot Point).

The decline of social ministries in the urban setting should not be understood, then, in terms of their being swamped by some alien (rural) ethos. Instead, another force was at work: competition with other forces typical of urban religion promoted a laissez-faire spirit, leading the church to subsidize, only on a temporary basis, ministries expected to shortly become self-supporting. Within such a system, social ministries, which rarely achieve self-support, failed to become institutionalized within the denominational structure and were operated as individual or family affairs. When the key individual directing a social ministry died or relocated, the particular agency generally closed. As a result, the character of Nazarene urban ministry gradually narrowed until it consisted almost exclusively of evangelistic soul-winning religion.

There were two particular elements widely influential in American religion at the time the Church of the Nazarene emerged. Both reflected the spirit of the day and encouraged religious attitudes of laissez-faire. One was the adaptation of American Christianity generally to the habits and methods of the business mentality. The other was the perpetuation of the mass revivalist's image as a

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Arlington, Texas, also operated from a broad base of support that included Nazarenes, Methodists, and Free Methodists.

heroic model and the prototype of religious success. The businessman and the mass evangelist were both typical products of the American city, not of the rural setting, and both were intimately connected with the distinctive ethos of the Gilded Age and its aftermath. Both influences need to be explored in relation to the emergence of the Church of the Nazarene.

In cursory fashion, it can be observed that the entrepreneurial spirit was operative within the Church of the Nazarene from its beginning. Founders of the pre-Nazarene parent bodies were almost always linked to strong lay families connected with commercial enterprise. In Los Angeles, the Widneys, the Gays, and the Knotts were all involved in some phase of business or management. In the South, the Bensons, the Mitchums, the Sheeks, and the Shinglers—business families all—played key roles in the evolution of the denomination in their region. Such individuals rarely lacked a social conscience, but they were businessmen who brought to their churchmanship the mental habits of their professional lives. For now we simply note that the spirit of enterprise was never foreign to the Church of the Nazarene but was bound up with its origins. Further work along these lines should seek to clarify the relationship of this mentality in the church with the various forms of social-Darwinism described by historian Richard Hofstadter as a rising force in American life during this period.

Similarly, the influence of the mass evangelist on the church needs to be probed. William McLoughlin (*American Revivalism*) and others have shown how mass evangelism in the post-Civil War era was attuned to the commercial spirit, and how true this was in the New South just as in the better-industrialized North. While revivalism has always been a staple of both rural and urban religion, the period in which Nazarenes of Methodist lineage left their mother church was one in which the role of evangelists was sharply debated. The 1894 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, is widely regarded as laying down the gauntlet to the Southern holiness movement, yet the bishops had precious little to say about the doctrine of holiness except to twit those who censoriously thought they held a monopoly on it. But the bishops said a great deal about “modern evangelists” who threatened existing church polity. These modern evangelists were regarded by the bishops as pale imitators of true giants like D. L. Moody, and they

were appearing in such large numbers that they threatened to disrupt the denominational system. These modern evangelists, we hasten to add, were the Robert Lee Harrises, the Bud Robinsons, and the R. T. Williamses who established the pre-Nazarene bodies in the South. Of this group, Robinson in particular made the transition from rustic country evangelist to a mass evangelist with broad down-home appeal, bridging some of the urban-rural dichotomies of modern revivalism. The *Atlanta Constitution* could not have prepared a better headline for Sam Jones than the one it printed over an article about a Bud Robinson service: "Weeping Men and Women Fell at Preacher's Feet; More than Two Hundred People Rushed to the Platform When 'Bud' Robinson Called 'Come to the Front'." Without doubt, the image of the professional evangelist has made a deep impression on the church, and investigation of the social ideas and the fundamental spirit communicated by their religious type, particularly in connection with the modern historiography of revivalism, will, I think, add to our understanding of why the character of early Nazarene urban ministry was so quickly transformed.

Neither the businessman nor the mass evangelist set out to destroy Nazarene social ministries, but each in his own way promoted a laissez-faire spirit in which social ministries had to find their own way. As long as entrepreneurial spirits directed them, some social ministries flourished; indeed, most actually operated like a family business. Others, like many small businesses, folded after just a few years. In the process the church, which began its first generation oriented toward the urban poor, moved into its second generation with a narrower sense of its own purpose and mission.