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Wesleyan/Holiness Studies Center
at Asbury Theological Seminary

Bulletin

An Anatomy of Early Methodism

John H. Wigger. *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Reviewed by Russell E. Richey

Stunning, magnificent, pungent, well-crafted, beautifully written, painstakingly researched, lavishly documented, careful, comprehensive, insightful, compelling — I can think of few commendations about a book that I would not offer for this one. It provides the best treatment of early American Methodism (to 1820) that we have and are likely to get any time soon.

Wigger has produced what one might term an anatomy of early Methodism. The first chapter explores what Wigger means by his subtitle, namely the appeal of Wesleyanism to the folk on the margins of society whose restlessness enterprise, ambition, willingness to sacrifice and orientation to the future made them open to a theology, cults and praxis at once critical of "establishment" and cogent as an alternative system. The widespread embrace of Methodism made Methodism a primary shaper of American society and at the same time wedded Methodism to popular culture. Wigger pursues the two sides of this embrace throughout the volume and returns to it in his final chapter which examines "Methodism Transformed." There he shows Methodism's enculturation — wealth; disuse

of class meetings, love feasts and camp meetings; settling of the itinerant; success in publishing — as the inevitable outworking of its popularity and cultural importance. The intervening six chapters probe the anatomy that gave Methodism its success: the connectional system, the itinerancy, the structures of local Methodism (class, love feast, quarterly meeting, camp meeting, discipline), the inner and outer patterns of enthusiasm

Gregory Schneider's *The Way of The Cross Leads Home* (1993), and Donald Mathews' essays — argue in a more daring fashion. More focused or specialized studies, both dissertations and essays, provide more startling discoveries. Wigger elects to keep the whole Methodist system and its relation to American society in view and to reflect continuously on the two sides to Methodism's popularity—its appropriateness for and

vignettes, often allowing the individual his or her own voice.

Allowing individuals a voice and a place — Wigger's strategy — also constituted Methodism's strategy, he argues. It allowed the marginal of the society to speak, in class and at love feasts (if irregularly), as exhorters or preachers. In its preaching and hymnody it drew on the intense, explosive idioms of the folk. Its praxis welcomed in spirituality from popular western and African culture. Its combination of national system and local initiative created a national religious free enterprise corporation. Its discipline encouraged the industrious from the middle and lower classes the resources to succeed. And then, of course, it was to become the agent of their advancement, refining itself to suit an increasingly middle-class constituency.

Readers of this journal will be pleased to see that Wigger compares early Methodism with the later holiness and Pentecostal movements. They may be less pleased to find its center. Wigger's Methodism is not a confessing movement but rather, as he titles the key chapter, "A Boiling Hot Religion."

Russell E. Richey is professor of Church History at the Divinity School, Duke University. Among his most significant works are *Early American Methodism* (1991) and *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (1996). He is also co-editor of *The Methodists* (1996).



*Allowing individuals a voice and a place —
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(dreams, visions, trances, shouting, healing, falling) that rendered the supernatural accessible, self-validating and egalitarian; the appeal of Methodism to African-Americans; and the rules of women in the movement.

Wigger dissects each organ or organic element with care. Indeed, what distinguishes this study is its carefulness, its discerning use of prior research, its exhaustive coverage of primary materials, and its attention to the various ramifications of whatever is under review. Thoroughness rather than radically new discoveries is what is surprising about Wigger's work. Other recent statements about Methodism — Christian Heyman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, A.

its embrace of popular culture.

So, while Wigger may not surprise the specialist on itinerancy or on women, he provides virtually everything essential the specialists offer and does so in relation to his larger purpose. He also keeps the larger end in view with telling comparisons of American Methodism to its British counterpart, to its American competitors and to the contemporaneous developments in society at large. Another feature of the volume that both serves the larger purpose and holds the reader's attention is his constant introduction of individual Methodists — black, white, male, female, local actor, major figure, preacher, and leper. On virtually every point he provides one or more personal

Recent Articles on Wesleyan/Holiness Themes

- Alexander, Estrela Y. "Liturgy in Non-Liturgical Holiness-Pentecostalism." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32 (December 1997): 158-193.
- Althouse, Peter. "The Influence of Dr. J. E. Purdie's Reformed Anglican Theology on the Formation and Development of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada." *Pneuma* 19 (Spring 1997): 3-26.
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The Quest for Purity and/or Justice: Reflections on Thornton's Radical Righteousness

Wallace Thornton, Jr. *Radical Righteousness: Personal Ethics and the Development of the Holiness Movement* (Salem, Ohio: Schmull Publishing Company, 1998).

Reviewed by Rodney L. Reed

Wallace Thornton's lucid and painstakingly documented study of the role of personal ethics in the history of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition makes a valuable contribution to the study of the tradition for at least two reasons. First, it attempts to understand the significance of the behavioral standards set by the Holiness Movement, a subject that has either been ignored or treated with disdain by most historians of the Movement. Thornton provides a corrective to this neglect and this tendency to treat the behavioral standards as merely the source of the legalism that appears so persistent in the Holiness Movement.

Second, *Radical Righteousness* presents an in-depth exploration of the conservative Holiness Movement and the Inter-Church Holiness Convention which has previously not been adequately or fairly treated by historians. Thornton, who is professor of Church History and Ethics at Union Bible College, writes as one from within the tradition who knows it well, and while he occasionally lapses into commentary on the faults of the larger Holiness Movement, his work is generally objective and often critical of his own heritage.

Thornton's basic argument is that from the time of Wesley to the mid-twentieth century, a shift occurred in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition's understanding and defense of certain behavioral practices such as opposition to theater attendance, and to the wearing of cosmetics, jewelry, and neckties.

Wesley and his immediate successors admonished early Methodists to dress plainly and avoid popular amusements because by doing so they could spend their time and money caring for others, especially the poor. During the nineteenth century, one embraced these behavioral norms more out of submission to the will of God and in contrast to pride which expressed itself in superfluous adornment. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dominant logic justifying these behavioral standards dictated that one adhere to them to maintain an appropriate separation from the world.



Thornton's basic argument is that from the time of Wesley to the mid-twentieth century, a shift occurred in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition's understanding and defense of certain behavioral practices.

As the twentieth century progressed, the holiness churches experienced embourgeoisement and became less inclined to maintain a radical separation from society at large. The abandonment of strict adherence to the behavioral standards in the main holiness churches resulted in the formation of numerous radical or conservative holiness churches which were dedicated to the preservation of the standards.

While the evidence to support Thornton's thesis is often overwhelming, he can be criticized for making historical transitions neat and tidy when it might be more accurate to depict stewardship, submission, and separation as threads that run throughout church history with the emphasis placed on each changing from time to time. As threads in the same tapestry, these three orientations

provide balance and mutual correction to one another, preventing any one of them from taking on a disproportionately large role in the life of the believer.

Thornton admits that the rationale behind the maintenance of the behavioral standards over time was not necessarily to the advantage of the Holiness Movement. However, in his defense of the conservative Holiness Movement, he clearly wants the reader to believe that in order to be faithful to the Wesleyan tradition, one must maintain some adherence to these standards, even if it involves a tendency toward

legalism. He further admits that "separation from worldliness" may not be as adequate a rationale as stewardship for the preservation of behavioral standards, but he does not seriously question the adequacy of separation alone. Consequently, Thornton sees only mainline holiness acquiescence to culture and fails to see that the conservative Holiness Movement is equally culpable in the abandonment of serious ministry to the marginalized of society. I contend that the holiness tradition will never truly understand or appreciate its own historic commitment to behavioral dis-

tinctives until it recovers an understanding of the relation of those distinctives to its concern for economic justice. The issue at hand is not whether the mainline holiness folk will repent and abandon their cosmetics, jewelry and certain forms of entertainment, but rather it is whether both mainline and conservative holiness folk will repent for having lost sight of one of the main reasons for their existence, concern for the poor, which can serve as an effective antidote to the tendency toward legalism engendered by the rationales of submission and separation.

Thornton's work is an extremely valuable contribution to a greater understanding of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. In addition, with the new emphasis on the value of simplicity in American society and the concern with the effects of television on children, the prophetic challenge of the conservative holiness tradition to Christianity warrants consideration, especially by those within the larger Holiness Movement. In addition, in the current environment of Christian rapprochement, Thornton's work has potential to serve as a catalyst for greater dialog between the people and institutions of the conservative Holiness Movement and those of the larger Holiness Movement.

Rodney L. Reed is pastor of the Arlington, Va., Church of the Nazarene. He is the author of "Toward the Integrity of Social Ethics and Personal Ethics in the Holiness Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1995).

THE WESLEYAN/HOLINESS STUDIES CENTER BULLETIN

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- Kim, In Sik. "Signs and Wonders in the Presbyterian Church in Korea with Special Reference to Miraculous Healings, 1884-1954." D.Miss. Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996. DA AAD97-25670.
- Knepper, Jeanne Gayle. "Thy Kingdom Come: The Methodist Federation for Social Service and Human Rights, 1907-1948." DA AAD97-10172.
- Leyh, Jr. George. "Beulah Land on the Jersey Shore: Ocean Grove Camp Meeting, 1869-1919. Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1997. DA GAX 97-37964.
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- Oehler, Carolyn Henninger. "Femininity and Religion Anxiety: Gender Trouble in the United Methodist Church." Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1997. DA GAX97-31312. Material on Lucy Rider Meyer and Ida Wells Barnett.
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- Walker, Elsie Deborah. "Edward Eggleston and the Frontier Methodism: 1800-1860." M.A. thesis, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 1997. DA AAD13-87199.
- Woods, Daniel Glenn. "Living in the Presence of God: Enthusiasm, Authority, and Negotiation in the Practice of Pentecostal Holiness (Prayer)." Ph.D. diss., University of Mississippi, 1997. DA AAD98-16984.

Symposium on the Oneness Pentecostal Traditions

Proposals for presentations are solicited for the "Symposium on the Oneness Pentecostal Traditions," to be held June 23-24, 1999 in Columbus, Ind. Papers may address any aspect of "oneness" or "apostolic" branches of Pentecostalism. Abstracts (200 words) with vitae, address, institutional affiliation and e-mail address should be submitted by January 10, 1999 to Dr. Charles Sims, Calvary Community Church, 1031 Chestnut, Columbus, IN 47201. E-mail: calvaryc@hsonline.net. Phone: (812) 372-1396. Copies of the papers are due May 1, 1999.

Social Gospel Conference

The second conference on the Social Gospel will be held at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, March 18-20, 1999. This year's conference will emphasize topics concerning women and the social gospel and the social gospel's legacy at the close of the 20th century. Papers and panels on all facets of the social gospel will be considered. Please send a 250-word abstract and vitae to Dr. Chris Evans, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1100 South Goodman St., Rochester, NY 14620. E-mail: cevans@crds.edu. Phone: (716) 271-1320.