

American Religious Pragmatic Idealism: From Holiness to Health to Wealth

1. Welcome. The industrial revolution not only transformed society, but also human understanding. Productivity exploded exponentially. Efficiency and affordability trumped traditional values. Human life was increasingly “instrumentalized” that is activities were evaluated as means towards ends rather prized as having inherent value in their own right. As we have already seen in the romantic critique of industrialization, religious thinkers, were worried that the sacred was being secularized, and in so doing human life was being trivialized. Industrial culture was becoming mass culture, ultimately a consumer culture undermining human freedom and human dignity.
2. This industrial revolution was in part the product of modern science. Romantics were not the only ones to worry that the power of technology threatening to co-opt reason with science, morality with marginal utility, art with mass entertainment and religion with both fantasy and fanaticism.
3. In the next four video lectures I intend to look at late “neo-romantic” nineteenth century movements of thought that sought to counter the rising hegemony of science and technology. I differentiate these movements by the countries in which they rose to prominence, as each bears affinities with its nation’s historical character and contemporary politics. I will look first at the pragmatic idealism that arose in the United States. I then turn to British evolutionary idealism, French vitalism, and close with German Neo-Kantianism.
4. Immediately before and after the American Revolution a pair of powerful mass religious movements swept through the American frontier. The Holiness movement evolved from one of the principal streams of these “Great Awakenings” – John Wesley preached that Christ not only died to forgive our sins but rose to empower us to sin no more. That is, Christ offers not only salvation but sanctification. Wesley proposed a method to attain such sanctification. Eventually his followers formed a new protestant denomination in the United States—“Methodism”
5. Methodism would spawn a larger and broader movement in nineteenth century America collectively referred to as the “Holiness” movement. Its logic continued to evolve over time from sanctification, or “spiritual health”, to “mental health”, from mental health to physical health, and ultimately from physical health to material wealth and prosperity.

6. Now this extrapolation from holiness to health and from health to wealth, has garnered many critics. It appears to outsiders to be at best wishful thinking. Has not science and technology left magical thinking behind? And even religiously, how can the same Jesus who called the *poor* blessed, and who preached *against* wealth ultimately reward our faith in Him by blessing us *with* wealth? How could the same Jesus who called on the rich young man to *give away* his wealth so as to follow him, call upon today's poor to *become* rich young men themselves? Is not this "prosperity gospel" a metastasis of evangelical Christianity, if not an outright scam, a kind of religious Ponzi scheme?
7. I shall argue that things are not so black and white. That while re-assuring the rich that their wealth is a blessing, the prosperity gospel also empowers the poor to become agents rather than mere victims of their own circumstances. Furthermore this trajectory is grounded philosophically in a practical personalized idealism, an idealism of mind over matter, from which arose American pragmatism. In short, the holiness to prosperity movement is yet another example of the powerful synergy between religion and technology, where religion is ever adapting to new technologies, and technological innovation is ever fueled and inspired by the fundamentally religious quest to build lives of meaning and purpose.
8. Thus to thoughtfully, and fairly, evaluate this new religious movement we must dive deeper into its quintessentially American religious trajectory and trace its philosophical affinities with other nineteenth century American movements we have already considered in previous lectures-- spiritualism, transcendentalism and ultimately pragmatism.
9. As I mentioned at the outset the holiness movement arose in the middle of the nineteenth century as a successor to the Great Awakenings that swept over American life as the industrial revolution took hold. The venue for religious revivals would migrate from rural camp meetings to civic auditoriums, empowered in no small part by the invention of the microphone, that enabled a single preacher's voice to address tens of thousands of enthusiastic hearers all feeding off each other's excitement in a mass mimetic contagion.
10. The power of the spirit in these mass revivals was palpable and transformative. At least in the moment. For it is one thing to *feel* saved in the midst of such a religious exuberance and enthusiasm, but it is another to *act* saved after leaving the auditorium and

returning to everyday life with all its worldly temptations and demonic evils that had cursed one's life in the first place.

11. The Holiness movement would call for a second conversion: from "rebirth" in Christ to a second baptism in the Holy Spirit. The first baptism frees us from our past sin, but the second gives us the power to live a sin-free, holy life going forward. John Wesley both preached this second baptism and offered a method for practicing the holiness it promised. "Methodism" became the name for this new religious movement.
12. Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874), was an early Methodist preacher who would distill Wesley's spiritual method into three fundamental steps:
13. The first step was this radicalized second conversion: not merely surrendering one's will to Christ but sacrificing it altogether. Luther had imagined the convert throwing himself or herself at Christ's feet, acknowledging their own powerlessness against sin and begging for mercy and forgiveness. Palmer imagined Christ rather as an altar of sacrifice upon which to place one's will as a divine offering.
14. Now while an intensification of Lutheran piety from surrender to sacrifice, such a sacrifice was not seen as the *annihilation* of one's own will, as we saw preached by radical medieval mystics such as Margaret Porete. On the contrary such a sacrifice of one's will was effectively experienced as an *affirmation* and *empowerment* of one's own *true* will. In effect, not only am I now a "friend of God" but God is also a friend of mine. The focus effectively shifted from my imitating Christ to Christ affirming me, empowering me, to be my best self. In other words, this was mystical experience in a modern, industrial key, where individuality and personal freedom are not sacrificed but affirmed as the new sacred.
15. However, again, it's one thing for me to sacrifice my will on the altar of Christ in a moment of religious transport, its another to follow through. Thus the second step in Palmer's method to holiness was to commit to the belief that Christ has given one the power to live a sinless life going forward. No matter the temptation, whatever the evils that befall one, God's grace blesses Christians with all the strength they need to overcome them. And that God will so bless the Christian when they call upon his name, but that God already has.

16. This then then leads to the third step: to practice the perfection promised. From moment to moment, one day at a time, manifest the holiness with which one has been blessed. And should one backslide, turn back and recommit again. Never despair, seeing one's sinfulness as the product of a depraved will, the cost of humanity's original sin. For we are never alone, left to our own devices. Like a good friend, Jesus is always there to aid and guide us. And should we ignore his help and advice, should we sin again, our friend Jesus can be relied upon to forgive us and take us back as soon as we ask. After all isn't that what friends are for?
17. Indeed the Holiness movement will reject the doctrine of original sin altogether. As opposed to Calvin, the natural condition of the human will is not depravity but sanctity. Like the more philosophically minded transcendental idealists earlier in the century, creation is not fallen but sacred. It does not obscure but manifests God's Glory. The holiness movement will thus draw from the optimism and uplift of American Transcendentalism.
18. Like Emerson, Palmer preached that to focus on contrition, or "brooding over guilt" only undermined our self-confidence, paralyzing one in self-doubt, leading ultimately to resigning oneself to the evils that befall one. Holiness is not about wallowing in guilt, but being grateful for one's blessings. It's not about recognizing how bad I have been but how good I will be from here on out. In contrast to Pietism, holiness is reached not by contrition but resolve. Guilt is but negative thinking. Faith is about adopting a positive attitude.
19. In the mid nineteenth century Phineas Quimby would extend this positive attitude from spiritual health to mental and ultimately physical health. He began within Spiritualism, an early adopter of Mesmer's method of manipulating magnetic auras and establishing a one-on-one "rapport" with the sufferer through what later came to be secularized as hypnosis. Soon enough however Quimby simplified Mesmer's method by removing the manipulation of magnetic auras as unnecessary and focused solely on establishing an eye to eye rapport with the sufferer, in the hope of transferring his own faith and confidence in God's blessings for them onto them. Quimby would listen attentively to the patient's complaints, correcting "errors" that would lay the blame for suffering on material medical conditions outside of the sufferer's control. Rather he would coach his patients to

treat their sufferings as the product of negative thinking, or “morbid thoughts” that they had the ability to change. In line with American transcendental idealism, he would teach that the body is not a machine, but the material expression of our mind and soul, nature itself but the blessed manifestation of God’s own creative Spirit. thus, cure the mind, and the body will follow, of itself.

20. Over time, Quimby would listen more and teach less until he came to the point of not saying a word, but simply gazing intently and attentively at his patient in an attitude of positive regard with the firm expectation that God not only *could*, but *would* cure them. Quimby’s own aura of serenity and confidence would generate a healing energy that could be picked up “telepathically” by his patient.
21. Finally, Quimby concluded that it was the patient’s own mind that was doing all the work, that his teaching only removed self-imposed blockages due to ignorance and fear. He argued that as the patient came to know themselves truly as a blessed child of God, they would experience the healing power of God already dwelling within them, ever welling up to vitality and vigor. It was mind over matter, or better, the Spirit over the Flesh.
22. To heal illness and battle negative guilt, Quimby, like Palmer before him, adopted mystical axial meditative and contemplative techniques designed to reconnect the sufferer with what they held sacred, not only holiness but also mental and physical health. Quimby taught those he treated to regularly repeat positive affirmations to themselves when waking, during the day and as one dropped off to sleep. He taught them to be vigilant against morbid thoughts, and encouraged “vision” exercises in which they were to imagine themselves restored to health, full of vim and vigor.
23. Quimby’s method came to be called the “mind cure.” To understand how popular it became, it will be important to remember the state of psychology in the nineteenth century. Psychology was barely even a field of scientific study. Outside of mental asylums, where those too ill to function in society were basically imprisoned to protect society and themselves, psychological therapy was still largely a religious matter of pastoral counselling and sacramental confession. The religious framing of therapy only continued contemporary practice. Furthermore, the techniques taught by Quimby, like Palmer before him, would eventually be rediscovered again in the latter half of the twentieth century as “evidence” based treatment when psychology finally did emerge as a

respectable scientific discipline. In the terminology of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for example, Quimby's repetitive affirmations and vigilance against morbid thoughts were "really" the reprogramming of dysfunctional neural pathways, the mind now interpreted along the model of an organic computer.

24. It is also important to remember the state of medicine in the nineteenth century. The first vaccine, for the scourge of smallpox, had just been discovered in 1796 by Edward Jenner. Vaccines for the myriad of other epidemics that would periodically sweep through the overcrowded manufacturing cities would not be found until the twentieth century. Indeed the germ theory of disease itself would await Henri Pasteur and only fully achieve consensus at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, what drugs did exist in the nineteenth century were unregulated, frequently laced with mercury, opium and alcohol. When not outright placebos, they were as likely to harm as to heal. A balanced lifestyle and a positive, optimistic outlook were the best bet for preserving and recovering health, particularly against chronic conditions such as back pain and crippling "neuraesthesia." The "rest cure" in a sanitarium for "breakdown," "depression" and even enervating diseases such as tuberculosis was hardly more and often less effective than the mind cure. Faith in God's love and healing power worked as predictably, if not more so, than early modern medicine, just now transitioning from bloodletting to pharmaceuticals. For those who could not afford modern medicine, God's grace was free: available and accessible to any who would believe.
25. But while the "mind cure" was often successful where traditional medicine was not, what did people do when it did not work? In such a case patience and continued confidence in the power and goodness of God would be required. As with holiness, one should act healthy even if one's health was not yet manifest, trusting that God will come through in the end.
26. But what about aging and death? Illness is going to get us all in the end. Quimby argued that death was not to be approached as a defeat, but as a liberation from the sufferings and limitations of the material body. Indeed, death was the ultimate release into divine transcendence. A "good" death, peacefully at home surrounded by family and friends was not an evil to be feared but a liminal portal to a fully spiritual life, in a heaven home

populated by our dearly departed eagerly awaiting our arrival even as those left behind wished us farewell.

27. Mary Baker Eddy, having herself experienced relief from a life of infirmity and chronic pain through Quimby's therapy, would later institutionalize this movement into a free-standing Church of its own-- the Church of Christ, Scientist. Following Quimby, she would argue that the healings performed by Jesus in the Gospels were not really miracles at all but rather fully natural phenomena that could be performed by anyone trained in Christ's own healing methods. Church services amounted to teaching Christ's own scientific method through participants reading aloud from her own book, *Science and Health*. As her church grew she distanced herself more and more from Quimby's influence until she finally argued that she had developed her method independently of Quimby, indeed ultimately accusing Quimby and the mesmerists and hypnotists before him as outright frauds.
28. In other words, the violence of exclusive truth infected yet another literate, axial religion as it institutionalized itself. However Quimby and most others resisted institutionalization into churches. Rather, like Emerson before them, they would travel around the country giving talks, organizing workshops, and writing books. Steam transportation by both rail and ship made such mobility sustainable. And with mass literacy and the mass production of cheap books, such prophets of what was soon termed "New Thought" could earn enough money to no longer be dependent financially on any given congregation or denomination. One could even say that the practitioners of "New Thought" were the first appearance of the "spiritual but not religious" which we will see exploding in the virtual age.
29. By the turn of the twentieth century we find a further extension of such "New Thought" from mental and physical health to material wealth. Surely a loving God desires his friends to be not only healthy but to prosper and flourish. As Christ himself had taught "Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the door will be open to you." Ask for what you want and trust God will come through. Take risks confident that you will reap the reward. Envision the prosperity you desire, already manifest in your life. Its only your own doubts and negative thinking holding you back.

30. And indeed physical health and material wealth did go together in nineteenth century industrial America. Many of the epidemic illnesses suffered by the rising urban masses were a function of their material poverty. This was particularly true of addictions, a curse at once medical, moral and economic. Here in particular, one needed to act as if one were already free of one's addictions, if one were ever to actually liberate oneself from them.
31. Drunkenness was a particularly virulent curse among the flood of immigrant factory workers. After a day of backbreaking but mind numbing labor from dawn to dusk, workers would often "squander" their subsistence wages in taverns with their coworkers rather than take their earnings home to support their families. Brewing beer became big business in industrial America. Political efforts to ban the sale of alcohol, known as the "temperance" movement, was led by denominations of the Holiness movement. In addition to "deciding for Christ" Presbyterians and Methodists would also "take the pledge." So too through their evangelization of the impoverished urban masses in such organizations as the Salvation Army and the YMCA, they would politically mobilize the urban masses to vote to become a "dry" country.
32. Alcoholics Anonymous would also adopt many of the methods of the Holiness movement, operationalizing an inclusive, non-denominational "twelve step" program. For example, AA's first step is equivalent to Palmer's sacrifice of one's will, calling upon alcoholics to recognize their own powerlessness over drink and to "surrender to a higher power." In weekly, even daily meetings, participants would read from the bible of their own movement, an anonymous work simply entitled "Alcoholic Anonymous," give testimony to their own conversion stories and relate their ongoing struggles and successes with sobriety. It was like a revivalist bible meeting with follow through. "Fake it till you make it" became the secular translation for manifesting God's blessings even when not fully apparent.
33. Preachers soon learned that applying the teachings of the Holiness movement to economic prosperity was particularly appealing...and profitable. Max Weber had argued that the Protestant Ethic also effectively inculcated "the spirit of Capitalism." Calvinism's focus on an "inner worldly asceticism" of industry and frugality created the successful capitalist. Now the holiness movement's call to manifest God's blessings effectively instilled the self-confidence and risk taking of the entrepreneur. And manifesting God's

blessings in one's own life, taught entrepreneurial self-promotion. The self-made man and the God-made man could be hard to distinguish in practice.

34. Thus the prophets of this new "prosperity Gospel" would need to manifest what they preached. They had to appear prosperous, living large, if they were to be credible to their followers. And of course what better enterprise for them to invest in than God's own ministry? Give to God's work and you shall receive back a hundredfold. "The man nobody knows" was Jesus the successful entrepreneur.
35. What to make of this last iteration of the Holiness movement? Does the "Prosperity Gospel" bring Christ into the marketplace or does it rather coopt Christ for capitalism? As with Spiritualism, faith healing and the promise of material blessings was to draw many charlatans and con artists. Indeed some have compared the Prosperity Gospel to a spiritual Ponzi scheme. But then Catholicism during the industrial revolution had its own miracle cures, centered on Marian apparitions and saintly intercessions. The promise, even hype, surrounding modern medicine had raised expectations medical science could not yet deliver on, especially to the urban poor. What had in the past been endured as only to be expected in this "vale of tears" became increasingly seen as avoidable, even unjust—a situation for which God himself was to be held to account. Evil had become a "problem," even for God.
36. On the other hand, what I find of enduring value in the Holiness movement, in faith healing and even in the prosperity gospel, is their focus on hermeneutics, that is, on how to interpret one's experience of sin, pain and deprivation. For it offers a hermeneutic of hope in the face of despair, faith in the teeth of the demonic. It embodies a refusal to play the victim or to give in to an all too tempting but only enervating cynicism. Historically the movement interpreted God's blessings literally, that God would literally give us the health and the wealth we asked for in his name and that he would give it in just the way that we envisioned it. Rather than our following God's will, it could seem at times that it was God who was expected to follow ours. But insofar as it preached that our addictions and infirmities do not need to define us or subvert the meaning and purpose of our lives, the Holiness movement and its offspring offer only to necessary virtues to emulate in industrial America..

37. As an American religious movement, the Holiness movement also promoted a democratic spirituality. God was preached not as a monarch to whom we are to be held accountable but as a ruler also accountable to us, us, his children yes, but who are not his subjects but his constituents. Rather than referring to the “Kingdom of God”, New Thought prophets spoke in terms of the “City of God” or even the “Republic of God” Angels and saints were not imagined as noble patrons mingling in a “celestial court,” but rather as family and neighbors eager to welcome us home. Eternal life was not portrayed as an intimate one on one mystical Beatific Vision but as urban life characterized by continued learning and neighborly conversation. God’s grace was not simply a royal act of gratuitous magnanimity, but a matter of justice God owed his friends. Our faith in God’s grace was based on our belief in him being a *true* friend and a good governor whose promises could be relied upon.
38. As a democratic religion that empowered the suffering and the oppressed, the Holiness movement was also a catalyst for social reform among the urban masses, not only in the temperance movement but also in women’s suffrage. It’s very lack of institutionalization gave women a leading voice for the first time not only in churches but also in politics. Women’s suffrage and the temperance movement marched hand in hand. Phoebe Palmer or later, Aimee Semple McPherson, would become forces to be reckoned with.
39. The holiness also had its academic philosophical champions. William James in particular, one of the founders of pragmatism embraced in his influential philosophy of religion many of the convictions of the holiness movement. In his Gifford lectures on The Varieties of Religious Experience, he would contrast the “healthy mindedness” and “muscular Christianity” of the Holiness movement to the “sick soul” of the traditional pietist emphasis on contrition and conversion as well as the “other-worldly” medieval mysticism of individual nothingness and absorption into the Godhead.
40. So too in contrast to rational theology, James argued that God, freedom and immortality were not hypotheses to be proven or refuted. Their significance lie not in whether or not they were metaphysical facts but in how belief in them made a practical difference in people’s lives. Belief in God was belief in a meaningful cosmos. Belief in freedom meant belief in one’s own agency. Belief in immortality meant belief in one’s own value as an individual. Religion thus promoted an optimistic positive attitude towards life while a

narrow doctrinaire scientific materialism dismissed as “pseudoscience” even research into any evidence that did not fit its canons and left psychology no “elbow room” for personal responsibility and creativity. True science ought to embrace a “radical empiricism” willing to investigate whatever phenomena is reported no matter how much in conflict with current theory. James himself would submit spiritualist claims of communication with the dead, telekinesis, even telepathy and levitation to rigorous scientific testing in the lab. While results were often negative or at best inconclusive, James did suspect that some subjects may indeed be gifted with extrasensory gifts that we have yet to reliably track and measure.

41. For James was convinced that reality was far more complex and diverse than any research methodology could ever fully encompass. While a strong advocate for empiricism he nevertheless also wrote appreciatively of the introspective phenomenology of Bergson’s vitalism in France and Fenchel’s panpsychism in Germany. Diverse methodologies need not contradict but could supplement each other, enhancing our understanding of reality as a whole. He was allergic to both reductive materialism and monist idealism, calling for what he called an “ontological pluralism.”
42. In sum, the Holiness movement represented a pragmatic, entrepreneurial and democratic Americanization of philosophical idealism. It was a sacralization not only of our interior life but also of positive thinking and individual initiative. In the next video we shall explore how a more aristocratic and monistic form of evolutionary idealism became similarly ascendent in imperial Britain.