The Fanaticisms of Hannah Whitall Smith

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This article investigates personal and public facets of the life and work of Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911) as a lens through which to explore the complexities of marginalization and belonging within the late nineteenth-century Holiness movement. Despite her significant contributions as a lay Christian leader, prolific author and social activist, Smith's legacy remains largely understudied. Examining selections from her extensive collected works, including correspondence and Smith's file of 'fanaticisms', this article investigates how supposed margins and peripheries are not places of obscurity or insignificance, but fertile contexts of religious dialogue and innovation.

Introduction

What does it mean to occupy the liminal space of a religious margin? Who has the authority to define and enforce religious boundaries? While sometimes relegated to the obscure, or insignificant, the marginalized often come into focus when their intersections with the mainstream are explored, revealing a fertile context for understanding religious dialogue, authority, innovation and acceptance. Although this may be said of many religious contexts and spaces, this article examines the intersections of the marginalized and mainstream in the microcosm of the life of one individual: Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911), a prominent and well-connected figure in the Holiness movement in the USA and Great Britain, and a vital force in women's suffrage and temperance causes.[1] Despite a lasting wealth of

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[1] See Edward H. Milligan, 'Smith [*née* Whitall], Hannah [known as Mrs Pearsall Smith] (1832–1911)', *ODNB*, online edn (2004), rev. 22 September 2011, at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47062>, accessed 18 September 2024.

Studies in Church History 61 (2025), 500–519
doi:10.1017/stc.2024.48

correspondence, diaries and other publications, Smith's legacy remains conspicuously understudied and undervalued, possibly a lingering consequence of a life-long balancing act at the margins.[2] Like many prominent nineteenth-century women, Smith's life and perspective can be reconstructed in surprising detail by a rich textual legacy. Smith was a prolific writer, publishing several major works about Holiness theology, which sold millions of copies during her lifetime.[3] In addition to her books, she provided countless contributions to newspapers, magazines and religious journals, while maintaining a staggering pace of correspondence. This abundant output of writing raises the question of how she had time to do anything but write. However, her historical record reveals that her life's work extended far beyond the written page. As the wife of another prominent religious reformer, the mother of seven children (only three of whom survived into adulthood), and an active speaker and preacher, Smith left a remarkable legacy of both private and public accomplishments.

The margins of Smith's private and public lives have yet to be examined, particularly with regard to her role as a Holiness reformer well-known in her own time. Although referring to Smith's relationship with Quakerism, Carole Dale Spencer's characterization of her as an 'orthodox heretic' is apt.[4] As evidenced by her private correspondence and public activities, she was at once accepted and repudiated; applauded and questioned.[5] This study seeks to examine Smith's work as a critical lens through which the complex and often contradictory relationship between marginalization and belonging played out at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. As a

[2] The author is grateful to the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington, for assistance with the Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith 1817–1987 (this collection also includes later family papers and bound volumes relating to descendants of Hannah Whitall Smith in addition to her own papers), and to the B. L. Fisher Library Archives at Asbury Theological Seminary for assistance with the Hannah Whitall Smith Collection in their archive.

[3] Smith's most famous work, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, was published in 1875 (New York); this was followed by monographs including *Every-day Religion, or, The Common-sense Teaching of the Bible* (New York, 1893); *The Unselfishness of God and How I Discovered It* (New York, 1903); and *The God of All Comfort* (London, 1906), all of which were well-known at the time.

[4] Carole Dale Spencer, 'Hannah Whitall Smith and the Evolution of Quakerism: An Orthodox Heretic in an Age of Controversy', *Quaker Studies* 18 (2013), 7–22.

[5] A 2020 doctoral dissertation offers the first scholarly exploration of Smith's private correspondence: Meg Ann Meneghel McDonald, 'Becoming a "heretic": Hannah Whitall Smith, Quakerism, and the Nineteenth-Century Holiness Movement' (PhD thesis, Indiana University, 2000).

female religious pioneer who defied convention, within her own religious circles, Smith was perceived as a model of piety by some, while being branded a fanatic by others who rejected her unique brand of Christianity and methods of practising it.

As someone who occupied peripheries, it is perhaps not surprising that Smith regularly played the concurrent roles of dissenter and conformist, with strong opinions about the unconventional religious movements of her era and her positionality in relation to them. As part of her legacy, Smith left a personal archive. Although she was labelled as radical in her own right, her papers include files of newspaper and periodical clippings about what she perceived as 'fanaticisms' and her encounters with them. What these artefacts illustrate is that she was herself marginalized while she attempted to define the margins, offering a reminder that peripheral religious boundaries are rarely tidy. Rather, they are contentious, blurred, changing and subjective.

Pride in the 'Peculiar'

In 1892, Hannah clipped and saved a short article from *Housekeepers Weekly*, which lauded her for the extent of her influence on Christian women around the globe, while noting that 'curiously enough, a large proportion of her hearers' were clergymen, 'despite the stress which the pulpit generally lays on the Pauline prohibition of "the sex" from public speaking.'[6] To navigate the trajectory that brought public opinion to this conclusion by the 1890s, it is critical to situate Smith in her religious context. As both a product and innovator, first in the nineteenth-century religious landscape in the United States and then in Great Britain, Smith's spiritual journey reflected the dynamic religious marketplaces of her time.[7]

In Christian circles during Hannah's formative years, mainstream and sectarian ideas collided as religious innovations tempted converts with new and renewed avenues to the promise of salvation. The convergence of these paths with popular political and social movements contributed to a widely varied religious landscape, in which

[6] Wilmore, KY, Asbury Theological Seminary, B. L. Fisher Library Archives, Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith, Box 4, Anon., 'Hannah Whitall Smith', *Housekeepers Weekly*, 4 June 1892.

[7] See R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Oxford, 1994), for a study of the competitive American religious marketplace.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experimentation was sometimes applauded, and at other times condemned.[8] Smith's personal route to the Holiness tradition was shaped by her work as a lay preacher, prolific author, and vocal champion of social causes including temperance, abolition and women's suffrage. The composite result of these causes was unsettling to Smith's detractors, but deeply appealing to her intimate circle of American friends, and later to her supporters in the Higher Life Movement in the United Kingdom.

Hannah Tatum Whitall's unique brand of theology was moulded by her upbringing and marriage. Her religious life began as a 'birthright' Quaker – an adherent 'born to one or more parents in the Society of Friends' – in Pennsylvania in 1832.[9] By Hannah's own account, she did not encounter other faiths during a strict, but loving and contented childhood.[10] Her family embraced Quakerism to the extent that 'every word and thought and action of [their] lives was steeped' in it.[11] In diaries from her teenage years – a time in which she could have perhaps rebelled against the simplicity and order established by her parents and community – she instead embraced their Quakerism to the fullest.

By the 1850s, when young Hannah was writing with effusive affection and praise for her given faith, American Quakerism was diverse and evolving. Internal schisms and social change contributed to Quaker branches, such as the Gurneyite tradition in which Hannah grew up, that varied from traditional Friends. Deeply leaning toward evangelical Christianity and the authority of Scripture, the Gurneyites embraced social reform and individual spiritual freedom, both of which would undoubtedly influence Hannah's later theology.[12]

When reflecting on her early Quaker ideals in her spiritual autobiography, *The Unselfishness of God and How I Discovered It* (1904), Smith confessed that her understanding of faith was affective rather than doctrinal at that stage of her life.[13] This feeling was especially

[8] Lydia Willsky-Ciollo, 'New Religious Movements in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 23 (2019), 5–17.
[9] See 'Birthright/convinced Friend', Quaker.org (January 2009), online at: <https://quaker.org/glossary/>, accessed 15 September 2024.
[10] Smith, *The Unselfishness of God* (New York, 1903; repr. Wilmore, KY, 2018), 20–1.
[11] Ibid. 37.
[12] Thomas Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800–1907* (Bloomington, IN, 1992), 36–7.
[13] Smith, *The Unselfishness of God* (reprint), 47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

grounded in a sense of pride of being among those who were 'peculiar', that is, set apart and chosen by God, and as such criticized and ostracized. The Pennsylvania Quakers with whom the young Hannah lived and worshipped led lives of nonconformity, forgoing worldly influences such as extravagant nineteenth-century fashion trends. They also advocated for moral principles such as abolition and pacifism, which would starkly differ from the pro-slavery and wartime realities of Hannah's early adulthood.[14]

Although the peak of the Second Great Awakening – a period of intense religious revivalism and experimentation – had occurred in the early nineteenth century, its effects were still being felt in America in the 1850s. In contrast to the emphasis on human sinfulness and depravity that characterised the First Great Awakening (1720 to 1740s) of the previous century, nineteenth-century revivalists such as Charles Grandison Finney and Francis Asbury emphasized emotional expressions of faith and social reform akin to those towards which Hannah had gravitated in her Quakerism. The Protestant Christian climate in America was highly denominational, with mainline Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians vying for converts alongside sectarian movements like Seventh-day Adventism and the Church of Latter-day Saints. It was also a context in which female leaders, including Adventist prophetess Ellen G. White and Christian Science foundress Mary Baker Eddy, carved out a place for women's religious innovation.

It was within this religious atmosphere that Hannah met and married Robert Pearsall Smith (1827–98) in 1851. Robert's Quaker pedigree rivalled Hannah's, with a family tree that traced a steady line of Quakers to the time of William Penn, the seventeenth-century founder of the province of Pennsylvania. Together, these ardent Quakers gravitated to new religious ideas, taking a circuitous route to Wesleyan Holiness by way of Methodism, the Plymouth Brethren (an Irish offshoot of evangelical Anglicanism) and the Baptist tradition. For Hannah, this resulted in a unique theological position that reconciled mainstream beliefs with elements of mysticism, revelation and individual religious experience.

In 1857, the death of their five-year-old daughter Nellie from an infection pushed Hannah into what she identified as a new era in her personal faith, one in which emotions were set aside to make room for

[14] Thomas Hamm, *The Quakers in America* (New York, 2003), 187.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scriptural pragmatism.[15] A move to New Jersey in 1864 for Robert to manage his retired father-in-law's successful glass factories at Whitall, Tatum & Company also marked a pivotal point in the Smiths' spiritual lives. It was there that they had their first encounter with the Wesleyan Holiness tradition, being exposed to the work of William Boardman and his *The Higher Christian Life*, published in 1859.[16] The Smiths seem to have been particularly drawn to Boardman's emphasis on achieving holiness through God's grace, which deeply resonated with Hannah's developing theology of spiritual achievement, particularly after Nellie's death. As they became more deeply involved with the Methodist revivalists, Robert began writing and preaching, quickly attracting interest in both the USA and Great Britain, and once again shifting the course of the Smiths' lives.

Negotiating Margins

The rapid growth and institutionalization of the American Methodist movement made it one of the largest and most influential denominations by the middle of the nineteenth century. However, it had not always enjoyed this position. When the Wesley brothers brought their nascent sect across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, their emphasis on personal piety and revivalism, driven by camp meetings and preaching circuit riders, felt anything but mainline. By Smith's time, this had shifted. The establishment of Methodist seminaries and publishing houses bolstered the movement's perceived respectability. While an internal schism in 1845 led to a split between the northern church and its southern counterpart, many mainstream Methodists were anti-slavery, pro-temperance and, in some cases, pro-women's suffrage, bringing them into tension with societal norms.[17]

However, the strain of Wesleyanism to which the Smiths turned with renewed interest was far from the mainline. As a revivalist movement, the Holiness tradition more closely paralleled Wesley's early sect than what Methodism had become by the second half of the nineteenth century. The new community emphasized evangelism, personal holiness and lay leadership, with itinerant preachers traveling

[15] Smith, *The Unselfishness of God* (reprint), 172.
[16] William Edwin Boardman, *The Higher Christian Life* (Boston, MA, 1859).
[17] Kenneth E. Rowe, Russell E. Richey and Jean Miller Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville, TN, 2012), 81–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to spread their message, as had Wesley's circuit riders of the prior century. The pragmatic Smith found herself in intensely emotional gatherings of fellow believers, moved to tears that seemed to surprise her. Rather than rejecting this renewed depth of heartfelt faith, she attempted to embrace it, confessing, on the first occasion of attending such a meeting, to having wept so much that she 'was obliged surreptitiously to lift up my dress and use my white under-skirt to dry my tears.'[18]

Despite this moment of religious emotion, Smith longed for the sanctifying experiences of her fellow believers, who in advancing to the camp meeting altars claimed to have tangible moments of divine blessing and consecration. While Robert experienced such a moment at a camp meeting, taking on the mantle of a 'divine glow', Hannah lamented that her lack of an emotional nature precluded her from such a blessing.[19] Her testimony of Robert's experience reveals the potency of these moments for believers:

> He said they had had one day a special meeting to pray for the 'Baptism of the Spirit,' and that after the meeting he had gone alone into a retired spot in the woods, to continue the prayer by himself. Suddenly, from head to foot he had been shaken with what seemed like a magnetic thrill of heavenly delight, and floods of glory seemed to pour through him, soul and body, with the inward assurance that this was the longed-for Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The whole world seemed transformed to him, every leaf and blade of grass quivered with exquisite colour, and heaven seemed to open out before him as a present blissful possession.[20]

In a nineteenth-century milieu in which women were perceived as being emotional and domestic, and men intellectual and worldly, the Smiths flipped the narrative. The 'domestic religion' of influential mainline Christian women like Catharine Beecher (1800–78), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96) and Sara Josepha Hale (1788–1879) undoubtedly contributed to the ways in which Protestant women and the home were viewed as being sanctified and associated with morality at this point in American history, yet Smith was by all accounts praised for her intellect alongside her domesticity.[21] Perhaps

[18] Smith, *The Unselfishness of God* (reprint), 286.
[19] Ibid. 288.
[20] Ibid. 288–9.
[21] Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle-Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1730–1900* (Cambridge, 1989), 182, 184. The Beechers were Congregationalists, while Hale was a devout Presbyterian.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a hallmark of her ability to bridge divides, Smith retained and came to appreciate her sense of pragmatism for the remainder of her life, though sometimes admitting to being jealous that her husband was able to access the emotions that she often could not.

Hannah's followers appear to have appreciated her less emotional nature. An obituary for her from 1911 in the *British Friend* suggested that in all things:

> she trod an even pathway. Her logical mind and strong common sense preserved her from the dangers that beset more ardent temperaments. A certain familiarity of language on sacred topics hindered her acceptance with some, but a long and consistent life, drawn out in widowhood to her eightieth year, had sealed her witness to the reality of an overcoming faith.[22]

From this perspective, as from Smith's own, it was possible to be a rational mystic: deeply rooted in faith and prophecy, while approaching such topics with reason and logic.

Despite the Smiths' gravitation toward other beacons of spiritual promise, the Quaker underpinning of their confession remained. Tendencies toward congregational egalitarianism, inner reflection, female religious agency, and mysticism, all rooted in her Quaker upbringing, persisted in Hannah's writing and later lay ministry. Despite adopting the Holiness movement, she at the same time maintained a firm connection to her Quaker heritage by continuing to attend and speak at Society of Friends meetings until the end of her life, suggesting that she did not think of her drift away from the movement as a complete severing of ties.[23] Where other Christians maintained that theological distinctions and doctrinal purity required converts to have a singular denominational adherence, Smith's perspective from the boundaries was one in which a believer had a

[22] Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Smith, H.W. mss., 1817–1987, Box 17, R. Hingston Fox, 'Hannah Whitall Smith and the Holiness Movement', *Reprint from the British Friend* (1911), 1–7.

[23] For further discussion of Hannah and the Holiness tradition, see Debra Campbell, 'Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911): Theology of the Mother-hearted God', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15 (1989), 79–101; Carole Dale Spencer, 'Hannah Whitall Smith's Highway of Holiness', in Jon R. Kershner, ed., *Quakers and Mysticism: Comparative and Syncretic Approaches to Spirituality* (London, 2019), 141–59; eadem, 'Hannah Whitall Smith: Nineteenth-Century Free-lance Quaker Heretic', in C. Wess Daniels and Rhiannon Grant, eds, *The Quaker World* (New York, 2022), 185–94.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

flexibility of personal practice that allowed for a degree of spiritual syncretism: always Christian in Smith's case, but decidedly interdenominational and exploratory.

By no means an apostate, by her own account Smith looked for something more interesting to spark her religious curiosity, but wished for it to come from her familiar Society of Friends. While Robert travelled for his religious work, Smith remained at home with their children, maintaining a pattern of normal life to the greatest extent possible. Her letters indicate that this included regular attendance at Friends meetings, despite having experimented with other traditions, but she was not content with the state of them. In a letter to Robert in 1873, Smith vented her frustration, indicating that Methodism had earned her attention once again:

> if the Friends do not hurry up and get more lively, soon I shall have to take the children somewhere else, and I must say that the Methodists do look very inviting. There is so much in their church to interest young Christians, and there is such a grand scope for religious work among them. If ever I give up my hold on Friends it will be to go to the Methodists, so prepare thyself, darling.[24]

In this same year, Robert persuaded Hannah to bring their family to join him in England, which they did in early 1874. There, too, Smith found herself at the margins of the Quaker tradition to which she had dedicated so much of her spiritual energy over the course of her life. Writing to her sister Mary just a month after settling into her new English home, Smith confessed to being:

> astonished at the *insignificance* of the Society here. No other word can express it. They have neither energy nor weight in the religious world, as far as I can discover. American Friends may certainly stop bowing down to the English any more, for the shoe is altogether on the other foot.[25]

As she gravitated toward a more complex and individualized definition of religious experience, Smith's social and political stances did not always align with orthodox Quakerism. For instance, she sidestepped Quaker pacifism following the death of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich of

[24] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to Robert Pearsall Smith, 24 March 1875.
[25] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 20, Hannah Whitall Smith to her sister Mary, 10 February 1874. Emphasis original.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Russia during a period of political unrest in 1905, applauding the violence that led to the Duke's demise: 'Yes, we did rejoice in the assassination of the Grand Duke, and we only hope there will be some more! I have always said that Quaker or no Quaker, if I had lived in Russia, I should have been a Nihilist! It is the only voice the people have.'[26]

For Smith, the reconciliation of disparate religious ideas seems to have been grounded in a belief that incongruent theologies and praxes could inform one another, but only when Smith detected compatibility. For instance, Meg Ann Meneghel-McDonald finds that although her religious posture 'was transformed by evangelical Protestantism, from a quiet, reflective tradition to a more active, yet structured approach to worship',[27] her embrace of Holiness sanctification still resonated with her Quaker foundation in the teaching of perfectionism.

For Quakers, perfectionism is not about achieving flawless behaviour. Instead, the tradition posits that through a spiritual rebirth guided by the Holy Spirit, individuals can embark on a continuous journey of purification. As one perfects the spirit, they progressively emerge out of the mire of sinfulness and away from further acts of wrongdoing.[28] Similarly, in the Holiness tradition, sanctification is identified as a deliverance from sin through the intervention of the Holy Spirit in this lifetime. Although there are dogmatic differences between Quaker and Holiness traditions, and strict practitioners would reject these equivalencies, Smith was not concerned with theological precision.

It is also significant that, from the Smiths' perspectives, these traditions were neither theologically nor practically mutually exclusive. Indeed, a strain of Quaker Holiness tradition emerged in America in the 1860s, which the Smiths welcomed as an interdenominational experiment. Like the Holiness movement for which the Smiths also became key evangelists, this community embraced personal holiness and promised the forgiveness of sins through sanctification.[29] Intertwined with the broader Holiness movement of the time, direct spiritual experiences were central for the Quaker Holiness believers, as for Wesleyan

[26] Hannah Whitall Smith to Mary Berenson, 22 February 1905, in *Philadelphia Quaker: The Letters of Hannah Whitall Smith*, ed. Logan Pearsall Smith (New York, 1905), 167–8.
[27] McDonald, 'Becoming a "heretic"', 2.
[28] Carole D. Spencer, 'Holiness: The Quaker Way of Perfection', *Quaker History* 93 (2004), 123–47.
[29] Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism. An Historical Analysis of the Theology of Holiness in the Quaker Tradition* (Milton Keynes, 2007), 183–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

followers. This unique marriage of views was relatively short-lived, challenged by the rise of Pentecostalism and by further shifts in American Quakerism, but it offers an important glimpse into diverse expressions of the faith into the beginning of the twentieth century.[30]

Operating at the borders of tradition – and claiming insider knowledge and familiarity, while simultaneously challenging normative practices – made it possible for the Smiths to carve out spaces between established religious constructs. In what often comes across as a conscious embracing of this liminality, Hannah Smith's later work reveals a confidence in her personal theological position, and pride in her role as a popular 'heretic'. In a not untypical letter to friends in February 1901, Smith revealed that she was writing her autobiography, which she posited as a history of her soul starting in her early Quaker days. She confided:

> I am putting all my heresies into my story, and am trying to show the steps that have led to them; and I flatter myself that it is going to be very convincing! So if you feel afraid of becoming heretics, I advise you not to read it. For my part, I always did love being a heretic as some of you know. What fun it was in those old days when our little flock of 'Mystic Birds' used to be taking our mystic flights higher and higher into the unexplored regions of God's love, and how restful it is now, in our old age, to have folded our wings in the blessed haven of absolute certainty that God is enough! All religion is enfolded for me now in these three words. God is enough for me, and for everybody, and for all the needs of all the limitless universe He has created![31]

Robert Smith, too, seemed to revel in his nonconformity. In a letter to one of her daughters in 1873, Hannah wrote that: 'The Square Friend is out this week in a very severe piece against father, but he is not fazed by it in the least. In fact, I think he likes it because it will give publicity to his tract. He has distributed about 800.'[32] Cloaking her

[30] Ibid.

[31] Smith references five 'mystic birds' in several of her letters, denoting a close circle of friends who supported her unconventional religious tendencies: Hannah Whitall Smith, circular letter to friends and family, including her cousin Carrie Lawrence, 18 February 1901, in *Philadelphia Quaker*, 139.

[32] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to one of her children, 20 April 1873. Smith had two daughters, Mary and Alys, and one son, Logan, who survived into adulthood; when she addresses letters 'Dear Daughter' or 'Dear Darling', it is not always apparent to which of her children she is writing.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

own 'radicalism' in calm logic, Smith was entering a phase as an 'eminent preacher' and well-known author in her own right.[33]

In her best-known work, Smith's *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (1875), Hannah began by modestly (and misleadingly) claiming that she knew little about theology.[34] While this modesty may have been a strategy, like Robert's radicalism, to draw in more readers, Hannah's work offered a significant exegetical framework for fellow Christians to follow in their own spiritual journeys. The book was not only popular – selling more than two million copies globally during Hannah's lifetime – but also made clear that her desire to reject tradition in favour of personal spiritual experiences was not merely a product of a lifetime spent on the margins. Rather, it was a deliberate choice to challenge established norms and offer a new path for spiritual fulfilment. This was a path that moved beyond 'goody sermons' in which nothing clear or useful was preached, instead challenging believers to grapple with their convictions.[35]

Hannah was also adamant that her work was not merely an appendage to her husband's, even before a scandal nudged him out of the public eye. In a letter to Robert in 1873, she voiced her frustrations that some of Robert's circle had challenged her views, fearing that she was tainting her husband's theology:

> If the brethren really convince thee that such a heretic as I am will hinder thy work, I can very easily keep clear of thy work and do my own in different places. I do not intend to be 'endorsed' by anybody. I *must* have freedom to hold my own views; and as I have not the least desire to preach unless the Lord wants me to, He shall be my only backer.[36]

The challenger in this instance was Sir Stevenson Arthur Blackwood (1832–93), who sponsored Robert's work in England, and promoted the Keswick Convention.[37]

[33] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 17, Poster, 'Religious Meetings', Bessbrook, Northern Ireland, 1874.
[34] Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian's secret of a happy life* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1875; repr. Wilmore, KY, 2017), iii, vi.
[35] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to Robert Pearsall Smith, 26 April 1873.
[36] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to Robert Pearsall Smith, 7 March 1875. Emphasis original.
[37] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In 1875, however, the couple's power dynamic shifted within their religious circles when Robert was accused of sexual misconduct by a female American journalist. The nature and validity of his actions were hotly debated, but they ultimately led him to withdraw from public ministry and strained many of his personal and professional relationships. This unsettling episode, and the sudden bout of stress-induced illness that it caused Robert, prompted the Smiths to return home to Pennsylvania.[38] While her husband re-established his business ties, Hannah rekindled her Quakerism, and was accepted back into the fold despite her 'continuing commitment to the explicit universalism of her "Restitution" heresy.'[39] Smith by now was arguing for the ultimate salvation of all souls, a view that was seen as heretical not only by fellow Quakers, but across those Christian denominations which had teachings about eternal punishment for the wicked. In contrast, Smith argued that God's grace was so complete that all of creation would eventually be redeemed and restored, prompting some publishers to censor the chapters of her spiritual autobiography that addressed the topic.[40]

Identifying Fanaticisms

As evidenced by scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings about her work, by the 1870s, Hannah had taken on leadership roles in a myriad of religious and social activities. However, as a nineteenth-century woman, her movements were constrained by social conventions, and Hannah was unable to transcend some of the boundaries placed on women's public engagement. Her initial deference to Robert's religious work after their move to England meant that Hannah first gained acceptance within her local community of women, then through other prominent female social circles. Following the Smiths' return to America after Robert's scandal, she aligned herself with movements such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

Such marginalization did not come without discouragement. On more than one occasion in her correspondence, Hannah vented

[38] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to an unnamed friend, 7 July 1875.
[39] Melvin E. Dieter, 'The Smiths: A Biographical Sketch with Selected Items From the Collection', *The Asbury Seminarian* 28 (1983), 7–42, at 24.
[40] Smith, *The Unselfishness of God* (reprint), 210–27 (chs 23–4).

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

annoyance at the obstacles placed in her way, such as being denied access to the pulpit when invited to speak in churches where ministers were uncomfortable with recognizing female exegetes as public preachers, and her own peculiar theology that challenged religious formalism and emphasized individual surrender to God. Smith was particularly frustrated that this was not simply a matter of denominational difference, but depended on the views of individual ministers and congregations. She shared the scenario about a fellow female Quaker preacher with her son Frank, a student at Princeton, who would die later that year of typhoid fever:

> what does thee suppose the Presbyterians will do with me? … I am a woman, and I am preaching? Thee knows the time they are having about Sarah Smiley in Brooklyn now, I suppose. Dr. Cuyler, a Presbyterian minister had her to preach in his pulpit, and his Presbytery took him up, and he made a splendid defence, and there was a great time. They first passed a vote of census, and then withdrew that, and referred the matter back to an old decision of a General Assembly forty years ago, which amounts, they say, to nothing.[41]

Hannah believed that popular opinion among her fellow Christians, at least the female ones, favoured woman preachers. However, as her letter to Frank demonstrates, without formal recognition and ordination of women, religious congregations were uncertain about how, or whether, to move forward with welcoming women into their pulpits.[42]

Smith also intimated that as her popularity increased, so too did her intermittent fatigue at being in the public eye. In a letter to her sister Mary dated 1875, the same year that her popular *The Christian's Secret*

[41] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 8, Hannah Whitall Smith to Frank Whitall Smith, 10 February 1872.

[42] While mainline churches struggled with the question of female preaching, Quaker and Holiness communities were often more flexible. Quakers had long held a more egalitarian view when it came to the 'inner light' guiding believers, and it was relatively common in many Quaker communities for women to speak in meetings, though with more limitations by the nineteenth century as social conventions shifted: see Carole D. Spencer, 'Evangelism, Feminism and Social Reform: The Quaker Woman Minister and the Holiness Revival', *Quaker History* 80 (1991), 24–48, at 24. The Wesleyan Holiness tradition was more conservative in its approach, but also contended that the Holy Spirit could move through women just as it did through men, opening the door to female prophecy and, eventually, preaching: see Michelle Sanchez, 'Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: The Rise of Women's Ordination in the Holiness Tradition', *Priscilla Papers* 24 (2010), 17–22.

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of a Happy Life was published, putting Smith in high demand, she lamented the discomforts of nineteenth-century transatlantic travel, and the pressure to maintain a punishing writing and speaking schedule while juggling the roles of wife (of a convalescent husband), mother, activist and religious reformer:

> once on shore, my life of weary wandering must begin. I can not tell thee how dreary the show-life I have to live this summer looks to me in prospect. I feel just as if the children and I were a sort of traveling Barnum's Hippodrome, with a 'woman preacher' on show instead of a tight rope walker.[43]

This was the same year that Robert was accused of sexual misconduct, pushing him out of the spotlight, just as Hannah was stepping into it. Suddenly, she was the religious expert, sought after on her own account, but increasingly exhausted by what her newfound fame entailed.

As the Smiths settled back into life in the USA, Hannah questioned the efficacy of their work in England. Shortly after returning to America, she confided to a friend: 'I have no doubt they [the English people] will be better off without us than they would have been with us, and I quite think we had ceased to be the least necessary in the work.'[44] This air of finality, however, was temporary, with the Smiths maintaining close ties with their English friends, and returning to England in 1888. As she entered these later years during her final 'epoch' of faith, Smith seems to have comfortably settled into her role as a public religious figure who could influence those around her through her unique theology.[45]

The widespread circulation of Hannah's publications, and substantial documentation in her scrapbooks detailing an overwhelming schedule, point to a religious figure who was well-liked and respected. Yet Smith never fully entered the mainstream. What kept Hannah on the margins? While many factors may have presented hurdles as she attempted to navigate her religious context, the perception of her teachings as heresies seems to have bolstered rather than hindered

[43] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to her sister Mary, 23 May 1875.
[44] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, Box 9, Hannah Whitall Smith to her friend Mrs. Shipley, 7 August 1875.
[45] Smith, *The Unselfishness of God* (reprint), 305.

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her efforts. Like other religious 'fanatics', Smith's later works reflect a zeal for an uncompromising and unorthodox view of faith when compared with her contemporaries. Yet Hannah did not believe that her own work crossed a line. When exploring the idea of the heretical through fanaticism in Smith's writing, the concept of fanaticism was as nuanced for its author as was her broader approach to faith. Later in life, Hannah reflected on this by curating a small archive of periodical clippings under the category of 'fanaticisms.' As her granddaughter Ray Strachey highlighted in her compilation of Smith's complete papers about fanaticism, which she edited for publication after Hannah's death in 1911, Smith believed that the fanatics that she had encountered in her life were not lost causes, but in fact 'acting in good faith'; this is to say that they were not wicked or ill intentioned, but erroneous.[46] She consistently used the term to describe movements which she believed to have at least some elements of sound doctrine and practice, but which fell short in some aspects, such as emphasizing emotion over her pragmatic brand of religious criticism.

From Smith's position of pragmatism, fanatics were misguided interpreters of faith, being drawn even further toward the margins than Smith and her supporters. As she read about different movements, particularly in periodicals, and saved clippings relating to those that most concerned her, Smith analysed them to uncover their heresies. Pantheists, Harmonists, Seventh-day Adventists and Christian Scientists all appear in her file, belonging to the category of traditions that she believed were incompatible with authentic religious convictions and risked engendering disillusionment among followers.

To share her position about these errant zealots, Hannah prepared a manuscript of her findings, which further delved into her reservations about emotional excess, spiritual hubris, and the dangers of misplaced emphases on outward expressions versus inward experiences of faith. These extracts from her papers include references to the religious mania of celibate communities like the Shakers, accusations about the ignorance of pseudo-perfectionists such as Noyes's followers at Oneida, and the false prophethood of millenarian communities like

[46] Ray Strachey, *Religious Fanaticism: Extracts from the Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith* (London, 1928), 19. This author was fortunate to encounter Hannah's compilation of fanaticisms through Strachey's text, but also as part of the Hannah Whitall Smith Collection at the B. L. Fisher Library Archives at Asbury Theological Seminary, where a collection of Smith's clippings about movements that she considered to be fanatical is kept.

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the Millerites. Regarding the latter, although labelled a prophet herself, it is worth noting that many of the movements that Hannah regarded as fanatical had proclaimed prophets for their leaders. This was a feature of her religious climate about which Smith was wary. She found it a 'curious fact in connection with many of these prophecies' that when foretold events failed to occur, adherents retained their beliefs instead of walking away from their refuted prophets.[47] When considered alongside fellow female reformers in her time, such as Adventist prophetess Ellen G. White, Smith claimed superiority. Although both came from offshoots of Methodism, White's role as a proclaimed prophet received an unequivocal rejection by Smith.

For Smith, the boundary between fanaticism and moderation was a space in which individuals could evaluate and try to overcome spiritual shortfalls, to which she admitted personal susceptibility. The common thread setting fanatics apart from legitimate religious practitioners was a default to 'emotional nature', a problematic consequence of the era of heart-driven reforms with which Hannah struggled so deeply:

> After careful study of the subject of fanaticism, and a great deal of most intimate intercourse with the fanatics, I have come to the conclusion that the whole explanation of it lies in the fact that the emotional nature is allowed absolute control … everything effects our emotional nature: the state of our health, the weather, the sort of food we eat … and especially, more than anything else, the influence of other people upon us … . Emotions are more contagious than the most contagious disease in the universe. A cheerful person can cheer up a whole circle of unhappy people, and a depressed person can depress the most cheerful … simply by the mysterious, contagious power of emotion. In the whole history of religion this has been [the case] … I would therefore always urge every seeker after the deep things of God to ignore emotions and care only for convictions.[48]

The difference between a religious emotion and a religious conviction was that the latter was an indication of the Holy Spirit working to sanctify, while the former was a symptom of impressionable, sometimes well-meaning, but deeply misguided faith. As in her early life, Smith acknowledged that she was as susceptible as others in allowing the emotions of her religious convictions to distract her from the

[47] Ibid. 52.
[48] Ibid. 155–64.

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spiritual work at hand, encouraging believers to recognize the pitfalls of such purely emotional responses to faith. The story that Smith's archive of fanaticisms tells is one of seeking and trying to excise emotional religious errors without mistakenly eradicating faith in the process. She proposed that the line between genuine spiritual passion and unhealthy fanaticism was a fine one, as blurred as the intersections of the mainstream and the marginalized that she occupied as a popular, but challenged, religious reformer.

Hannah's letters and diaries reveal her to have been a tactful but forthright woman. As the boxes of newspaper clippings, posters and pamphlets outlining her every speaking engagement and public activity reveal, she was not completely detached from her reputation, but she was decidedly not afraid to speak her mind, believing that her religious message took precedence over widespread acceptance. This was especially true in her later years, when Hannah began to move away from formalized religious adherence, embracing an ever more syncretistic view of her Christian faith. Nonetheless Hannah's experimentation had its limits. Despite her openness to some fringe practices, including faith healing (she writes of a visit to a healer with her sister Mary who had been diagnosed with breast cancer), and spiritualism (she marvels about a mind cure doctor whom she believed to have miraculous powers), some traditions were too radical even for the open-minded Smith. These fell into quite a different category of fanaticism, one that was spiritually dangerous. She cautioned those seeking an authentic religious experience: 'beware impressions, beware emotions, beware of physical thrills, beware of voices, beware of everything, in short, that is not according to the strict Bible standard and to your own highest reason.'[49]

Defining a Higher Order

But how to cultivate such reason? For Hannah, the solution was not a movement away from the periphery, but instead, the cultivation of an inward transformation driven by practical Christian living and a balanced, rational approach to religious experience while relying on God's will and mercy. Attuned with her exposure to Quaker perfectionism and Holiness sanctification, this 'higher order' was aimed at

[49] Ibid. 164.

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refining the moral and spiritual nature of the self, with the intention of broader social reform. In short, Smith, like Boardman, sought to reorder not just religious practice, but society at large, one individual spiritual transformation at a time.

Many pages of Smith's surviving correspondence enthusiastically discuss details from more than a decade of Higher Life meetings, starting in 1875 and hosted by Lady Mount-Temple, whose Broadlands estate in Hampshire served as a haven for the marginal movement and a forum for the cross-pollination of its unique religious ideals. The meetings, which were also known as the Keswick convention, were significant religious gatherings that promoted a deeper spiritual life and Christian sanctification. The first meeting was held in 1875 and became an annual gathering, which attracted a diverse group of evangelical Christians from different denominations.

Although challenged for its elitist tendencies and sometimes vague theological position, the community's emphasis on Hannah's brand of personal holiness and social responsibility resonated with many Christians, with lingering effects in the resulting Keswick movement through to the present day. The Broadlands meetings, which began as an annual convention of believers, gravitated toward Holiness views about sanctification, performing good works, and turning away from sinfulness through personal spiritual reflection and growth.[50] The movement especially gained traction in the 1890s, following the Smiths' return to England, and was uniquely open to female participation and leadership.[51]

Conclusions

Smith's work has left an enduring legacy, especially her influential publications and missives. Despite being a prolific female author and lay preacher, her role within a male-dominated paradigm and experimental Christianity kept her at the margins throughout her life. As has been argued here, there is not anything to indicate that Smith lamented this position, or that she wished to be embraced fully by

[50] See Charles F. Harford, ed., *The Keswick Convention: Its Message, Its Method and Its Men* (London, 1907).

[51] Alison M. Bucknall, 'Martha's Work and Mary's Contemplation? The Women of the Mildmay Conference and the Keswick Convention 1856–1900', in R. N. Swanson, ed., *Gender and Christian Religion*, SCH 34 (Woodbridge, 1998), 405–20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.48 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the mainstream. Instead, her legacy of writings indicates an ardent hope that her message of Christian reform could transcend denominational and national boundaries. The essence of her theological view was a simple one: emphasizing personal spiritual growth through rational Christianity in preparation for salvation.

Although less well known today than her friends and contemporaries such as WCTU president Frances Willard (1839–98; a strict mainline Methodist), Smith's story sheds significant light on the intersections between the margins and mainstream in the Quaker and Holiness traditions. By embracing and negotiating liminal spaces, she challenged the boundaries of Christian expectations and experiences with her syncretistic approach. While labelled a fanatic sectarian by some, Smith appears to have found solace, purpose and strength in the peripheries, while fostering her 'higher order' with like-minded communities of believers.

Her close examination of, and experimentation with, diverse movements – from Quakerism, to Methodism, to Holiness traditions and beyond – underscores the dynamic nature of religious dialogue, as well as the fluidity of religious boundaries. Her legacy also compels us to re-evaluate how religious peripheries are defined: not as static spaces for inclusion or exclusion, but as fertile ground for understanding agency and authority, innovation and failure, acceptance and marginalization. Called a fanatic sectarian by some, Smith thought carefully about her own definitions of fanaticism and sectarianism. This interplay offers a broader understanding of religious identity and challenges us to see peripheries as integral to the tapestry of lived religious experience.

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