

The Role of Protestantism in the American Prohibition Movement

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Abstract

Religion is the spiritual source of the American nation. Many famous reform events in American history are deeply influenced by religion, including the Prohibition Movement, which originated in the colonial period. In 1919, the adoption of the 18th Amendment pushed the Prohibition Movement to the peak. While fourteen years later, the Prohibition Act was abolished by the 21st Amendment, symbolizing the Prohibition Movement ended in failure. Although the outcome of the Prohibition Movement was not successful, it lasted for more than a century, leaving great impact and deep value in American history. The Protestantism was a great driving force throughout the entire course of the Prohibition Movement. This article attempts to take religion as the main line, carrying out an in-depth study of Protestantism in the different stages of the American Prohibition Movement.

Keywords

American History; Prohibition Movement; Religion; Protestantism.

1. Introduction

In the course of American history, the Prohibition Movement is an idealistic social improvement movement. It germinated in the 1920s. The official introduction of the 18th Amendment in 1919 marked the peak of the Prohibition Movement that the prohibition swept across the country. However, due to all kinds of social problems caused by the prohibition, with the announcement of the 21st Amendment in 1933, the vigorous Prohibition Movement came to an end, and the control power of alcohol returned from the federal government to the local government. Looking back on the development of American constitutionalism, this is also the only case in which one amendment repeals another.

Religion is the spiritual pillar of the American nation, the spiritual comfort and indispensable spiritual food of the American people, and religious motivation almost runs through the whole process of the prohibition movement. In order to get rid of religious persecution and pursue freedom of religious belief, European immigrants, mainly British Puritans, settled in New England from the beginning of the 17th century and became the ancestors of modern American immigrants. The thought of temperance and abstinence of the early Puritans was the origin of the Temperance Movement. However, the Prohibition Movement lasted for nearly a hundred years, and the religious structure of the United States also changed greatly. In the process of social change, Protestantism lost its absolute dominant position and became a trinity with Catholicism and Judaism. The reasons and measures of Protestantism's intervention in various stages of the prohibition movement are also closely related to its own status change. The analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and the Prohibition Movement in the United States is of great help for us to understand the unique religious culture and social customs of the United States.

2. In the Early America (Colonial Period)

Early before the European colonists arrived in America, the Native American Indians had mastered the fermentation technology. In addition to the most common crops at that time, corn, flowers and fruits, tequila with high sugar content and juiciness was another important raw material for Indians to make wine at that time. Pulque fermented by tequila was often used in early religious activities. With the discovery of the new world in the 15th century, Spanish and Portuguese colonists and missionaries began to plant European grape varieties in Mexico, California Peninsula and other places. By the middle of the 19th century, the United States had ushered in a period of great development in grape cultivation, wine making and production. Wine industry has gradually become the most developed production sector in the United States [1].

In colonial America, wine was considered a good thing, even a gift. Wine plays an indispensable role in people's daily life and communication. Rum, brandy, beer, cider, wine and other liquors were the necessities. Even children diluted cider with water as a drink [2]. As Clark wrote in his book, Abraham Lincoln recalled his childhood in a prohibition speech in 1842: "At that time, almost everyone drank, and no one objected to it. Drinking is a common practice, from aristocrats to homeless tramps" [3].

In addition, wine is 'the blood of Jesus' and has an important use in religion. Some churches in the South and middle of the United States even stipulate that when holding major religious activities, believers must drink until they are drunk. They believe that drinking can be more closely associated with God. During the colonial period, although the Puritans hated the unrestrained enjoyment of material things and advocated moderation, they did not prohibit proper and reasonable entertainment. Pastor Cotton Mather pointed out that drinking is 'God's great creation'. People should share God's gift instead of wasting or abusing it. At the same time, he advised not to drink too much. "There can be good entertainment occasionally, but I only ask you to treat entertainment as 'seasoning', not as 'main course'" [4].

But there were also some religious organizations that did not approve and encourage drinking, such as the Methodist, Baptist, Quaker, Mormon Church and so on [5]. These religious organizations played a positive role in preventing drinking from becoming a serious social problem at that time. Generally speaking, the Protestant Church in early America has many sects. In addition to the existence of other sects such as Judaism and Catholicism, the early American religion also has the characteristics of pluralism. However, Protestantism occupies an absolute dominant position both in number and quality of believers.

3. Experimental Period of the Temperance Movement (1920s-1960s)

In the early 19th century, there was a large-scale religious revival movement in American society, which had a profound social impact. The 'perfectionism' and 'millennialism' widely spread in the second religious awakening movement further developed people's thought of improving society, and also provided a theoretical basis for the further development of the prohibition movement. The 'millennialism' is also called 'perfectionism'. It holds that the perfection of religion and morality is not only the ideal state pursued by people, but also the goal and situation that can be achieved in this life. God can redeem everyone in the world as long as they convert to and believe in Christ. Protestants can achieve a better and perfect life through their own positive efforts after being saved, so as to achieve 'perfectionism' [6].

The idea of 'perfectionism' can be traced back to the theological thought of John Wesley, the pioneer of the Methodist Church. The core ideas of the Methodist are: 1) the key to man's salvation lies in himself; 2) after 'justification', man can achieve 'sanctification' through his own continuous efforts. The spread of the theory gives people the confidence and belief to be saved.

Whether people can be saved or not depends on themselves, which fundamentally negates Calvin's thought of 'predestination'. People should make themselves more holy through their own efforts. As alcoholism is harmful to people's mind and health, and also hinders people's spiritual conversion, people will try to get rid of the bad habit of drinking, so as to achieve the best state and be saved in faith [7].

Preaching is the most important core of Puritanism. It has been a long time to propagate religion through preaching. In the way of preaching, Protestants pay great attention to emotion and reasoning. The pastors called on the people to work hard, stay sober and be thrifty, so that believers can achieve material success, decent life and social respect. The religious revival movement also made the idea of prohibition gradually popular through preaching and doctrine. As noted by Boyer, at that time, the American Bible Society distributed thousands of pamphlets, which mainly talked about moral examples of admonishing people to stop drinking [8].

4. Rise of the Prohibition Movement (1960s-1919)

In the middle and late 19th century, a large number of new immigrants from non-Protestant countries poured into the United States, which made American cities more heterogeneous in ethnic composition, leaving a great impact on the original 'Protestant unification' situation. Moreover, these non-Protestant immigrants hold an understanding and tolerant attitude towards alcohol drinking, which further stimulates the consumption of alcoholic drinks in the United States and leads to the dissatisfaction of Protestants in the United States. The huge cultural differences and different customs between the new and old immigrants make the problem of prohibition more complicated, and the prohibition movement is becoming more and more intense. With the great social changes brought about by industrialization, the spiritual life of Americans has greatly enriched. 'Skepticism', 'Darwinism' and 'Scientific Materialism' constantly refresh people's old ideas. The religious philosophy with Christian theory as the main body strives to maintain its position, and Protestantism becomes more secularized. Social problems are becoming more and more acute, and the consumption of alcohol is still large. People of all social strata, who are impetuous and anxious, think that only a thorough prohibition can solve all social problems. For a time, alcohol has become the target of public criticism. In order to denounce the crime of the city, maintain the dominant position of traditional Protestantism, people in this period were extremely enthusiastic about prohibition [9].

In the late 19th century, women's access to education increased significantly. The invention of cheap and convenient family facilities gradually separated women from the tedious family affairs. More and more women actively participated in church groups and church charities. At this time, Protestantism became more secularized, advocating that religious belief should be changed from individual obligation to public obligation, which prompted women to pay more attention to the solution of social problems. The Church provided a platform for women to exchange ideas, where they can talk and encourage each other. At the same time, many missionaries supported and encouraged women to participate in the Prohibition Movement. The promotion of women's status in the church and society endowed them with self-confidence and self-consciousness, giving them enthusiasm and sense of mission to serve the society.

Since 1860, women's temperance groups were called 'daughters of temperance', aiming to limit alcohol consumption to save families and hoping that the government can incorporate temperance into the bill. In 1874, the Ohio Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was officially established. WUCT advocated, according to Paskoff, "in the name of Jesus, save the soul, close salons and pubs, and carry forward the Christian spirit in the world" [10]. WCTU set up thousands of branches all over the United States. As recorded by Morello, it had special liaison officers in 40 states, with 160000 members by 1890, 200000 by 1900 and 245000 by 1911 [11].

5. Fall of the Prohibition Movement (1919-1933)

After the implementation of the prohibition, the Prohibition Movement did not develop in the direction that people expected. Alcohol did not disappear. The Kingdom of God that people dreamed for did not come. The problem of social crime caused by the proliferation of illicit drinking became more rampant. Urban culture prevailed. The trend of drinking also rose in women who played the role as assistants of religious prohibition. Small and medium-sized towns no longer stick to the prohibition camp. The social foundation of religious promotion of prohibition movement became very weak.

Protestant culture has always been the mainstream in American society. After the First World War, Protestant culture was deeply impacted by the new cities. Protestant Church's attitude towards abstinence has also been changed. Some city priests and church groups who strongly promote the Prohibition Movement have begun to break away from the camp and even against it. In 1928, the Church Alcoholics Anonymous published a public opinion survey on its internal members, many of whom were religious leaders who had strongly supported abstinence. The report showed that only 28% of the members thought that the Prohibition Movement in their parish had won. Of the 2000 leaders polled, 1400 supported the amendment to the Volstead Act [12].

The New York Herald commented that: "the two most important things in the United States in 1930 were hunger and thirst. People were eager for food and work. They were not so eager for alcoholic drinks, but the right to drink." People are eager for the end of the long-standing prohibition experiment and this moral reform. According to the city health department, Roosevelt took office as president of the United States in 1933. On March 13, 1933, he asked Congress to hold a special meeting to amend the Volstead Act to legalize the production, sale and drinking of beer and wine. In December 1933, the 21st Amendment was officially passed. After a hundred years of the Temperance Movement and the Prohibition Movement, American people finally ushered in a legal drinking era.

6. Conclusion

During the colonial period, although the Puritans hated the unrestrained enjoyment of material things and advocated moderation, they did not prohibit proper and reasonable entertainment. Wine was considered 'the blood of Jesus' and 'God's great creation'. The 'perfectionism' and 'millennialism' widely spread in the second religious awakening movement further gave people self-confidence and courage to redeem themselves and developed people's thought of improving society. To some extent, it reflected the role of religion in moral education. While in the following years, Social Darwinism has seriously damaged the authority of God and alienated the religious church. Protestantism was forced to give up the pure spiritual field to secularization, and embarked on the road of religious service to society. In the period of social transformation, Protestantism made great efforts to adapt itself to the social reform under the promotion of various factors. The Christian Church changed its focus from the salvation of individual soul to the salvation of society. It changed the traditional afterlife gospel into the social gospel in the new era. It not only found a new way for the church itself, but also promoted the reform and progress of society.

We should realize that religion plays a positive role in moral education, but its role is relative and limited. Protestants tried their best to promote the Prohibition Movement. Although the 18th Amendment was passed in 1919, which pushed the Prohibition Movement to the peak, the social morality became more degenerate. Drinking is a personal habit and hobby, using legal means to fight against it blindly can only cause more strong resistance of the people. Absolute prohibition not only harms the legitimate rights and interests of moderate drinkers in society,

but also damages the dignity of human beings as individuals. This also reminds us that legislators and executors must respect the development of human society and the law of individual behavior, and safeguard individual dignity. All in all, religion is the source of strength of the American nation. Many major reform events in American history are deeply influenced by religion, including the Prohibition Movement. Protestantism almost ran through the whole process of the movement and became a great driving force to promote the development of it.

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