

Chapter 11: Religion and Reform, 1800-1860

I. Individualism: The Ethic of the Middle Class

A. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism

1. The reform movement reflected the social conditions and intellectual currents of American life; Alexis de Tocqueville coined the word *individualism* to describe the condition and values of native-born white Americans.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson of New England was the leading spokesman for **transcendentalism**.
3. Emerson's vision influenced thousands of Americans and a generation of important artists and sparked the **American Renaissance**, a movement characterized by an outpouring of first-class novels, poetry, and essays.
4. English romantics and Unitarian radicals believed in an ideal world; to reach this deeper reality, people had to transcend the rational ways in which they normally comprehended the world.
5. Emerson thought people were trapped in unquestioned and unexamined customs, institutions, and ways of thinking; remaking themselves depended on their discovery of their "original relation with Nature."
6. Emerson's genius lay in his capacity to translate vague ideas into examples that made sense to ordinary middle-class Americans.
7. Emerson believed that all nature was saturated with the presence of God, and he criticized the new industrial society, predicting that it would drain the nation's spiritual energy.
8. Emerson's message reached hundreds of thousands of people through writings and through lectures on the Lyceum circuit.
9. Emerson celebrated the individual who was liberated from social controls but remained a self-disciplined and responsible member of society.

B. Emerson's Literary Influence

1. Emerson urged American writers to celebrate democracy and individual freedom and to find inspiration in the familiar.
2. Henry David Thoreau heeded Emerson's call and turned to nature for inspiration. In 1854, he published *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.
3. Thoreau became an advocate for social nonconformity and civil disobedience against unjust laws, both of which he practiced.
4. Margaret Fuller, also a writer, began a transcendental discussion group for elite Boston women and published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which proclaimed that a "new era" was coming in the relations between men and women.
5. Fuller believed that women, like men, had a mystical relationship with God and that every woman deserved psychological and social independence.
6. In 1855, Walt Whitman – a teacher, journalist, and publicist for the Democratic Party – published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which recorded his attempts to pass a number of "invisible boundaries."
7. Whitman did not seek isolation but rather perfect communion with others; he celebrated democracy as well as himself, arguing that a poet could claim a profoundly intimate, mystical relationship with a mass audience.
8. Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Letter*, 1850) and Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*, 1851) addressed the opposition between individualism and social order, discipline, and responsibility.
9. Of all of these writers, American readers preferred the more modest examples of individualism offered by Emerson, who made personal improvement through spiritual awareness and self-discipline seem possible.
10. Transcendentalists and other radical reformers created ideal communities called *utopias*. The most important was Brook Farm, founded in 1841, where members hoped to develop their minds and souls and then uplift society.
11. The intellectual life at the farm was electric; all the major transcendentalists were residents or frequent visitors.
12. Brook Farmers supported themselves by selling goods from their farm but organized their farming so that they remained independent of the market cycles.
13. Brook Farm failed financially, and after a fire in 1846 the organizers disbanded and sold the farm.
14. The transcendentalists abandoned their attempts to fashion a new social organization, yet their passion for individual freedom and social progress lived on in the movement to abolish slavery.

II. Rural Communalism and Urban Popular Culture

A. Mother Ann Lee and the Shakers

1. Led by “Mother” Ann Lee Stanley, the Shakers were the first successful American communal movement.
2. The Shakers accepted the common ownership of property and a strict government by the church and pledged to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, politics, and war.
3. Shakers believed that God was both male and female, but they eliminated marriage and were committed to a life of celibacy.
4. Beginning in 1787, the Shakers founded twenty communities, mostly in New England, New York, and Ohio.
5. Their agriculture and crafts, particularly furniture making, enabled most of the communities to become self-sustaining and even comfortable.
6. Shaker communities attracted more than three thousand converts during the 1830s, with women outnumbering men more than two to one, and they welcomed blacks as well as whites.
7. Because Shakers had no children of their own, they relied on conversion or adoption of orphans to replenish their numbers.
8. The Shakers had virtually disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century.

B. Arthur Brisbane and Fourierism

1. Charles Fourier, a French utopian reformer, devised an eight-stage theory of social evolution and predicted the decline of individualism and capitalism.
2. Arthur Brisbane, Fourier’s disciple, believed that cooperative work groups called *phalanxes* would replace capitalist wage labor with **socialism** and liberate both men and women.
3. Brisbane skillfully promoted Fourier’s ideas in his influential book *The Social Destiny of Man* (1840), through a regular column in the *New York Tribune*, and via hundreds of lectures.
4. In the 1840s, Brisbane and his followers started nearly 100 cooperative communities, but they could not support themselves and quickly collapsed because of internal disputes over work responsibilities and social policies.

C. John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community

1. The minister John Humphrey Noyes set about creating a community that defined sexuality and gender roles in radically new ways.
2. Noyes, who was inspired by the preaching of Charles Finney, was expelled from his Congregational Church and became a leader of “perfectionism.”
3. Perfectionists believed that the Second Coming of Christ had already occurred and that people could therefore aspire to perfection in their earthly lives and attain complete freedom from sin.
4. Noyes and his followers embraced complex marriage – all the members of the community being married to one another.
5. Noyes sought to free women from being regarded as their husbands’ property and to free them from endless childbearing and childrearing.
6. Opposition to complex marriage in Noyes’s hometown of Putney, Vermont, prompted him to move to Oneida, New York, in the mid-1840s.
7. The Oneida community became financially self-sufficient when one of its members invented a steel animal trap, and others turned to silver manufacturing; the silver-making business survived into the twentieth century.
8. The historical significance of the Shakers, the Fourierists, and Noyes and his followers is that they attempted to live their lives in what they conceived of as a more egalitarian social order and left their counter-cultural blueprints to posterity.

D. Joseph Smith and the Mormon Experience

1. The Mormons aroused more hostility than did the Shakers and the Oneidians because the Mormons successfully attracted thousands of members to their controversial group.
2. Founder Joseph Smith believed God had singled him out to receive a special revelation of divine truth – *The Book of Mormon*.
3. Smith organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; affirmed traditional patriarchal authority; encouraged hard work, saving of earnings, and entrepreneurship; and started a church-directed community intended to inspire moral perfection.
4. The Mormons eventually settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, and became the largest utopian community in America.
5. Resentment toward the Mormons turned to overt hostility when Smith refused to abide by some Illinois laws,

asked that Nauvoo be turned into a separate federal territory, and then declared himself candidate for president.

6. Smith believed in polygamy – having more than one wife at a time.
7. In 1844, Smith was murdered in jail after being arrested for trying to create a Mormon colony in Mexico.
8. Led by Brigham Young, the Mormons settled in the Great Salt Lake Valley and spread planned agricultural communities across present-day Utah (then part of Mexico).
9. Mormons who did not support polygamy remained in the United States; led by Smith's son, they formed the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
10. The “Mormon War” was a bloodless encounter; President James Buchanan was afraid that if he tried to eliminate polygamy it might set a precedent that could be used to end slavery.
11. Mormons in Utah and the Midwest succeeded because they reinvigorated the patriarchal family, endorsed private ownership of property, and accepted the entrepreneurial spirit of a market economy.

E. Urban Popular Culture

1. As utopian reformers organized new communities on the land, rural migrants and foreign immigrants created a new culture in the cities.
2. Between 1800 and 1840, America experienced a high rate of urban growth. By 1860, New York numbered over 1 million residents. Urban growth generated a new urban culture.
3. Young working-class laborers, domestic servants, and factory operatives engaged in commercialized sex and serial monogamy while dressing in the latest fashion style, such as the “B’hoy” and the “Bowery Gal.”
4. Popular entertainment was another facet of the new urban culture, particularly in New York. Blood sports, performances of Shakespeare, and museums run by P.T. Barnum were popular attractions.
5. The most important form of entertainment was blackface minstrelsy, a complex blend of racist caricature and social criticism in which white men masqueraded as African Americans. The shows reinforced white supremacy and class criticism of elite control of industry and politics.
6. Many urban New Yorkers and northeasterners disdained German and Irish immigrants, particularly the Irish, and beginning in the 1830s created a violent and political nativist movement in an attempt to halt their arrival.

III. Abolitionism

A. Black Social Thought: Uplift, Race Equality, and Rebellion

1. Leading African Americans in the North advocated policies of social uplift; they encouraged free blacks to “elevate” themselves through education, temperance, moral discipline, and hard work and, by securing “respectability,” to assume a position of equality with the white citizenry.
2. Some whites felt threatened by this and in the mid-1820s led mob attacks against blacks.
3. In 1829, David Walker (“An Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens”) justified slave rebellion, warning of a slave revolt if their freedom was delayed.
4. In 1830, African American activists called a national convention in Philadelphia. The delegates did not endorse Walker's radical call for revolt but made collective equality for all blacks their fundamental demand. This new generation of African American leaders focused on “race-equality” rather than individual uplift and respectability.
5. As Walker called for a violent black rebellion in Boston, Nat Turner staged a bloody revolt in Southampton County, Virginia.
6. Turner, a slave, believed that he was chosen to carry Christ's burden of suffering in a race war.
7. Turner's men killed sixty whites in 1831; he hoped other slaves would rally to his cause, but few did, and they were dispersed by a white militia.
8. Vengeful whites began to take the lives of blacks at random, and Turner was captured and hanged.
9. Shaken by Turner's Rebellion, the Virginia legislature debated a bill for emancipation and colonization, but the bill was rejected and the possibility that southern planters would legislate an end to slavery faded.
10. Southern states toughened their slave codes and prohibited anyone from teaching a slave to read.

B. Evangelical Abolitionism

1. A dedicated cadre of northern and Midwestern evangelical whites launched a moral crusade to abolish slavery.
2. William Lloyd Garrison, an abolitionist leader, founded *The Liberator* in 1831 and spearheaded the formation of the New England Anti-Slavery Society.
3. Garrison condemned the American Colonization Society, attacked the U.S. Constitution for its implicit acceptance of racial bondage, and demanded the immediate abolition of slavery.

4. In 1834, Theodore Dwight Weld (*The Bible Against Slavery*) inspired a group of students at Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati to form an antislavery society.
5. Weld and Angelina and Sarah Grimké provided the abolitionist movement with a mass of evidence in *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, which depicted the actual condition of slavery in the United States.
6. In 1833, Weld, Garrison, and Arthur and Lewis Tappan, along with other delegates, established the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia.
7. Women abolitionists quickly established their own organizations, such as the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Anti-Slavery Conventions of American Women.
8. The abolitionist leaders appealed to public opinion, assisted blacks who fled from slavery via the Underground Railroad, and sought support from legislators.
9. Thousands of men and women were drawn to the abolitionist movement, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

C. Opposition and Internal Conflict

1. The abolitionist crusade won the wholehearted allegiance of only a small minority of Americans.
2. Northern opponents of abolitionism often turned to violence, and southern whites reacted to it with fury, offering a reward for Garrison's kidnapping.
3. In 1835, Andrew Jackson asked Congress to restrict the use of the mails by abolitionist groups; Congress did not comply, but the House adopted the notorious gag rule that automatically tabled any legislation about slavery.
4. Abolitionists were divided among themselves over issues of gender; Garrison not only broadened his reform agenda to include pacifism and the abolition of prisons, but also to women's rights when he demanded that the Society "emancipate" women from their servile positions and make them equal with men.
5. Garrison's opponents founded the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.
6. Some abolitionists turned to politics, establishing the Liberty Party and nominating James G. Birney for president in 1840; he won few votes.
7. The very strength of abolitionism proved to be its undoing because its radical program aroused the hostility of a substantial majority of the white population.

IV. The Women's Rights Movement

A. Origins of the Women's Movement

1. During the American Revolution, the belief arose that women should limit their political role to that of "republican mothers" who would instruct "their sons in the principles of liberty and government." A woman should inhabit a "separate sphere" made up of her home and members of her family.
2. Many middle-class women transcended these rigid boundaries by joining in the Second Great Awakening, through which they gained authority and influence over many areas of family life, including the timing of pregnancies.
3. Some women used their newfound religious authority to increase their involvement outside the home, beginning with moral reform.
4. The American Female Moral Reform Society, founded in 1834 and led by Lydia Finney, had as its goals ending prostitution, redeeming fallen women, and protecting single women from moral corruption.
5. Women also tried to reform social institutions – almshouses, asylums, hospitals, and jails; Dorothea Dix was a leader in these efforts.
6. Northern women supported the movement led by Horace Mann to increase the number of public elementary schools and improve their quality.
7. Catharine Beecher, the intellectual leader of a new corps of women teachers, argued that women were the best qualified to instruct the young.
8. By the 1850s, most teachers were women, in part because of Beecher's arguments but also because women could be paid less than men.

B Abolitionist Women

1. Maria W. Stewart, a Garrisonian abolitionist and an African American, lectured to mixed audiences in the early 1830s; white women also began to deliver abolitionist lectures.
2. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) graphically described the special horrors of slavery for women.

3. A few women began to challenge the subordinate status of their sex; the most famous were Angelina and Sarah Grimké, who used Christian and Enlightenment principles to claim equal civic rights for women.
4. By 1840, female abolitionists were asserting that traditional gender roles amounted to the “domestic slavery” of women.
5. Drawn into public life by abolitionism, thousands of northern women had become firm advocates of greater rights not only for enslaved African Americans but also for themselves.

C. The Program of Seneca Falls and Beyond

1. During the 1840s, women’s rights activists, often with support from affluent men, tried to strengthen the legal rights of married women; three states enacted Married Women’s Property Acts between 1839 and 1845, and an 1848 New York statute gave a woman full legal control over the property she brought to a marriage, which became the model for similar laws in fourteen other states.
2. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized a gathering in Seneca Falls, New York, that outlined a coherent statement of women’s equality.
3. The Seneca Falls activists relied on the Declaration of Independence and repudiated the idea that the assignment of **separate spheres** for men and women was the natural order of society.
4. In 1850, the first national women’s rights convention began to hammer out a reform program and began a concerted campaign for more legal rights and to win the vote for women.
5. Susan B. Anthony joined the women’s rights movement and created a network of female political “captains” who lobbied state legislatures for women’s rights.
6. In 1860, New York granted women the right to collect and spend their own wages, to bring suit in court, and to control property they brought into their marriage in the event they became widows.