

Reform in Nineteenth Century America

The Great Awakening of the mid 18th century sparked a revival of spirituality and faith. America experienced periodic waves of revivals—Revival of intense religious feeling that swept across the American society. In his early 20s, George Whitefield, an eloquent and fiery preacher in both Great Britain and America, played a dynamic role in founding and influencing the Great Awakening. In the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, his fervor, hellfire and brimstone sermons and dramatic ministry held his audiences spellbound. Hearing Whitefield preach, men became hysterically terrified as he played for them the roles of a vengeful God damning sinners to eternal suffering and of a damned soul writhing in torment. Terror led men to the “conviction” that they were sinful and deserved lasting punishment, that only Christ could save them and in that alone they were utterly helpless. Conviction commonly led to an emotional “conversion”—“the feeling that one had been saved by grace.”

The emotional impact of the evangelical revivals in many ways produced a moral consciousness and strengthened Christian ideals. Many Americans, though devout Protestants, came to accept the concept that predestination and salvation was not solely in the hands of God. Man was responsible for his own soul and was sinful because he chose to be. God was benevolent and just and the man who chose to repent and be converted through faith could reap the benefits heaven.

Following the birth of this new nation, from 1795 to 1837, this religious spirit of enthusiasm spread with increasing intensity in the poor isolated eastern and western regions of the country. In search of spiritual satisfaction and under the influences of revivalists, many people repented and were converted. As the wave of revivals continued every man became a potential convert. Even the man who emigrated from these areas could not evade the call of the revivalist. He may not have been a convert but he had always participated in church activities.

This had become a way of life for him and he knew that at one time or another the “Holy Spirit” would call upon him to become a devout church member. (Cross, 7-8) This feeling of spiritual enthusiasm had manifested itself within the souls and minds of many Americans. Although in 1837 the excitement of the revivalism began to subside, its emotional impact would influence the attitudes and actions of the American people in the crucial years preceding the Civil War.

In the nineteenth century, if ever a time, in American history, “the spirit of man seemed free and the individual could assert his independence of choice in matters of faith and theory. The militant democracy of the period was a declaration of faith in man and in the perfectibility of his institutions. The idea so progress so inherent in the American way of life and so much a part of the philosophy of the age was at the same time a challenge to traditional beliefs and institutions and an impetus to experimentation with new theories and humanitarian reforms.” (Tyler, p. 1)

In 1817, construction began on the Erie Canal. The transportation revolution broke down barriers of distance and isolation, uprooting established communities and existing markets.

A definite pattern of migration was created as cities developed into industrial areas as a result of establishment of factories. However, the age old problems of poverty, disease and illiteracy became more concentrated as cities grew.

An expanding West was beckoning the hungry and dissatisfied to an endless search for the pot of gold.

America had entered the age of progress. As the economic patterns of the society changed, so did the social pattern and as a result a sense of anarchy evolved. This feeling led many Americans to question every aspect of national life. This new age made many aware of the fact that “old forms of American self-expression and social relations needed overhauling.

(Filler, p.30)

Thus, growing industrialization and urbanization in the East, new means of communication and transportation, the marvels of new invention and science, and advancement in the mechanization of industry, were all dislocating influences of mounting importance. And increasing immigration during the century was bringing into the country thousands of Europeans who were dissatisfied with the difficult conditions of life in their native lands. Nor did religion place any restraint on the unrest, recurring revivals, emphasis on individual conversion and personal salvation, and the multiplicity of sects, all made religion responsive to the restlessness of the time rather than a calming influence upon it.

Each citizen of the young republic, in his own way, recognized the ferment of the era and made answer to its challenge. Itinerant revivalists and the most orthodox of clergymen alike responded to the new century with missionary zeal. For an influential few, transcendentalism proved to be a satisfying reconciliation between the rationalism of their training and the romanticism of the age, while among the lesser intellectual, Adventism, spiritualism, Mormonism and perfectionism each won disciples who founded churches and preached their creeds with fervor. To these sects were added the cults and communities transplanted from abroad. America offered all kinds of possibilities. The combination of religious tolerance, overflowing optimism, and cheap lands caused Europeans of unorthodox faith or unusual social ideas to seek asylum in America. Each isolated religious community, each social utopia, was a testament of the tolerant, eclectic spirit of the young republic, and each made its contribution to the culture of the land that gave it sanctuary. (Tyler, p.2)

The 19th century was a period of transition, i.e, change and restless ferment—full of missionary zeal. Following the War of 1812, rapid economic growth takes place in America. The economic revolution of the ante-bellum years provided the foundation for national growth, both in territory and population. America's wealth producing capacity on the farm, in factories and workshops made it possible for America to be free and independent. It enabled the

American experiment in democracy and the survival of republicanism. It was a period in which the “the spirit of man seemed free and the individual could assert his independence of choice in matters of faith and theory. The militant democracy of the period was a declaration of faith in man and in the perfectibility of his institutions. The idea of progress so inherent in the American way of life and so much a part of the philosophy of the age was at the same a challenge to traditional beliefs and institutions and an impetus to experimentation with new theories and humanitarian reforms.” (Tyler, p.1)

By the 1820's many Americans were influenced by Enlightenment beliefs (faith in reason), a liberal humanitarian religion that assumed the goodness of humankind, and the perfectibility of the individual, came to believe that harmony, between God, nature, and man, could be achieved was through transformation of the society. Thus, inspired by the complex combination of Enlightenment rationalism, religious revivalism, transcendentalism, the democratization of society that resulted from the impress of the frontier, and the “belief in the progressive improvement of humankind. . .” (Cross, p.199), Americans set out to reform their society. Thus 19th century American reform was, in part, predicated on the belief that man was capable of determining his own destiny and could live in harmony with God and nature, the idea of progress, human freedom and the belief that institutions existed to be improved, that man could improve them along with himself, that the law of human society, like that of physical nature, was one of change. Ralph Waldo Emerson, looking back on the 1830s, in 1841, asked, “What is man born for, but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made . . . imitating that great Nature which [embraces] us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation of a new Life?”

As the reformers began their task, American experienced another wave of revivalism. In upstate New York, commonly referred to as the Burned Over District, Rev Charles Grandison

Finney, one of the greatest revivalist of the period, began his evangelical work. His strength was using common sense, everyday language, the Bible and histrionics to drive his congregations to salvation and social action. He preached not only salvation, but reform. Many who came under his influence and were involved in moral campaigns of their own turned to the abolition and temperance societies and made those crusades as vigorous as Finney's. Finney saw reform as:

1. Steps toward the millennium (future golden age; the reign of Christ).
2. Salvation was only the beginning of life.
3. The importance of doing God's work on earth.
4. Christianity was a way of life.
5. Because a Christian's life was the combination of belief in God and the participation in benevolent activity, it was the responsibility of every Christian and the church to eliminate sin and social injustice from the earth.

Finney became a powerful influence on the reform movements and by the 1830's thousands of converts took active part in working for a perfect society. Thus "religious zeal" helped to sweep reform high into the public consciousness.

The American reformer knew that he did not work alone. Along side of him thousands of people engaged in various causes of the period. The reformer recognized that each cause he became involved with was a part of a world of progress and aspiration, but peculiarly his was the freedom to experiment, for in his homeland there was room and hospitality for adventure. Happy in his privilege, he acknowledged his duty and accepted for his age the sign of his crusade. It is with him, his quest for perfection and his faith in his right to be free. (Tyler, p.3)

The mark of a true reformer was his compulsion to probe, to question and to agitate all aspect of American culture. The central tenet in the reform philosophy inspired men and women to reform dress and diet in the interest of universal health, to promote universal

education, to uproot capital punishment and imprisonment for debt, intemperance, war, and prostitution, and to agitate for the full rights of women, the humane treatment of the insane and the criminal, establishing model utopian societies, and even for the overthrow of such ancient institutions as the family, private property, and the state itself.

19th century reform was a demanding profession, with poverty and violence among its dangers, but it had its rewards. For women it was they could exert public influence. For men it offered was a kind of moral authority that law, politics, business and in some circles the ministry no longer had. Abolitionist and Women's Rights activist Lydia Maria Child, upon her meeting with abolitionist/reformer William Lord Garrison pointed out that he(Garrison) "got hold of the strings of my consciousness and pulled me into reform. The encounter changed the whole pattern of my life-web". (Walters, p. 14) For Lydia Child, as for countless others, reform was a significant part of life.

The reform movements, that swept across America during the first half of the 19th century reflected the evangelical Protestant imagery and rhetoric of the American Revolution of the 18th century as it took on various forms. Though the anti-slavery crusade was the most famous, other movements were of equal importance. Reform helped the American people respond to a changing world.

It is difficult to categorize the ideologies of the reformers. They all had different reasons for being involved in reform as well as diverse views of reform.

1. Some saw reform as a means to change the individual behavior.
2. Others believed that an imperfect environment was at fault for the corruption in society and that a meaningful solution to the problem at hand involved structural changes in society.
3. A few viewed reform as conservative in nature in that it would minimize class rivalries, antagonism, thereby preserving a fundamentally good and

moral social order. William Lloyd Garrison, expressing the spirit of his time, exclaimed, "I shall assume, as self-evident truths, that the liberty of a people is a gift of God and nature . . . that the right to be free is a truth planted in the hearts of men, and acknowledged so to be by all that have hearkened to the voice of nature." The right to be free, deeply rooted in democracy, and evangelical religion need only to be coupled to nineteenth-century faith in progress . . .

4. Still other saw reform in more radical terms and called for fundamental change in the fabric and structure of society.

Although the reformers were diverse in nature and involved with reform for a varieties of reasons, there were a few theme that were common to all.

1. They were optimistic about the potential of the individual and the society as a whole. There was no problem that could not be solved, no evil too extreme that could not be eradicated; no person so sinful that could not be redeemed; no situation was beyond control and no illness so severe that it could not be cured.
2. A large number those involved in the movements had strong religious convictions. To these reformers, all men were subject to a moral law that made them responsible for the welfare of their fellow man. "No individual could ignore this obligation."

The American reformer was the product of evangelical religion, which presented to every person the necessity for positive action to save his own soul and dynamic frontier democracy, which was rooted deep in a belief in the worth of the individual. Born of this combination, the reformer considered reform at once his duty and his right, and he did limit his activities to one phase of social betterment. Education, temperance, universal peace, prison reforms, the rights of women, the evils of slavery, the dangers of Catholicism, all were legitimate fields for his efforts.

3. Most reformers believed that science and reason complimented rather than contradicted religion. Science and reason provided the means of fulfilling the moral

and religious obligations that bound all individuals.

4. Recognizing the complexity and interdependency of 19th century society, the reformers were universal in their concern and often were involved in more than type of reform.

Their intent was to provide the American society with a new moral and ethical basis. Their vision was based on a belief in a “government based on popular consent, whose function was to prevent the denial of liberties of the individual, to protect the rights of the unfortunate and to prohibit the mistreatment of the delinquent.” (Tyler, p. 225)

It was the reformers responsibility to educate the nation’s youth—to train that youth to “recognize its civic and social duty and to strive for a better society.” He was also convinced that it was the destiny of his country to lead mankind toward a better life . . . and to set an example for the rest of the world to follow. (Tyler, p.225)

In this climate women worked tirelessly for each of the reforms. However they did so within the confines of the limits set for them by men, whose liberalism and willingness to accept the works of women stopped short at the barriers of traditions and prejudice. Women, then bent on testing the principles of liberty and equality, directed their attention to acquiring for themselves some of the freedom of opportunity they sought others.

Both men and women realized that slavery was incongruent with the equalitarian principles of American democracy. Entangled with every phase of American life was the slavery question. Slavery, for many reformers became the central issue and eventually the anti-slavery crusade over shadowed all the activities of those who sought to perfect the institutions of the new republic.

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