

A Legacy of Ambivalence and Suspicion:
Awakenings, Revivals and Spiritualism in 18th and 19th Century Congregational Life

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The manifestation of the First Great Awakening in Ralph Waldo Emerson's home town of Concord, Massachusetts was led by his great-grandfather, Daniel Bliss who often became weepy in the pulpit. Bliss began his ministry at First Parish Church in 1738, and in 1741, as George Whitefield preached in the open air to a large Concord assembly, Bliss wept with joy, expressing earnest sympathy with the revivalist's message and method. Bliss' frequent tearful outbursts plunged his parish into "ecclesiastical discords." Some members disapproved of their minister's emotionalism. Many townsfolk charged Bliss as a "favorer of religious excitements."¹ So when Bliss was affirmed and simply admonished for "a few improprieties of expression" by the Parish Council, a significant portion of the congregation broke away and within five years formed the town and parish of Lincoln.²

¹ from Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Historical Discourse, at Concord on the centennial anniversary of the incorporation of the town, September 12, 1835" from *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol 11 (Miscellanies)*, (Fireside Edition, Boston and New York) 1909, found in The Online Library of Liberty.

² noted by Elise Almire in *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*, (University of Pennsylvania Press), 2009, p. 34.

Ralph Waldo Emerson recounted this history in 1835 for Concord's bi-centennial celebration. Reflecting upon this religious revolution that embraced the role of emotional experience in corporate worship as a sign of the presence of God's love, Emerson struggled with how the Unitarianism in his own era had become "corpse-cold." Describing the ecclesiastical trial of his great-grandfather, he marveled at Bliss' piety. To make matters worse, two other great-grandfathers of Emerson – Joseph Emerson and Samuel Moody – were also New Light clergy supportive of the revival's emotionally expressive approach to religion.³ Emerson must have queried: how did his family's church become "an icehouse"?⁴ But he could not answer such questions because Emerson, himself, ended up abandoning the religious tradition he spent his life trying to renew.

Five historical trajectories will help us understand how the fired up legacy of Emerson's own Unitarian heritage devolved into a big chill liberal religious tradition Emerson both railed against and inspired. First, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Chuancy and the First Great Awakening. Second, John Wesley, the Second Great Awakening, and the rise of the shout tradition and the American camp meeting. Third, Emerson's Transcendentalism. Fourth, Spiritualism. And fifth, the Holiness Movement and the Birth of Pentecostalism. By means of these studies I will demonstrate that Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wanted to be the prophet of change, became the champion of retreat because he abandoned the hearth of his tradition: the church.

Our contemporary struggles with corporate and personal displays of religious affections are in no small part Emerson's unintended legacy because he has given us "a legacy of ambivalence and suspicion" not only towards exuberant expressions of emotion in matters of faith – but also our congregational life.

³ Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 16.

⁴ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, Belknap Press of Harvard Univ Press, 1956, p. 199.

I. Jonathan Edwards and the First Great Awakening

Jonathan Edwards was the intellectual generator of the revival known as the First Great Awakening. His Northampton congregation quickly grew with hundreds of converts, some of whom swooned and fell down during worship with fits and visions. In explaining the phenomenon, Edwards emphasized the importance and power of immediate, personal religious experience for ordinary folk. Although reluctant to suggest such displays of religious affections were necessarily marks of the holy spirit, he argued that anyone could be touched by God's grace. While it is easy to imagine Edwards screaming about sinners in the hands of an angry god, he preached with a gentle, emotive voice that quietly yet powerfully led individuals to his inexorable conclusion: human beings are dreadfully lost without the grace of God.⁵ This dawning of evangelical Christianity ushered in an emotional connection to faith that fostered prayerful introspection and personal commitment to new standards of morality.

Up until then, God spoke through the Bible interpreted by learned clergy, but now not only the established church but the established order, particularly in New England, was challenged by the newly embraced extemporaneous and enthusiastic preachers who inspired experiential, democratic communities of faith where God could potentially speak through anyone. "Enthusiast" became a pejorative applied to any religious person or preacher who demonstrated or stirred up an excitement of the emotions. In the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language (1755), Samuel Johnson defined enthusiasm as "a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication."⁶ Enthusiasm originally meant inspiration or possession by a divine afflatus or by the presence of a god. *Afflatus* signifies, first, a sudden rush of creative impulse or inspiration often attributed to divine influence, and, second, a breath or blast of wind, deriving from the Latin meaning to have been blown or breathed upon.

⁵ George M. Marsden, *Johnathan Edwards: A Life*, 2003, p. 224.

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755, p. 563,

I.1 Charles Chauncy and the First Great Awakening

Charles Chauncy, who served Boston's First Church from 1727 to 1787, both approved and disapproved of enthusiasm in religious experience. It was good so long as it was restrained. Unrestrained, it was anathema. Chauncy thus, on the one hand, articulated the establishment church's perspective that "the enthusiast mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the Spirit of God, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination."⁷ For Chauncy, "real religion" was sober, calm, reasonable, providing an ethic of character building and self-cultivation. Associating real religion with order and false (enthusiastic) religion with disorder, he deemed the enthusiast's certitude as an abandonment of reason that resulted in the decay of moral character.

But on the other hand, Chauncy was a far more complex religious leader than as he is often represented today. Through rigorous argument he came to question original sin and instead affirm the capacity of human beings to participate in their own salvation. He held that an uplifting change of heart was integral to the process of spiritual maturation and affirmed the value of emotion, just as long as one's feelings didn't override the faculties of reason. He saw the work of the Spirit to be "savingly wrought" not just on one's heart but over the whole individual, transforming one's entire life.⁸ Chauncy didn't disagree with Edwards that human beings are lost without God's grace; his disagreement was with Edwards' contention that human beings aren't capable of participating in their own spiritual transformation.

⁷ Ann Taves, *Fits Trances and Visions*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 22.

⁸ Thandeka, "Love Beyond Belief," *Prairie Group Paper* 2009, p. 7.

When Chauncy wrote the first universalist tract in America in 1765,⁹ he delayed publication for two decades, for fear he would appear supportive of what he deemed were poorly educated itinerant preachers spreading their Universalist faith through emotionally charged revival-like gatherings. However, his vision of heaven was far from the egalitarian, communal view developed by early Universalists.¹⁰ Instead, Chauncy's vision for religion served as a significant basis for Unitarianism, providing a legacy of not only a faith in reason among cultural elites that raised suspicions of emotional outbursts and reports of direct religious experience but also a profound social restraint that led people to distance themselves from and distrust their emotional experience.

It is well worth noting here that in 1779, when John Murray founded the Universalist Church of Gloucester, the town taxed the members to support the standing order parish. When property was seized for the payment of taxes, Murray joined a lawsuit to recover it, and in 1786, the Universalists won the settlement and "dissenting" churches suddenly became a greater threat to the established order. George DeBenneville had already been preaching Universalism for over four decades, cultivating a field that would soon see hundreds of congregations founded, often by itinerant preachers who were highly rational folks, just of a different social class than the "Old Light" or "Old Brick" Unitarians like Chauncy. Universalism thrived thanks to the itinerant preachers such that by a century after Murray's arrival, Universalism was arguably the sixth largest denomination in America. They did not initially shy away from the emotions of the heart. Early Universalist preachers called people into a communal experience of love. Community piety was a hallmark of early Universalism. Unitarians, on the other hand, held firm at a fraction of a percent of the population but never grew.

⁹ Entitled: *The Mystery hid from Ages and Generations, made manifest by the Gospel-Revelation: or, The Salvation of All Men: The Grand Thing aimed at in the scheme of God*, London, printed for C Dilly, 1784.

¹⁰ Ann Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement In America, 1770-1880*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 13.

Their hearth, despite tremendous cultural and material resources among their membership, did not generate the necessary heat.

II. John Wesley, the Second Great Awakening and the Rise of the Shout Tradition and Camp Meeting

In 1738, as Bliss began his pastorate in Concord, on the other side of the Atlantic, John Wesley felt his “heart strangely warmed” following a tumultuous decade of seeking God’s grace. In 1729 at Oxford, his younger brother Charles founded the Holy Club, a weekly meeting of students, including George Whitefield, gathered to systematically live a holy life. Fellow students derided them as “Methodists” given the orderly way of conducting their lives. In 1735, John Wesley and his brother Charles set out as missionaries for Savannah, Georgia. During the voyage a storm broke the ship’s mast; as the Englishmen screamed in terror, the Moravian settlers on board sang hymns and prayed. Wesley longed for similar depth of faith to experience and share, but his Georgia mission went miserably and ended with a humiliating trial alleging that he’d broken off a marriage proposal.

Once back in England exhausted and depressed, he tearfully and joyfully experienced God’s love in a conversion experience he readily described to others. Less than a year later, he experienced a second highly emotional conversion that provided assurance that he, albeit still prone to sin, was on the path towards Christian perfection. He called this second experience sanctification. Precluded from preaching in most churches, Wesley--on Whitefield’s encouragement--took to the open air and discovered he could reach folks unlikely to enter a church. As people sought and had experiences that moved them to commit themselves to a more holy life, Wesley created “bands,” or small groups, for people to participate in, complete with sets of rules and vetted lay leaders. Sometimes called “class meetings” 5 to 12 people gathered where those seeking listened to testimony from those who had already experienced conversion and sanctification.

Thus did the First Great Awakening become a transatlantic phenomenon, though it would be another half century before Wesley's teachings would grow like wildfire in the newly formed United States as part of the Second Great Awakening.

II.1 The Rise of the Shout Tradition and American Camp Meeting

Originally articulated by Wesley as a process, the sanctification experience quickly became understood in the American colonies as an emotional state of holiness one entered by faith at a definable moment in time. Because followers of Wesley gathered together in small groups, their sanctification experiences often occurred during intimate, prayerful class meetings. By the American Revolution, this coaxing toward holiness through sanctification had taken root in Virginia.

The Virginia revivals of the 1770s and 1780s developed as thoroughly interracial affairs.¹¹ Seeking the experience of holiness/sanctification, Methodists were observed "panting and groaning for pardon," or "entreating God, with strong cries and tears to save them from the remains of inbred sin, to sanctify them throughout." "Some would be seized with a trembling, and in a few moments drop on the floor with streaming eyes, and all were lost in wonder, love, and praise."¹² At times the congregation would "raise a great shout" that could be heard for miles around. Early American Methodists often were referred to as "shouting Methodists."¹³

As circuit riders penetrated every corner of frontier and society with this boisterous religious movement, the emotionally expressive worship of this new fiery sect connected with the temper of rough frontiersmen, African slaves, and some native

¹¹ Ann Taves, *Fits Trances and Visions*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 78.

¹² Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971, p.9.

¹³ Taves, p. 76.

Americans.¹⁴ Shouting wasn't restricted to the Methodists. The Separatist tradition of the Baptists was similarly multi-ethnic in its make-up and likely multicultural in its practices from the start.¹⁵ The shout tradition was, a tradition "they [Europeans and Africans] made together. What this means is that the sacralization of certain kinds of experience within Christianity developed in an interracial and more importantly a multicultural context."¹⁶

The emergence of the shout tradition was shaped thus not only between preachers and people, but also, as evidence from the Virginia revivals suggests, by the interaction between mourners and shouters.¹⁷ The power of God often "came down" in the prayer meetings before preachers arrived. Preachers often complained of losing control of preaching services, not simply because people cried out or shouted, but because the people transformed them into prayer meetings, turning their attention away from the preacher to pray for family and friends.

Shouters assumed that mourners and those in the throes of conviction needed their prayers in order to be saved. This assumption reflected both the Wesleyan emphasis on spiritual development as a communal process and the traditional African emphasis on knowing the Spirit through the dynamic rhythmic interaction of individuals within a group.

The impact of the African performance tradition reached well beyond singing to preaching and dance. Evangelists were obliged to develop a more interactive preaching style. Songs often moved into speech and vice versa, and the entire performance could be shot through with the rhythms of call-and-response or verse and chorus. As

¹⁴ Synan p. 11.

¹⁵ Taves, p131, relying on Albert Raboteau and David Wills.

¹⁶ Taves, quoting Michel Sobel, p. 80.

¹⁷ Taves p. 103.

musicologists point out, African music, because of its emphasis on polyrhythm and call-and-response, is typically the product of a group interaction.¹⁸ Consideration of African religious influences suggests we shift our mode of viewing away from the actions of individuals--the preacher, the convert, the shouter--to the interaction among people in a group.

It was in this communal, experiential context that the camp meeting exploded into existence at Cane Ridge, Kentucky in 1801. After three years of revival preaching by various sects, Methodist John McGee sparked something completely new when, while preaching, he was overcome and “shouted and exhorted with all possible energy” and the floor was “covered with the slain” while “their screams for mercy pierced the heavens.”¹⁹ Camp meetings quickly became a significant part of American religious life. Lasting up to five days, with revival preaching day and night, camp meetings witnessed whites, blacks, men, women and persons of many denominations taking turns exhorting would-be converts. It was an egalitarian phenomenon where participants prayed for those around them.

Thus the point. Anyone at any time could receive the holy spirit. When repentant sinners were asked to approach the “anxious bench,” they sat with all eyes on them until conversion experiences descended, often with sensational involuntary movements such as falling down as if dead, barking like dogs, and experiencing “the jerks.” In the light of blazing campfires hundreds of sinners would fall “like dead men in mighty battle.” In some services entire congregations would be seized by the “holy laugh,” an ecstasy that could hardly be controlled. In some locales, curiosity and excitement drew daily crowds from 10,000 to 25,000.

¹⁸ Taves, p. 105.

¹⁹ Synan, p. 41.

Ironically, the logistics for making “disorderly” worship possible became meticulously planned. Camping areas were assigned based on church, city, and race. Law enforcement committees formed to promote camp rules and prevent theft and "courting" improprieties. Methodist Bishop Asbury noted in his journal that over 400 Methodist camp meetings occurred in 1811. By 1830, however, the more frenzied aspects of the revival had been tamed; by the 1840's cabins replaced the tents and sites became summer vacation camps.

2.3 Universalism

Universalists spread their faith by itinerant preaching like the Methodists and Baptists, but without camp meetings. Universalist evangelism, often overlooked by scholars of the Second Great Awakening,²⁰ sought to remove the scales of irrationality and affirm faith grounded in love rather than fear, all the while promoting an egalitarian, communal vision. Universalist evangelists often set up their gatherings as debates or opportunities to affirm arguments for Universal salvation. Largely antagonists of evangelicalism with its Calvinist underpinnings, Universalists didn't fervently pray to transform each other but instead relied on reason to “convert” others.

The rise of Universalism in late eighteenth century reflected the desire to maintain a communal faith in opposition to the individualism that increasingly characterized social and religious attitudes in New England. Universalist itinerant preachers found fertile ground for their evangelism both in the subsistence farm societies throughout New England and the more urban areas as they “spoke of a community of love in ways that echoed the solidarity of tight-knit journeymen’s societies and the mutuality of the larger working-class community.”²¹

²⁰ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* vol. 1, p. 548.

²¹ Bressler, p. 22.

A major part of Universalism's appeal through the first half of the nineteenth century was its proponents' reputation for contentiousness. Yet early Universalism had a profound communal piety that served the local congregation but thwarted broader organization.²² As Universalists grew in numbers and influence, the initial focus on piety turned to ushering in the Kingdom of God. Their influence wasn't only among their own-- a large number of Methodists adopted a near universalist stance, making Universalism less of a radical and unique religious perspective than it had been. The Methodist practice to provide small bands for its members to experience intimacy and ultimacy within congregational life gave the Methodists a sustaining institutional organizational power that served their continued flourishing. Universalists on the other hand underwent significant change, morphing its message and appeal to the culture at hand. "In no other religious movement do we witness so dramatically the shift from an eschatological and communally oriented faith to an open-ended, progressive sensibility centering on individual personality."²³ This change opened up a profound longing for emotional engagement as we will see.

III. Emerson's Transcendentalism

One hundred years after Bliss began his pastorate in Concord and Wesley had his warming heart conversion experience, Emerson delivered his Divinity School Address. He spoke more eloquently than other Unitarians about cultivating an experiential religion that honored human experience; but he advocated a personal religion without congregational life. Self-reliance was his method, and human perfection his goal. For him, each human being harbors the seeds of knowledge and truth within if only human beings would wake up to their true nature; no mediation through grace required, only the inborn capacity to intuit the deeper truths of one's experience.

²² Bressler, p. 83.

²³ Ann Lee Bressler, p. 8.

Emerson's aunt Mary Moody Emerson had fired his appreciation for the "old religion" by recounting, with devotion, stories she heard from her elders told about Daniel Bliss, Samuel Moody, and Joseph Emerson. There is arguably a continuity of a visionary and ecstatic mode in New England religious thought originating with the Puritans and extending through Edwards to Emerson.²⁴

Mary Moody Emerson's social memory shot through with adoration of their clergy kin provides a compelling link between these two religious geniuses.²⁵ Without her, Emerson would not have written so glowingly of great-grandfather Bliss and his ecclesiastical trial: "His answer to one of the counts breathes such true piety that I cannot forbear to quote it." The allegation: a prayer for himself as a mediator between God and his people. "To this Mr. Bliss replied, 'In the prayer you speak of, Jesus Christ was acknowledged as the only Mediator between God and man; at which time, I was filled with wonder, that such a sinful and worthless worm as I am, was allowed to represent Christ, in any manner...'"²⁶

With his aunt's influence, Emerson's transcendentalism should not be understood as simply a rebellion against Unitarian rationalism but a recasting of the earlier emotional religion of the New Lights. Out of his longing for a renewed ecstatic religious vision, he reformulated new spirit-filled ways of faith; however, he failed to spawn a sustained revival as did Edwards or Wesley because he walked away from congregational life. Instead his influence would be cultural, as he provoked a sustained anti-revival, encouraging private reflection over shared experience in a congregational context.

²⁴ Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson" in *Errand into the Wilderness*,

²⁵ Cole, p. 18.

²⁶ Emerson, "Historical Discourse."

Emerson left the ministry because, in part, he was opposed to serving communion. “Jesus did not intend to establish an institution of perpetual observance,”²⁷ Emerson insisted. But Jesus intended to establish a community of perpetual participation and commitment. He said, after all, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”²⁸ Emerson distanced himself from the emotional experience of being in religious community. He abandoned the conflicts that come with such participation. Instead Emerson focused on the development of ideas and summarized his doctrine as the infinitude of the private man. Even with his intellectual peers, he often eschewed the commitments of religious community. With George Ripley, Emerson once mused about the creation of a university of the spirit, suggesting that along with himself, Hedge, Parker, and Alcott ought to serve as rotating teachers. When Ripley took the plunge to live out their shared idealism and warmly invited Emerson to participate in Brookfarm, Emerson wrote Ripley a short, cool note to say his temperament wouldn’t allow him.²⁹

IV. Spiritualism

Rituals to commune with spirits of the dead became vastly popular in the 1850s among our Universalist forebears and, to a lesser extent, Unitarians and Quakers. The spiritualist revival promoted a distinct experiential religion through circles, Sunday lectures, and camp meetings, that affirmed God’s providence, human destiny after death, and the relationship between Heaven and Earth. “Many saw spiritualism as a rejection of superstition and supernaturalism and an endorsement of the universal application of natural law and evolution--even to the afterlife.”³⁰ For those no longer

²⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson “The Lord’s Supper” from *Uncollected Prose*

²⁸ Matthew 18:20, King James Version.

²⁹ Richardson p. 343

³⁰ John Benedict Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*, Skinner House Books, 2004, p. ix.

convinced by the “evidences” of Christianity, Spiritualism provided “scientific” evidence of religious truth while encouraging skeptics to become “investigators” to observe “demonstrations” of the truth of Spiritualism produced under “test conditions” in the seance room. Contemporaneous scientific discoveries such as electricity appeared no more credible.

Spiritualism became intertwined with the reform goals of Adin Ballou; the celebrated champion of nonviolence and founder of Hopedale presided over the first two national gatherings of spiritualists. Many Universalists, like Ballou, conceived of spiritualism as a form of rationality. Wrote Ballou,

I am a Spiritualist because I regard Spiritualism as a great help in the promulgation of free discussion. There are thousands of questions on the subject of religion, science and philosophy, which must be discussed, but could never be solved by any method mankind possessed prior to the birth of modern Spiritualism. ... Man’s eternal destiny was a mere fancy; the essential religious truths were mere baseless whims. The time has come when religion and reason must be married.³¹

Spiritualists’ radical vision for the reformation of society paralleled the extreme individualism of their religious practice.

Spiritualist faith challenged institutional religion asserting that the Spiritualist’s truth came directly to the individual without mediation by minister, Bible, or church.³² For many, Spiritualism was a natural extension of Transcendentalism. “While the American public flocked to Emerson’s lectures and were inspired by what he said, few of them responded by joining communes or becoming Transcendentalists. Instead, they

³¹ Adin Ballou as quoted in Braude p. 64.

³² Braude 56

followed his lectures with visits to séances, where the power of Emerson's ideas helped fuel the movement he despised."³³

Yet "Spiritualism formed a major--if not the major--vehicle for the spread of advocacy for women's rights in the mid-nineteenth century."³⁴ Also bringing together many of those who formed the backbone of the abolitionist movement, spiritualism affirmed the individual personality as well as the capacity for human beings to participate in their own earthly salvation. Theodore Parker wrote in 1858, "Spiritualists are the only sect that looks forward, and has new fire in its hearth; they alone emancipate themselves from the Bible and the theology of the church while they also seek to keep the precious truths of the Bible, and all the good things of the church."³⁵

Universalists and to a lesser extent Unitarians and Quakers were more susceptible to spiritualism's pull than other religious traditions for several reasons. First, there was a strong emotional engagement in Spiritualism's "rational" gatherings. Second, they provided circles in which members could participate, as well as their own form of camp meetings. Third, with religious underpinnings so individualistic, spiritualism ushered in a mass temporary mooring for religious liberals who longed for an alternative to evangelicalism yet longed to ground their emotional experience in quasi-community. Fourth, Spiritualism was a welcome respite from the emerging orthodoxy struggles as Universalists removed the liberty clause from the Winchester Profession and Unitarians struggled with requiring a creedal test and remaining a Christian denomination.

When spiritualism went out of vogue, Universalism was forever changed. Along with Unitarianism, it developed what Universalism had originally resisted--a moralistic

³³ Braude p. 45

³⁴ Ann Braude *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*, Beacon Press, 1989, p. xx.

³⁵ Buescher, p. 140.

focus as both traditions now were obsessed with negating bad doctrine and struggled with identity. Instead of being a tradition that provided a communal experience of love, Universalism now sought to discern right belief.

At the heart of spiritualism was the poignant emotional experience of keeping alive the love and memory of lost loved ones. If Adin Ballou hadn't lost his beloved son, Hopedale would have unfolded quite differently. Although the experience of losing a child was common, the bereavement was no less intense. Similarly, if the Civil War hadn't claimed so many young men, spiritualism wouldn't have been nearly as buoyed by emotionally bereft folks wanting to know what happened to their beloved sons, fathers, brothers, and husbands.

Communities (usually Universalist) that dedicated resources to spiritualism ended up irrelevant. Efforts among spiritualists to organize floundered. While the sixth national convention of Spiritualists was poorly attended in 1869, thousands of people flocked to the far more entertaining Spiritualist camp meetings located on scenic lakes or beaches with newly built cabins and assembly halls.³⁶ Without cultivating any institutions of consequence, Spiritualism declined in the 1870s as the experiential religious movements of Theosophy, Christian Science, and New Thought emerged in its stead.

V. The Holiness Movement and the Birth of Pentecostalism

American Methodism claimed the primary home of the early holiness movement, as the Methodist General Conferences of 1824 and 1832 issued urgent calls to the faithful to lay greater stress on holiness, fueled by an emphasis on Wesley's original writings. By 1840, as "the perfection of man" had become a central theme of American social, intellectual, and religious life, the holiness tradition was sometimes called

³⁶ Braude 174

“evangelical Transcendentalism.” The nation’s leading Baptist evangelist within the holiness camp wrote, “The ideals to which Emerson and Henry David Thoreau aspired on a highly sophisticated level, plain men of the time sought at a Methodist mourners’ bench or class meeting.”³⁷ However, there was a vast difference between the two, the most telling is the role of communal worship.

As the camp meeting faded from the American scene in the 1840s, a new generation of holiness ministers, often self-appointed, provided seekers the promise to experience sanctification. Phoebe Palmer, the most prominent of them, took up the holiness torch and held Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness. Hundreds of preachers and laymen from various denominations flocked to her home to hear of the “shorter way” of achieving the perfection and ecstasy that early Christian saints had taken lifetimes to achieve. By placing “all on the altar,” she taught, one could be instantly sanctified through the baptism of the Holy Ghost. This was not the kind of holiness that the Methodists intended to ignite.

In the 1870s, as younger educated Methodist and Baptist ministers brought in robed choirs, organs, building plans for beautiful churches, and a more urbane following, many older churchmen lamented the loss of old institutions, such as the class meeting, the camp meeting, and the plainness of dress. Renewed calls to holiness broke out. National Holiness Camp Meetings were held. The schism between denominational bodies and an “independent” holiness movement split largely along class lines. The exception was in the South where many educated ministers led the holiness charge in the wake of Reconstruction. The Methodists ended up rejecting the Holiness movement largely on the grounds that holiness teachings are “semi-Pelagian” and offer a “do-it-yourself” form of salvation.

³⁷ Synan 19

As the Holiness Movement reached its peak in 1890, the Social Gospel emerged and deeply affected all the major churches, but none as deeply as the Methodist Church. The Third Great Awakening witnessed two branches of revival activity that characterized this split between Methodism and the Holiness tradition: a revival of reform-minded religion and the birth of pentecostalism for whom poverty, inequality, and unequal distribution of wealth weren't the greatest sins, but rather the iniquities of the theater, ball games, dancing, lipstick, cigarettes, and liquor.³⁸ Consisting of primarily people among the lower classes, the holiness and Pentecostal movements also recoiled from what more liberal churches embraced: Darwinism, higher criticism, and ecumenism.

From the perspective of community, members of the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition at the turn of the century participated as a matter of survival and to hold their lives together, whereas the social gospel movement brought a broad spectrum of people together who found meaning in their lives by devoting themselves to the betterment of others.

From 1895 to 1905, the holiness movement fragmented into more than 20 denominations, instead of forming one large group. Why? As a movement of experiential religion, theirs also relies largely on a radical individualism that foments anti-authoritarianism and anti-institutionalism. When all sorts of folks claim authentic revelation, it's hard to coordinate them together.

Among the most radical adherents of the holiness movement, Charles Parham began teaching that one isn't saved until baptized by the Holy Spirit, characterized by falling down and speaking in tongues or effecting divine healing. In 1905, Parham's student William Seymour traveled to Los Angeles where his preaching inspired the Azusa Street Revival. Worship was interracial with music and impromptu preaching. No

³⁸ Synan, p. 47.

order of service. People rose to testify as the spirit directed them, often falling down and speaking in tongues. This revival at Azusa Street is considered the birth of Pentecostalism. The signature of this new movement was to draw together people in intense emotional experiences within a community dedicated to caring for its own.

By 1914, theological unity eluded the Pentecostal movement, and the experiment of racial integration ended. Yet, the attraction to this full-throated spirit-filled religious form amidst dozens and later hundreds of denominations would become the fastest growing religious movement by the end of the twentieth century.

At this time, Unitarians proclaimed “onward and upward forever” and Universalists struggled to curb their movement’s precipitous decline. Both traditions now encouraged people to experience the holy in private, if at all. The evangelical and holiness-pentecostal movements, on the other hand, experienced the sacred in communal settings, providing intensely community focused religion because religion was an integral and central part of their lives. But when religious community becomes optional, it is easy to walk.

Conclusions

Ralph Waldo Emerson wanted to be the prophet to fire up his family’s religious tradition, but his retreat from congregational life turned those who followed his teachings away from religious community to seek revelation. At the heart of the evangelical, emotionally charged traditions has been a self-acknowledgment of unworthiness and a deep praise for the privilege of being smiled upon by God. Emerson expressed this kind of dependence when he fell in love with Ellen Tucker, his first wife. He shared with his aunt Mary his extravagant happiness and this happiness made him aware of “an apprehension of reverses always arising from success.” “I cannot find in the world within or without any antidote any bulwark against fear like this; the frank acknowledgment of

unbounded dependence.”³⁹ The frank acknowledgment of unbounded dependence is at the core of the “old religion” defended by his New Lights ancestors. It is also the core of religious experience. May we find this relevance not only in the arms of our loved ones but also in the embrace of our religious communities.

Emerson does not give us a foundation for religious authority. Many UU ministers have looked to Emerson as a model for their own contemporary ministry. This is problematic. What we now need is a great-grandfather clause where we can all be grandfathered into the piety of Daniel Bliss. We need to be blissed out, or dare I say, blissed in.

Emerson does not provide us with teachings to build and sustain community because he avoided the conflicts that come with such engagement. I pray that we not only enter the fray but rise above it as we explore the emotional dimension of worship that comes with personal testimony, rousing music, narrative preaching, spontaneous prayer, and communion rituals—including the sharing of joys and sorrows—and that we collectively discover new ways to plumb our own rich tradition for the lost sources of minds, hearts, and souls on fire: our congregational lives.

³⁹ Robert D. Richardson, “Schliermacher and the Transcendentalists,” from *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and its Contexts*, edited by Charles Capper and Conrad Wright, p. 131.