

ABSTRACT

The Crisis of Sectarianism: Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon Converts in Antebellum America

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The antebellum era is often portrayed a time of religious flourishing, when the state got along with the church, when revivalism gave a voice to the voiceless, and when churches grew faster than the population. While these aspects are significant, one must also examine the unintended effects of radical freedom and egalitarianism, such as sectarianism, individualism, and heterodoxy. As each religious sect claimed to be the true church, a number of Americans began to experience a sense of religious confusion, detachment, and instability. This resulted in a crisis of sectarianism, induced a number of conversions from traditional Protestant denominations.

This paper examines why antebellum Americans converted to Restorationism, Catholicism, and Mormonism. While each of these traditions was considerably different from one another theologically, they each offered converts a sense of religious stability through defined authority and security through cohesive communities and rituals. Furthermore, the critiques of the all the traditional Protestant denominations voiced by these converts, reveals the inherent danger in the American values of freedom, liberty, and independence, as applied to religion, when not maintained by a semblance of order.

The Crisis of Sectarianism: Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon Converts in
Antebellum America

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1. The Crisis of Sectarianism	1
Introduction	1
Church Growth among the Methodists & the Baptists	3
Populist Impulses & Their Results	5
Presbyterians & the Second Great Awakening	7
The Search for True Religion	9
Common Sense Moral Reasoning & Individualism	11
The Search for Christian Unity	14
Conclusion	15
Chapter 2: Conversions to Restorationism	17
Desire for Unity	18
Criticisms	19
Thomas Campbell	24
Barton W. Stone	27
Alexander Campbell	30
The Stone-Campbell Movement	34
Other “Restorers”	39
Converts to the Restoration Movement	40
Democratic & Modernistic Impulses	41
Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon Converts	42
Conclusion	43
Chapter 3: Conversions to Catholicism	45
Anti-Catholicism	46
High Churchmanship & Romanticism	48
Elizabeth Ann Seton	50
Orestes A. Brownson	57
Isaac Hecker & Other Transcendentalist Converts	62
Conclusion	66

Chapter 4: Conversions to Mormonism	67
Joseph Smith	69
The Book of Mormon	74
A New Church	77
Conversions among Joseph Smith’s Family	78
Other Mormon Converts	84
Mormon Answers to the Crisis of Sectarianism	90
Heterodoxy	91
Religious Persecution & the Murder of Joseph Smith	93
Conclusion	94
Chapter 5: Epilogue	96
Bibliography	102

CHAPTER ONE

The Crisis of Sectarianism

Introduction

In the 1740s a religious revolution took place in America known as the First Great Awakening. Conversions to Christianity increased, as did church attendance, new churches, and missionary activity. Internal divisions among Protestants and dissent from the established churches, however, also resulted from the awakenings. Impenetrable schisms resulted among the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, who divided into “New Lights” and “Old Lights.”¹ This religious revolution helped to ignite the American War for Independence through the powerful impulses of dissent and independence from authority.² The political ideals of freedom, liberty, and independence were incorporated by Protestants during the early republic. The fusion of Protestant and democratic ideals fostered tremendous growth among traditional Protestant denominations, especially the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists during the early nineteenth century. It was among these three denominations that a Second Great Awakening, more radical and democratic, spread along the American landscape. As with the colonial revivals, however, the Protestant surge of the early nineteenth century, was also accompanied by bitter fragmentation, only this time on a much a larger scale.³

¹ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 309.

² Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 288.

³ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

The democratization of Christianity not only brought expansion and rejuvenation to religion in America through egalitarianism, voluntarism, and free enterprise, but also, through these same mediums, cultivated certain problems, such as radical individualism, heterodoxy, and fractionalization. As churches began to compete with each other in order to survive in an atmosphere of religious disestablishment, and as Americans became increasingly suspicious of religious authority figures, a variety of denominations proliferated and religious innovation burgeoned. With each religious sect claiming to be the true church, a number of Americans began to experience a sense of religious confusion, detachment, and instability. This crisis of sectarianism resulted in conversions from traditional and popular Protestant denominations to radically different traditions, and in some cases, despised churches at the time, such as Restorationism, Catholicism, and Mormonism. The fires of revivalism and the hype of religious democratization had left converts to these three faiths burned over and wearied. At the moment of traditional Protestantism's greatest popularity in America, when the American Way was understood as the Protestant way, a noteworthy number of Americans dissented back to religious authority, discovering freedom in unlikely places.

Condemning all the churches in America for failing to achieve Christian unity, Alexander Campbell converted from the Baptist Church to help found the Restoration Movement, which formed the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ.⁴ Joseph Smith declared that his confidence in the Bible, the creeds, and the churches, had been

⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Prospectus," *The Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 1 (January 1830), 1.

destroyed by the “contradictory views of the clergy.”⁵ It was while Smith was praying in the woods for God to reveal to him the true church that he reportedly had a vision, the first among many which would lead to his founding of the Mormon Church.⁶ After sojourning in a number of popular Protestant churches, Orestes Brownson converted to Roman Catholicism, despite widespread and militant anti-Catholicism at the time. Brownson became convinced that the true source of heresy and fragmentation was the individualistic interpretation of the Bible.⁷ Although Restorationism, Mormonism, and Catholicism, were radically different from each other, each represented the ideal of unity and orthodoxy to converts of these traditions during the early nineteenth century through their embodiment of community and authority.

Church Growth among the Methodists and the Baptists

The same dynamics that triggered sectarianism among the churches were those which also allowed for the colossal growth of Protestantism.⁸ To overcome an alarming drop in church attendance in the 1790s, dynamic evangelical leaders devoted their lives to reaching the unchurched. Among the Protestant denominations, the Methodists were the most effective in their incorporation of democratic measures. After they split with the Anglican Church in 1784, the Methodists presented themselves as a church for the

⁵ William Smith, Interview (1893), in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996-2003, 1:513, in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 33.

⁶ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 217.

⁷ Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 116.

⁸ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 100.

common person, in disdain of Episcopal formality.⁹ Methodist itinerant preachers traveled thousands of miles on horseback, often alone, to the most remote areas of the frontier. Like their predecessor, George Whitefield, these circuit riders incorporated theatrics to appeal to their audiences.¹⁰ In 1804 the itinerant preaching of Benoni Harris was reported by an observer as loud, effective, and entertaining.¹¹ In addition, most traveling ministers could relate to the majority of Americans as they themselves were often impoverished and self-educated.¹² The first college graduate among the circuit riders in Indiana gave up his ministry, citing his education as an insurmountable disadvantage.¹³ As Methodists employed democratic ideals of freedom and egalitarianism, they fostered populist impulses, and consequently grew from 30 churches in 1780 to 2,700 by 1820.¹⁴

Baptist churches also rose rapidly in the new republic as they promoted freedom from state control, relying instead on the power of volunteerism and local initiative.¹⁵ At the turn of the century the Baptists were considered a “poor and despised people,” but the movement gained momentum as the authority of the established churches from the

⁹ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 256.

¹⁰ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 258.

¹¹ George Peck, *Life and Times of George Peck, D.D., Written by Himself* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1847), 27-28.

¹² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity*, 88.

¹³ William Warren Sweet, *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1916), 76-77, in Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity*, 89.

¹⁴ Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: A History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 61.

¹⁵ Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World*, 64.

colonial era began to wane by the early nineteenth century. The Baptists reached the people, as the Methodists did, through powerful leaders, who were often uneducated lay persons. John Leland, a self-taught Baptist itinerant from Massachusetts scorned the “learned clergy” and preached that the people were the holders of theology.¹⁶ William Smythe Babcock traveled an estimated fifteen hundred miles in nine months as an itinerating minister, preaching a message of freedom and liberty from all authority other than the Bible. In 1809, he broke with the Freewill Baptists, convinced that he must stand alone, “unconnected to or with anyone.”¹⁷ As the printing press and the efforts of revivalists allowed the Bible to be a book for the people, Baptists and Methodists assumed democratic status as churches for the people, and they thus flourished in the wake of American independence.

Populist Impulses and Their Results

Placing Bibles into the hands of every person and breaking the bonds of tradition kindled a remarkable religious fervency unmatched in American history. These democratic measures, in turn, left eccentric theologies unchecked and fostered widespread division. Reflecting on his tour of the United States in the 1830s, the famous French political scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote,

The power of the people is disseminated through all parts of this vast country, and instead of radiating from a common point, they cross each other in every direction; the Americans have no where established any central direction of opinion.¹⁸

¹⁶ John Leland, “The Rights of Conscience Inalienable,” *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland, Including Some Events in His Life, Written by Himself* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 185.

¹⁷ William Smythe Babcock, *Journal of Preaching*, December 1809, Babcock Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester Massachusetts, as quoted in Hatch, 42-43.

¹⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Signet Classic, 1956), 93.

With no central authority, orthodoxy became difficult to maintain. Churches quarreled over the signs of true conversion, the Biblical way to baptize, the role of missionary societies, and when and how the Lord would return. Such disagreements caused internal division within Protestant churches. A few divisions included New School and Old School Presbyterians; Separatists, Freewill, and Calvinistic Baptists; and Republican Methodists and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁹

The plague of schisms which resulted from the populist impulse in the churches also spawned radical new sects, transforming the young nation into a spiritual hothouse.²⁰ Although the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming was transported from England, the Shakers made their greatest advances on American soil. This sect believed that their founder, Mother Ann Lee was the feminine incarnation of Jesus Christ and that their church was the true millennial church on earth. They were especially successful in gaining converts among Baptists and Presbyterians. In the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening, they claimed over six thousands members.²¹ Belief in the imminence of the millennium coupled easily with evangelical enthusiasm. William Miller had a dramatic conversion at a Baptist revival before his personal examination of the Bible led him to believe that Christ would return in March 1843. Thousands joined him to prepare for the event, and despite their disappointment in the failed prediction, the Millerites became a formal congregation in 1845.²² Unitarianism, Universalism,

¹⁹ Noll, *America's God*, 168.

²⁰ Butler, 225.

²¹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 493-494.

²² Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 479-480.

Transcendentalism, Mormonism, and a variety of other “isms” all rose to prominence during the heyday of religious democratization, each claiming Scriptural warrant to justify their cause.

Presbyterians and the Second Great Awakening

Protestant evangelical denominations, however, grew the most during the early nineteenth century especially throughout the expanding frontier. The event that best marked their rise to prominence was the Presbyterian-led revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in August 1801. Attracting around twenty-five thousand people and lasting about a week, Cane Ridge inaugurated the Second Great Awakening and was referred to as the greatest movement of the Spirit since Pentecost.²³ Sectarian lines were overshadowed at Cane Ridge, as Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists preached from tree stumps, often simultaneously, to large crowds.²⁴ Those in attendance, who were mostly backwoodsmen and their families, responded to the charismatic leaders of the revival in dramatically emotional ways, such as dancing, laughing, running, jerking, and even barking.²⁵ The long duration of Cane Ridge, which continued even at night by camp fires, the vast crowd, and the dynamic preaching produced something of a drunken ecstasy of religious experience. Attendants emerged from Cane Ridge with disdain for creeds and clergy, high on their own personal experience with God instead.²⁶

²³ Ahlstrom, 431.

²⁴ Ahlstrom, 431, 433.

²⁵ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 167.

²⁶ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Chu Hartley Publishers, 1992), 52.

Although formal divisions among denominations were blurred during the excitement at Cane Ridge, religious individualism was fostered. Such revivals not only reached the poor, the uneducated, and the unchurched of the American frontier, but also extended to them religious authority and autonomy. Ecstatic religious experience detached from formal conventions offered individuals a compelling sense of self-respect.²⁷ Frontier faith reached new heights with the presidency of Andrew Jackson, who emphasized the rights of ordinary men and women to make their own decisions in matters of politics.²⁸ Unlike the religious and intellectual hubs of New England, the frontier was a vast space with few community centers around which the people could unite. Frontier life was thus more lonely and detached, making those who lived in the rough terrain more susceptible to a private, emotionally-charged, self-affirming faith. Commenting on this new wave of religious individualism, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “I have seen no country in which Christianity is clothed with fewer forms, figures, and observances than in the United States; or where it presents more distinct, simple, and general notions of the mind.”²⁹ While formalism began to die away in the colonial revivals, by the antebellum era it was almost completely replaced by individualistic “heart” religion.

²⁷ Hatch, 4.

²⁸ Butler, 215.

²⁹ Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, 154.

The Search for “True Religion”

Authority assumed by individuals through the elevation of personal religious experience caused quarrels among the people over what constituted true religion.³⁰ The most democratic group to emerge from the antebellum atmosphere of religious populism was the Restorationists, whose rallying cry was *Vox populi, vox Dei*—“the voice of the people is the voice of God.”³¹ In fact, it was one of the founders of this movement, Barton Warren Stone, who started the revival at Cane Ridge. So democratic was this movement that Stone and his followers referred to their schism with the Presbyterians as their “declaration of Independence.”³² For the Restorationists, true religion was not wrapped up in the outward customs of creeds or titles, but in the heart of the individual and in the Bible alone. These convictions resonated with the democratic atmosphere at the time, bringing tremendous success for the Restorationist movement, which rivaled even that of the traditional evangelical churches. At the same time, the Restoration Movement emerged as a response to the crisis of sectarianism, as the leaders of this movement charged all churches with corruption for their failure to unite. Leaders of Restorationism claimed that their movement represented the only true church on earth. Restorationism was thus at once both democratic and authoritarian.

More than empowering the people, the founding impetus for the Restoration movement was correcting sectarianism. Controversy surrounded almost every religious body. For example, the Shakers caused an uproar in the Upper Ohio Valley with their

³⁰ Moore, *Selling God*, 121.

³¹ Alexander Campbell and Rt. Rev. John B. Purcell, “A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion,” (Cincinnati: Stereotyped & Published by J. A. James & Co., January 1837), 44.

³² Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 152.

variant practices and beliefs;³³ a group of Baptists, known as the Landmarkists, were claiming that only local Baptist congregations were the true church;³⁴ and revivalists such as Albert Barnes and Lyman Beecher of the Presbyterians were tried in court for heresy by their congregation.³⁵ The Restorationists were not the only ones who lamented the bitter fragmentation. John Williamson Nevin, an Old School Presbyterian, charged the “sect-spirit” as being Antichrist in a sermon he delivered in 1845.³⁶ Unlike the Restorationists, however, Nevin condemned the “no creed but the Bible mentality” as the cause of sectarianism. Nevin complained that popular sovereignty in the churches made the Bible out to be “a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.”³⁷ Theophilus Armenius (pseudonym), a Methodist, similarly complained that the Bible as the “only rule” was turning everyone “foot-loose . . . on every question as to doctrine or government.” “They ran wild!” he exclaimed.³⁸ Thus while individuals differed over what they took to be the cause of sectarian strife, many Americans were troubled by its presence.

³³ Bill J. Humble, *Campbell & Controversy: The Debates of Alexander Campbell* (Joplin: College Press Publishing Co., 1986), 71.

³⁴ Noll, *America's God*, 243.

³⁵ George H. Shriver, ed., *Dictionary of Heresy Trials in American Christianity* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 11, 27.

³⁶ John Williamson Nevin, “Sermon on Ephesians 1:23” (15 October 1846), in Ahlstrom, 472.

³⁷ John W. Nevin, “Early Christianity,” in Charles Yrigoyen and George H. Bricker, *Catholic and Reformed* (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978, first published in 1851), 245.

³⁸ Theophilus Armenius, “An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Work of God in the Western County,” *Methodist Magazine* 2, n. 4 (August, 1819). In *The History of Methodism in Kentucky* (1870), Alfred Henry Redford suggests Theophilus Armenius was a pseudonym for Rev. Thomas S. Hinde.

Common Sense Moral Reasoning and Individualism

Ironically, amidst the growing sectarianism of the early nineteenth century was an almost unanimous optimism toward humanity's ability to see, know, and accept the truth. As early as the eighteenth century prominent professors began to appeal to theistic common sense—the idea that religious truths were self-evident—in order to combat the growing religious skepticism of Enlightenment figures such as David Hume.³⁹ By the nineteenth century common sense principles were widely applied in the new nation, as people readily believed that the merits of a free republic were self-evident. Evangelical Protestants were eager to link political common sense reasoning, with religious common sense, advocating that experiencing God, free from creeds, traditions, and clerical mediators was clearly more biblical. The basic underlying assumption of this philosophy was optimism about the human condition, and in turn, aversion toward outside aid. This was a striking contrast from the formerly ingrained Calvinistic belief in total depravity, a belief which prompted Christians to closely question their intentions and ability to understand spiritual matters. Consequently, many Americans became less eager to sit passively in sermons and more drawn to attending religious debates, where speakers appealed to their sense of reason through persuasion.⁴⁰ So popular was new independent thought that multiple journals published weekly religious debates and took on titles such as *The Free Inquirer*.

In order for religious leaders to hold their positions they had to be able to hold the attention of the people, and in the early nineteenth century the surest medium for success

³⁹ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 7.

⁴⁰ Noll, *America's God*, 233.

was the growing consumer culture. Realizing the Bible was no longer one book, Harpers publishing company made enormous profit from the *Harper's Illuminated and New Pictorial Bible*, released in 1844.⁴¹ Various versions of the Bible began to appear, with different binding and features, sold at various prices. Each religious denomination published their own journals and competed for sales with each other. Various new books appeared with titles such as, *Anecdotes: Religious, Moral and Entertaining*, *The Baptist Library*, and even *The Churches and Sects of the United States*.⁴² Some ministers even began publishing fiction to maintain their readership.⁴³ Even the religious debates, meant to be times of engaged and serious discourse, became arenas of paid amusement. On her visit to Cincinnati, Ohio, an English traveler, Frances Trollope, commented that “a stranger from the continent of Europe would be inclined, on first reconnoitering the city, to suppose that the places of worship were the theaters and the cafes of the place.”⁴⁴ Although religious resources were vast and expanding in the atmosphere of religious freedom, the competing, persuasive, and sometimes market-driven claims of true religion presented a challenge to common sense moral reasoning.

Common sense reasoning, religious disestablishment, and democratization mobilized Americans who left, joined, and started new churches more rapidly depending on what appeared to be the strongest argument to them at the moment. In 1809 a former member of the Universalist Church confessed that he could no longer support the

⁴¹ Moore, 34.

⁴² “Miscellaneous,” in Jeremiah B. Jeter, *Campbellism Examined* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport, & Blakeman, 1855), M, N, O.

⁴³ Moore, 17.

⁴⁴ Frances Trollope, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984; first published in 1832), 60.

doctrines of this church against his own “thundering alarms of conscience.”⁴⁵ The scene of this new conviction was not in a church or among respected associates, but rather while he was alone, “intensely exercised in my mind.” It was only then, that this author confessed, “it appeared to me I was convinced there was a hell for the unjust.” In justifying his conversion from Universalism, the man concluded, “I feel that the testimony of God and my own conscience is better than the applause of ungodly men.”⁴⁶ Throughout this article words such as “feelings, doubt, prove, convince, conscience, and testimony,” were repeated in a way that rendered belief, religious truth, and experience with God highly individualistic. When Joseph Smith sought answers to discover the “true” church, he did not consult clergy or history, but went out into the woods by himself to inquire of God alone.⁴⁷ Many became convinced of the veracity of Smith’s encounter with the angel, Moroni, along with a number of other radical beliefs, such as the Mormon doctrine that Jesus only became God gradually, on the mere basis of his personal testimony. One of the clearest examples of the difficulty inherent in religious individualism and commonsense reasoning was the conflicting views of Christians in America over the issue of slavery. As each person or denomination argued their position based on personal convictions and “clear” evidences in the Bible, sectarianism not only violently disrupted the churches, but tore apart the entire nation as well.

⁴⁵ David Haselton, “To the Church and Congregation of Westford, in Vermont,” *The Religious Repository* 2, no. 3 (Jan/Feb 1809), 85.

⁴⁶ Haselton, “To the Church,” 85-86.

⁴⁷ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 38.

The Search for Christian Unity

In 1845 *The New Englander* published an article entitled “Christian Union,” which presented the fragmentation of the churches as “the disastrous influence” of Adam’s fall.⁴⁸ The article went on to claim that the highest aim of Christianity “is to correct this evil—to destroy this disjunctive, repellent force—to bring together the separated fragments of a once glorious humanity.”⁴⁹ In a particularly striking critique of sectarianism, the article held that Christianity has been “broken into many different sects—all jealous of each other; some assuming a superiority to others—claiming for themselves peculiar gifts and privileges.” The solution proposed in this article was for Christians to “think more of the things which make them one, than those in which they differ.”⁵⁰ That same year a different article appeared in this journal advocating a nebulous sort of unity in “essential doctrine, in spirit, and in action.”⁵¹ Another solution to the problem of sectarianism was sought through Lyceum organizations.⁵² These groups were formed to disseminate practical information; their sponsors forbade any religious proselytizing which was partial to any particular sect. Yet, such efforts toward non-sectarianism through the banishment of religious discourse began a cultural trend in the direction of secularization.⁵³

⁴⁸ J. W. M. “Christian Union,” *The New Englander*, n. XVI (October 1846), 532.

⁴⁹ J. W. M. “Christian Union,” 533.

⁵⁰ J. W. M. “Christian Union,” 533-534.

⁵¹ “The American Tract Society,” *The New Englander*, n. X (April 1845), 272.

⁵² Moore, 56.

⁵³ Moore, 56.

Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon converts went in the opposite direction of embracing either a vague unity based on essential doctrines, or secularization. Although Alexander Campbell believed he could solve sectarianism by disentangling the Holy Scriptures from “conventional theology and traditions of established churches,”⁵⁴ the Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ were nevertheless dogmatic and eventually traditional in appropriating Biblical mandates. The Restorationists strictly enforced baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins and weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a memorial feast.⁵⁵ Roman Catholicism was the most doctrinaire and authoritarian of the three traditions, in this way Catholic converts at this time represented a more radical rejection of democratized Christianity, as they sought Christian unity through explicit creeds, traditions, and religious mediators. While the Mormon faith began with the individualistic religious experience of one man, it attracted adherents through its religious cohesion and direct authoritative leadership. Uniting these converts’ quest for authority was a shared disturbance over Christian sectarianism.

Conclusion

In the early nineteenth century American democratic values of freedom, liberty, and independence were becoming increasingly interpreted as freedom from all forms of authority, community, tradition, and history.⁵⁶ In the churches, learning from the past was replaced by preoccupation with the future—the future church, the second coming of

⁵⁴ Frederick R. West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 29.

⁵⁵ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of the Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 24.

⁵⁶ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 36.

Christ, and the apocalypse. Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon converts, however, all turned back to the past for answers. Although the Restorationists and especially the Mormons could be said to have created something new, both looked to Christian history for a perfect model. The Restorationists sought to restore the New Testament Church, even insisting their members speak of Biblical ideas in Biblical terms,⁵⁷ and the Mormons sought accordance with the supposed lost history of the Israelites in America. So too did Roman Catholicism offer a deeper connection with past Christian history, as evidenced through their incorporation of centuries of tradition. The lives of various converts to Restorationism, Catholicism, and Mormonism in the antebellum era reveal the ways in which religious freedom and the democratization of religion did not always promote “true” religion or allow the individual’s faith to flourish through free expression. The following chapters will trace the critiques of sectarianism as voiced through the founding of the Restoration Movement and Mormonism and the resurgence of Roman Catholicism in America.

⁵⁷ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, edited by Edwin S. Gaustad (New York: Arno Press & the New York Times, 1969; first published in 1866), 125.

CHAPTER TWO

Conversions to Restorationism

According to the founders of the Restoration Movement, the problem of sectarianism had an obvious and simple solution. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, wrote Alexander Campbell, Protestants have wondered “why the Bible alone, confessed and acknowledged, should work no happier results than the strifes, divisions, and retaliatory excommunications of rival Protestant sects.”¹ The answer, he explained, was that all Protestant Christians had failed to realize that “the Bible alone is the Bible only, in word and deed, in profession and practice.”² Strict adherence to the Bible only became the hallmark of the Restoration Movement in America. Restorationists believed that the primitive Christian church of the first century, as recorded in the Bible, was the uncorrupt and true church of Christ, and they sought to restore this community in early nineteenth century America. They rejected manmade creeds and confessions of faith on the basis that these elements added to the Bible and so corrupted and divided Christians. Converts to the Restoration Movement were the most optimistic in their hope of solving the crisis of sectarianism and the most caustic of all the three groups of converts in their criticism of the existing Christian denominations. Paradoxically, Restorationist converts were also the most democratic in their critique of the democratization of Christianity.

¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, As Pled in the Current Reformation* (1866; repr., New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 5.

² Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5.

The three main leaders, or “reformers,” as they referred to themselves, of this movement were Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), his oldest son, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), and Barton Warren Stone (1772-1844). Although the Campbells were originally from Scotland, Thomas Campbell moved to the United States in 1807, followed by his son, Alexander, in 1809. They began the Restoration movement in the American frontier, with Thomas in Washington, Pennsylvania, and Alexander in Bethany, Virginia, and it was in America that they worked to advance the movement for the rest of their lives. Barton W. Stone also promoted Restoration ideals on the American frontier, from Bourbon County, Kentucky. All three of these men were licensed ministers in the Presbyterian Church before they broke from this denomination to enact a reformation. While they each preached the ideals of the Bible only and rejected creeds and confessions of faith independently of one another, it did not take long for them to unite and form one movement toward the restoration of “pure Christianity.” None of these men originally intended to start a new church, but rather to ignite a movement on the basis of a principle that might infiltrate the existing churches and bring about unification.³ In the end, however, converts to Restorationism found themselves forced to defend a particular creed of their own, consequently forming denominations themselves, known today as the Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ.

Desire for Unity

The greatest desire among the Restorationists was for unity among Christian churches. They believed that the true Christian church was made up of only one body of

³ Winfred Ernest Garrison, and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1964), 11.

believers, and that until this harmony was actualized, converts to the faith would not be gained and Christ would not return to earth. Alexander Campbell was convinced that the restoration of primitive Christianity would bring about this unity, which would, in turn, provoke the millennial dawn.⁴ In fact, the hope that Campbell harbored for his cause was reflected in the journal that he founded and edited, the *Millennial Harbinger*, which means, “herald of the millennium.”⁵ His adoration for this great power of Christian unification was also exemplified in the avowed purpose and title of his book, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity*. In this book, Campbell wrote that the “all-absorbing question of Protestant Christendom” was how Christians might “unite, harmonize, and co-operate in one great community, as at the beginning.”⁶ So extensive was Campbell’s goal of Christian unity, by means of the Restoration Movement, that he even included Catholics in the vision. “We devoutly wish to see Papists and Protestants, every sect, coming to this center,” he wrote in the *Millennial Harbinger*.⁷ The urgency of Christian unity was thus foundational to the cause of the Restoration Movement.

Criticisms

Esteem for Christian unification was not necessarily new, however, and the Restoration Movement was not primarily born out of novelty, but from criticism of

⁴ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 11.

⁵ Henry E. Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement*, rev. ed. (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2003), 150.

⁶ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 12.

⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Campbellites Uniting with the Arians,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3, no. 1 (January 1832): 36.

existing churches. Although the Restoration Movement developed into a system of its own, with certain defining features, Alexander Campbell, his father Thomas Campbell, along with Barton Stone, founded their reformation, in true Protestant fashion, in protest against the beliefs and practices of popular Christian denominations. Alexander Campbell wrote that every attempt toward true Christianity since the first century church went wrong. “If any of those reformations began in the spirit,” he decried in 1825, “they have ended in the flesh.”⁸ In describing the early ministry of Alexander, an early critic of the movement, Jeremiah Jeter wrote,

His teaching was almost entirely negative. He was neither a Unitarian nor a Trinitarian, neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian. It was clear that he rejected ‘the popular exhibition of Christian religion;’ but not clear what he would substitute for it.⁹

From behind his pulpit of primitive Christianity, Alexander Campbell and his followers attacked every church and every person who was not on board with the vision of Restorationism.¹⁰ It seemed to them that none of the existing churches of their time embodied the true church that Christ established, and that none of them had reached the founding goal of being a city on a hill, despite achieving religious freedom and despite church growth.

Objects of particular assault by the Restoration Movement included the clergy, creeds, confessions of faith, and missionary and educational societies. In *The Christian System*, Alexander Campbell wrote that “creeds and new parties in religion” were

⁸ Alexander Campbell. *Christian Baptist* (February 1825): 127f., as cited in Bill J. Humble, *Campbell and Controversy: The Debates of Alexander Campbell* (Joplin: College Press Publishing Co. Inc., 1986), 14.

⁹ Jeremiah B. Jeter, *Campbellism Examined* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport, & Blakeman, 1855), 24.

¹⁰ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 22.

“abortive efforts to reform the reformation,” none of which could ever become “the basis of a union.”¹¹ One Restorationist who contributed to the *Millennial Harbinger* condemned “creed-mongers” for “always being at war with each other.” He went on to say that because “they have produced as many different systems of orthodoxy, as they have entertained opinions,” their inspiration was suspicious.¹² Another contributor to the journal commented that all the Christian creeds were “certainly false as they are contradictory.” He concluded that “the Bible thus reveals but one system of truth.”¹³ Alexander Campbell set the precedent for the movement by disavowing all creeds, whether or not he believed them to be veracious, under the persuasion that “all were hostile to the union, peace, harmony, purity, and joy of Christian union, communion, and co-operation, and adverse to the conversion of the whole world to Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Any church that did ascribe to a creed or a confession of faith, furthermore, received a reproof from Campbell as being the “illegitimate daughter of that mother of harlots, the Church of Rome.”¹⁵ Intrinsic to the character of the Restoration Movement was a complete rejection of and abhorrence toward any form of creed or confession of faith other than the Bible, and belief that the crisis of sectarianism stemmed from the inclusion of such traditions.

¹¹ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5.

¹² A Radical, “The Testimony of a Methodist Brother,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 2, no. 5 (May 1830): 209.

¹³ Oriole, “For the Millennial Harbinger,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 2, no. 5 (May 1830): 193-199.

¹⁴ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 9.

¹⁵ Alexander Campbell, “Mark Them Who Cause Divisions,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 3, no. 12 (December 1832): 604.

It was not difficult for the Restorationist leaders to find sympathizers for their hostility toward creeds and confessions of faith, and much less difficult for them to attain an eager audience for their total disdain toward the clergy. In an anti-authoritarian atmosphere, which especially prevailed throughout the American frontier, Campbell's charge to "dethrone the reigning popular clergy from their high and lofty seats,"¹⁶ resonated deeply. And his charge against all Christian denominations ironically resembled the refrain of certain Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists before him, who challenged the clerical authority of the established Congregationalist and Anglican churches. "It is time to pull down their Babel," he declared, "and to emancipate those whom they have enslaved, to free the people from unrighteous dominion and unmerciful spoliation."¹⁷ Apart from his populist refrain, however, a more obvious reason why Campbell and his fellow Restorationists rejected the clergy was because the term "clergy," was not found in the English translation of the Bible.¹⁸ Like creeds and confessions of faith, the titled clergy were placed by the Restorationists in the category of human traditions, and deference toward such figures was perceived by them as another source of sectarian strife.

A more peculiar criticism extended by the Restorationists, but one in keeping with the Bible-only mantra, was a rejection of all religious benevolence societies. Alexander Campbell was the most adamant of the Restorationists in his opposition to these man-made institutions. "The [apostle's] churches were not fractured into missionary societies,

¹⁶ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptist* (no date), as cited in Jeter, *Campbellism Examined*, 27.

¹⁷ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptist* (no date), as cited in, Jeter, 27.

¹⁸ Jeter, *Campbellism Examined*, 27.

Bible societies, or education societies,” wrote Campbell, “nor did they dream of organizing such in the world.”¹⁹ Although Thomas and Alexander Campbell joined forces with the Baptists in the beginning stages of their movement, Alexander condemned even the Baptist Church for having advisory councils, schools, and colleges. Such institutions, warned Campbell’s followers, were “marks of the beast.”²⁰ While the basis of his rejection of such societies was lack of Scriptural warrant, the practical reason why Campbell dismissed the efficiency of missionary societies was the sectarianism in Christendom. According to Campbell, the “heathen” could not be converted by an apostate church, and he believed all sects to be apostate and all the churches of his day to be sects; thus renouncing all “the proselytizing schemes” as hopeless.²¹ A contributor to Campbell’s journal wrote that Christian missionaries were failing in the East because their potential converts had to “decide whether he would be a Methodist, or a Presbyterian, or a Calvinist, or an English Protestant, or a German Lutheran.”²²

The Restorationists launched their fiercest attack against sectarianism in general. A disciple of the Restoration Movement, Tolbert Fanning, wrote that the nineteenth century was “the most remarkable era for aberrations from the truth,” because of the variety of religious sects available.²³ Alexander Campbell charged no other time in history and no other country with having more “internal broils and dissension” among

¹⁹ Jeter, 45.

²⁰ Randolph Stone, Samuel Rogers, Joshua Wilson, Samuel Davis, and Andrew Fuller, “The Vantage Ground: A Circular Letter,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 1 (January 1830): 14-16.

²¹ Alexander Campbell, “Missionaries,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 9 (September 1830): 429.

²² Alexander Campbell, “Missionaries.” *The Millennial Harbinger*, 429.

²³ Tolbert Fanning, “Discourse, Delivered in Boston, July 17, 1836” (Boston, 1836), pp. 18-19, as cited in Hughes, 66.

Christians. Of the Methodists, Campbell wrote, “they now form five or six separate communities under different names.” “And what shall I say of the twelve or fourteen sects of the Baptists,” he continued, “many of whom have as much affection for the Greek or Roman church as they do for one another.”²⁴ An early convert to the Restorationist Movement and one of the main promoters of its ideals, Walter Scott, wrote that “the different and contradictory views set forth from the pulpit” affirmed more than one way to preach Christ, but that the Bible allowed “only one true way.”²⁵ Furthermore, in order to avoid sectarian dissension, before joining forces with Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone had formally rejected any title other than Christian. The Restorationist Movement thus emerged in defiance of all the popular forms of Christianity in the early nineteenth century.

Thomas Campbell

While it is difficult to say exactly when the Restoration Movement began, Alexander Campbell cited 1809, the year his father wrote the “Declaration and Address,” in opposition to the Presbyterian Church, as the founding date of the movement.²⁶ Thomas Campbell sailed from Glasgow, Scotland, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1807.²⁷ Since educated clergy were rare in Washington, Pennsylvania, where he settled, Thomas Campbell was quickly assigned to the Chartiers Presbyterian Church. That same

²⁴ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 109.

²⁵ William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott: With Sketches of His Fellow-Laborers, William Hayden, Adamson Bentley, John Henry, and Others* (Cincinnati: Bosworth, Chase & Hall, Publishers, 1874), 62.

²⁶ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5.

²⁷ Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity*, 68.

year, however, he was charged by the Seceder Presbytery, of which he was a member, with departing from standard doctrine. The charges against the elder Campbell were for rejecting of the divine warrant for confessions of faith, and tolerating preachers who opposed Presbyterian tenets.²⁸ Thomas Campbell appealed the charges and defended his position by arguing that “the present broken and divided state of the church” made it lawful for Christians to listen to other ministers when they “have no opportunity of hearing those of their own party.”²⁹ The Presbyterian synod decided against suspending Campbell’s preaching license, but they did rebuke him for his views.³⁰ By 1808, however, Campbell had become ostracized for his dissenting views among the Presbyterians, and there were no churches available for him to resume his pastorate.³¹

Eventually Thomas Campbell formally withdrew from the ministry, sending his letter of resignation on September 13, 1808. He was invited to preach in the homes of certain friends and neighbors who shared his growing aversion toward creeds and emphasis on the authority of the Bible to achieve Christian unity. Campbell and his followers soon agreed that the best way to reach these ideals was through the formation of their own organization. The initial defining proposition of this group stated “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.”³² On August 17, 1809 the organization was officially formed as the “Christian Association of

²⁸ Webb, 70.

²⁹ William Herbert Hannah, *Thomas Campbell, Seceder and Christian Union Advocate* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1935), 48, as cited in Webb, 71.

³⁰ Webb, 71.

³¹ Webb, 71.

³² Webb, 72-73.

Washington, Pennsylvania.” As leader of the movement, Thomas Campbell was assigned the task of outlining the principles and intents of the Association.³³ Alexander Campbell later regarded the resulting document, the “Declaration and Address,” as the charter for the entire Restoration Movement.³⁴

The “Declaration and Address,” began with a bold anti-authoritarian contention that the time had come “for us to think and act for ourselves, to see with our own eyes, and to take all our measures directly and immediately from the Divine standard.”³⁵ Continuing along this vein, the document declared that “every man must be allowed to judge for himself, as every man must bear his own judgment.”³⁶ The document expressed a deep desire to be “at rest” from all of the “bitter jarrings and janglings of a party spirit,” and to “restore unity, peace, and purity to the whole Church of God.”³⁷ The “Declaration and Address,” maintained that no such unity, peace, and purity could be found in any other place other than “in Christ and his simple word.”³⁸ Finally, the document made clear that the members of this association had no intention of forming their own church: “That this society by no means consider itself a church...but merely as voluntary advocates for church reformation.”³⁹ Despite this avowed intent, however, the Christian Association of Washington severed every connection with the Presbyterians on

³³ Webb, 73.

³⁴ Hughes, 11.

³⁵ Thomas Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, edited by C. A. Young (1904; repr., Joplin: College Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), 71.

³⁶ Thomas Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” in Young, 71.

³⁷ Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” 73.

³⁸ Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” 73.

³⁹ Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” 75.

May 4, 1811, becoming an independent church.⁴⁰ The Christian Association had had little success among their Presbyterian brethren, who felt threatened by their declarations. Their Association would not become the dynamic force for restoration of ancient Christianity until Alexander Campbell, who was deeply impressed after reading his father's document, became the unofficial spokesperson for the movement.

Barton W. Stone

A few years before Thomas Campbell's dissent, Barton W. Stone was also taken with the ideal of Christian unity. Stone received an education from David Caldwell's Academy, a Presbyterian seminary and law school in Guilford, North Carolina, and in 1793 he became a candidate for the ministry.⁴¹ Throughout his seminary studies, Stone struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity and with certain Calvinist doctrines, such as predestination and reprobation. In order to receive his ordination, Stone had to answer in the affirmative whether or not he received the Westminster Confession of Faith. With his doctrinal hesitations in mind, Stone answered "I do, as far as I see it consistent with the Word of God."⁴² Despite his vague response, he received his preaching license and was stationed at a Presbyterian church at Cane Ridge in Bourbon County, Kentucky. After being profoundly impressed with the revivalistic and powerful preaching of fellow Presbyterian ministers, James McGready and the McGee brothers, Stone planned for an outdoor revival, the result of which was the start of the Second Great Awakening. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians alike came to Cane Ridge to preach and hear the

⁴⁰ Humble, *Campbell and Controversy*, 29.

⁴¹ Webb, 43.

⁴² John Rogers *Biography of Elder Barton W. Stone, Written by Himself; With Additions and Reflections by Elder John Rogers* (Cincinnati: J. A. & U. P. James, 1874), 2 as cited in Webb, 45.

Christian message. What impressed Stone the most about this event, and what led to his disassociation with the Presbyterian Church three years later, was the unity of believers. “They were of one mind and soul,” wrote Stone, “we all engaged in singing the same songs, all united in prayer, all preached the same thing.”⁴³

Certain revivalistic tendencies, however, such as the emphasis placed on Arminian doctrines of free will, were not endorsed by the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky formally charged one of Stone’s fellow ministers, Robert McNemar, with embracing these tendencies in direct opposition to the Westminster Confession of Faith. As participants in the revival at Cane Ridge, Stone and three other Presbyterian ministers, joined causes with McNemar and withdrew from the Kentucky synod.⁴⁴ The five ministers, who were subsequently dismissed from their ministries, organized a separate body called the Springfield Presbytery. They published a formal purpose statement called “The Apology of the Springfield Presbytery.” Their reasons for separation included rejection of the doctrines of foreordination and divine election along with a rejection of “all human creeds.”⁴⁵ While the new presbytery was short lived, lasting only from 1803-1804, their reasons for dissolving once again were based on the conviction that their movement was more than a protest, but rather an effort to unite all Christians. Subsequently, they referred to themselves simply as “Christians.”⁴⁶ This schism of the Presbyterian Church, although small, was the first to

⁴³ William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Unity* (Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954), vi.

⁴⁴ Webb, 55.

⁴⁵ Webb, 51.

⁴⁶ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 11., See also Garrison and DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ*, 12.

result from the Second Great Awakening and it was an important precursor to the Restoration Movement.⁴⁷

The start of the “Christians” under the leadership of Barton Stone was inaugurated by a document of intent, entitled, “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” The dominant themes represented in this document bore a striking resemblance to those later emphasized by Thomas Campbell in the “Declaration and Address.” The first premise of the document stated the intent for their present “body” or presbytery “to die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body and one Spirit.”⁴⁸ Secondly the document revoked all church authority to license ministers, seeking instead only license “from God to preach the simple Gospel.”⁴⁹ The following item ruled that the “Christians” adopt the “Bible as the only sure guide to heaven.”⁵⁰ Although all five of the dissenting Presbyterian ministers signed the document, two of the ministers, including McNemar, joined the Shaker Church, and another two returned to the Presbyterian synod, leaving only Stone from the original number. By this time, however, the ideals of the Christian movement had persuaded a number of people from the influx of settlers to the frontier, who formed a band of believers with Stone.⁵¹ The movement grew as Stone preached widely,

⁴⁷ Humble, 67.

⁴⁸ Barton W. Stone, “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,” in *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*, edited by C. A. Young, 20.

⁴⁹ Stone, “The Last Will and Testament,” in Young, 20.

⁵⁰ Stone, “The Last Will and Testament,” in Young, 21.

⁵¹ Webb, 54-55.

constructed a school from his farm in Kentucky, and founded the *Christian Messenger*, a monthly which he edited from 1826 until his death.⁵²

Alexander Campbell

While Stone's influence on the Restoration Movement was significant and undeniable, Alexander Campbell was the strongest proponent of the movement, as he did more than any other to systematize and disseminate their message. Stone acknowledged him as "the greatest promoter of this reformation of any man living."⁵³ Before coming to the United States in 1809, Alexander Campbell renounced the Presbyterian Church for not representing "the Church of Christ as seen in the New Testament."⁵⁴ He became even more convinced of the need for a thorough reformation upon his arrival to America. Campbell was furthermore delighted to learn about his father's own dissent from the Seceder branch of the Presbyterians, and he heartily endorsed the "Declaration and Address," resolving to pursue the aims therein.⁵⁵ The Christian Association of Washington was invigorated by Campbell's enthusiasm, and began to meet regularly. By 1811 the members of the association decided to become an independent church, appointing Thomas Campbell as elder, choosing four deacons, and in 1812 licensing Alexander Campbell to preach as their official pastor. The following Sunday they had a

⁵² Webb, 57.

⁵³ Rogers, *Biography of Elder Barton W. Stone*, 76, in Webb, 57.

⁵⁴ Webb, 100.

⁵⁵ Garrison and DeGroot, 12.

communion service for the congregation's estimated thirty members.⁵⁶ Alexander Campbell's leadership of the Brush Run Church was the beginning of his ministry of the Restoration Movement that would later reach the entire United States.

In an effort to avoid becoming a sect themselves, the Brush Run Church was united with the Baptists of the Redstone Association in western Pennsylvania in 1813.⁵⁷ Their affiliation with the Baptists was prompted by Alexander Campbell's conclusions on the topic of baptism a year earlier. Like the Baptists, Campbell came to reject infant baptism and embrace baptism of the believer by immersion.⁵⁸ Differences soon arose, however, among Campbell and his fellow reformers and the Redstone Association, as the latter strongly endorsed the Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession of Faith.⁵⁹ During his time with the Baptists, Alexander Campbell founded the *Christian Baptist* in 1823, a journal from which he launched regular assaults on clerics, creeds, and denominational systems.⁶⁰ Despite its sectarian sounding title, Campbell avowed that the journal "shall espouse the cause of no religious sect, excepting that ancient sect called Christians first at Antioch."⁶¹ The journal enjoyed wide circulation and appealed to the sentiments of many living on the American frontier. The journal's exposure unsettled a number of the Baptists; however, on whom the wrath of numerous of Campbell's accusations were

⁵⁶ George F. Miller, "Brush Run Church," *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, edited by Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 100.

⁵⁷ Miller, "Brush Run Church," in Foster, 100.

⁵⁸ Webb, 94.

⁵⁹ Webb, 95.

⁶⁰ Hughes, 11.

⁶¹ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptist* 1, no. 3-7 (October 6, 1823), as cited in Webb.

launched. One of Campbell's early critics described the *Christian Baptist* as "an open, formal declaration of war against all religious sects."⁶² Certain of the reformers were evicted from the Baptist Church, and by 1830 Campbell and the reformers officially separated from the Baptists altogether.⁶³

During the time in which Alexander Campbell and his followers associated with the Baptists, they were referred to as the "reformers." After the termination of their union in 1830, they became known as the "Disciples of Christ."⁶⁴ That same year Campbell ended the *Christian Baptist* and launched the *Millennial Harbinger*. In his introduction to the journal, Campbell wrote, "This work shall be devoted to the destruction of Sectarianism, Infidelity, and Antichristian doctrine and practice."⁶⁵ The "development of the Millennium," was the end goal of Campbell's project.⁶⁶ In vindication of the reformers' split with the Baptist Church, Campbell continued, stating that "the foundation of no Sect can be the basis of the Millennium Church."⁶⁷ Throughout the *Millennial Harbinger's* forty years of publication, Campbell included editorials on the importance of the authority of the Bible only and the necessity of baptism by immersion as means of restoration of the primitive church. Converts to Restorationism from almost every state contributed to the journal to discuss Restoration

⁶² Jeter, 23.

⁶³ Webb, 114. See also Lee Snyder, "Christian Baptist, The," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone Campbell Movement*, edited by Douglas A. Foster, et al., 174-175.

⁶⁴ Garrison and DeRoot, 13.

⁶⁵ Alexander Campbell, "Prospectus," *The Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 1 (January 1830): 1.

⁶⁶ Alexander Campbell, "Prospectus," *The Millennial Harbinger*, 1.

⁶⁷ Campbell, "Prospectus," *The Millennial Harbinger*, 1.

theology and to report progress and difficulties of the movement in their area. The journal proved to be one of the most important mediums for shaping and directing the fledging movement and remained in publication until 1870.⁶⁸

The *Millennial Harbinger* also published the popular religious debates in which Campbell engaged. Campbell's first debate was with a Presbyterian minister in 1820 on the topic of baptism by immersion. The debate attracted monumental attention, quickly selling out of its initial 1,000 copies and 3,000 copies after that.⁶⁹ All of Campbell's debates were held in the small area of the Upper Ohio Valley, a location to which Campbell often traveled for days in expression of his earnest intent to promote true Christian orthodoxy. In his debate with Bishop John B. Purcell over the topic of Roman Catholicism, Campbell travelled two hundred and forty miles "sometimes on foot, sometimes by sleigh."⁷⁰ While Campbell was often the initiator of the debates, he was also provoked by outsiders. Campbell enthusiastically met every challenge presented before him, defending his cause with hundreds of memorized Scripture references, scathing sarcasm, and impressive logic.⁷¹ Even his critic, Jeremiah Jeter, attributed Campbell with being a "skillful and popular debater."⁷² In America's growing disdain of religious authority and steady attraction toward powerful, persuasive religious leaders,

⁶⁸ Douglas A. Foster, "Millennial Harbinger, The," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, edited by Foster, et al., 517-518.

⁶⁹ Webb, 111.

⁷⁰ Alexander Campbell and Rt. Rev. John B. Purcell, *A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion*, v.

⁷¹ Hughes, 55.

⁷² Jeter, 20.

Campbell's debate made national headlines and were praised by members of all different sects as advancing the Protestant cause.

The Stone-Campbell Movement

The most substantial formation of the Restoration Movement came by means of the union, in 1832, between the two frontier movements led by Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone. Unable to settle on a title for themselves, the union became known as Disciples of Christ and Christians.⁷³ The overarching purpose for the joining of these two groups was their shared desire for Christian union and their belief that the foundation for this union hinged on the restoration of primitive Christianity.⁷⁴ Representing Campbell's forces, "Raccoon" John Smith enjoined his fellow Christians at the meeting in 1832 to be unified. "Let us, then, my brethren, be no longer Campbellites, or Stoneites, New Lights, or Old Lights, or any kind of lights, but let us all come to the Bible and to the Bible alone as the only book in the world that can give us all the Light we need."⁷⁵ Thus the followers of Campbell and Stone were united in Lexington, Kentucky that year, bringing together around 13,000 supporters.⁷⁶ In his journal, the

⁷³ Paul M. Blowers, Douglas A. Foster, and D. Newell Williams, "Stone-Campbell History Over Three Centuries: A Survey and Analysis," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, edited by Foster, et al., xxi.

⁷⁴ Hughes, 99.

⁷⁵ Alonzo Willard Fortune, *The Disciples in Kentucky* (Convention of Christian Churches in Kentucky, 1932), 121, as cited in Humble, 45.

⁷⁶ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 216.

Christian Messenger, Stone announced that year that the union of Christians was spreading “like fire in dry stubble.”⁷⁷

The defining features of the Campbell-Stone movement, apart from overt criticism of other Christian denominations, especially from Campbell, were distinctive views on the Bible, baptism, faith, and the ancient Church. Followers of the Campbell-Stone movement were fully convinced that the Bible was the only resource necessary for the Christian church. “Let the Bible be substituted for all human creeds...,” wrote Campbell.⁷⁸ Campbell even blamed sectarian strife on the other church’s members’ inability to quote directly from the Scriptures. “It is owed to this lax and latitudinarian way of quoting, that Episcopalians have so much trouble with the Catholics; that Presbyterians have so much trouble with the Episcopalians, and that Baptists have so much trouble with the Paedobaptists.”⁷⁹ In addition, the Restorationist principle of the Bible only was understood as the Bible as translated literally, not conceptually. Campbell spoke of the necessity of a “purity of speech” among Christians. “We choose to speak of Bible things by Bible words,” he wrote.⁸⁰ Thus Restorationists abandoned terms and phrases not explicitly found in the Bible, such as “Trinity,” “the eternally begotten Son of the Father,” “free will,” “original sin,” and “visible and invisible

⁷⁷ Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott*, 176.

⁷⁸ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 110.

⁷⁹ Alexander Campbell, “Samuel Roger’s and Dr. Wilson’s Mount Pleasant, Missouri Open Letter,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 1 (January 1830), 18.

⁸⁰ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 124-125.

church.”⁸¹ The Bible as the only creed and the restoration of the “pure” speech of the Bible were two of the main features of the Restoration Movement.⁸²

While the Bible alone served as substitution for creeds, the New Testament alone constituted the perfect template for Christian living, according to the Restorationists.⁸³ In 1833, Stone wrote that the Christian churches were in agreement to adopt the New Testament alone, rather than creeds of any kind.⁸⁴ In order to restore what he thought to be the purest form of the text, Alexander Campbell published his own translation of the New Testament in 1826. One of the most pronounced changes he made was in reference to baptism. Campbell adopted the literal term “immersion” for baptism and accepted immersion as the literal method for remission of sins. Campbell referred to John the Baptist as “John the Immerser,” and translated “He who is immersed, will be saved.”⁸⁵ Immersion was not only endorsed by Campbell because of its literal rendering in the Bible, but also because of its incorporation by the ancient Church. He readily assumed that the original method of baptism was the purest and only administration. “There is then, but one baptism, and not two, under the Christian administration,” wrote Campbell.⁸⁶ One of the Movement’s early followers called immersion “the primitive

⁸¹ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 124.

⁸² Jeter, *Campbellism Examined*, 35.

⁸³ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 214.

⁸⁴ Barton Stone, *Christian Messenger*, VII (1833), 5, as cited in West, 176.

⁸⁵ Webb, 120.

⁸⁶ Campbell, *Christian System*, 57.

confession of Christ, and a gracious token of salvation.”⁸⁷ Campbell’s absolute stance on baptismal theology provided security and certainty of salvation to his growing number of followers who sought relief from the variety of Christian opinions on the subject.⁸⁸

A third defining feature of the Restoration Movement was the principle of faith in the Lordship of Christ as the basis for church membership. Campbell, especially, took faith to mean a simple rational process of persuasion of Christ’s Lordship. While Stone agreed with Campbell on this central tenet, he did not discount the validity of an emotional conversion experience, such as was commonly had by those who attended the revival at Cane Ridge.⁸⁹ Campbell was critical of such emotionalism, claiming that “prayerless,” “joyless,” and “Christless hearts...seemed to have all their religion before they professed it!”⁹⁰ Campbell’s views defined the movement more generally, as he was the more outspoken of the two leaders. The only confession necessary for Christians, he claimed, was that “Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”⁹¹ Jeremiah Jeter wrote of Campbell, “He was understood to teach and maintain that faith is a simple persuasion that Jesus is the Messiah.”⁹² Affirming this, Campbell wrote, “The belief in ONE FACT is all that is requisite, as far as faith goes.”⁹³ While this belief was

⁸⁷ Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell: Embracing a View of the Origin, Progress and Principles of the Religious Reformation which He Advocated* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1868), 437.

⁸⁸ Hughes, 114.

⁸⁹ Hughes, 59.

⁹⁰ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 244.

⁹¹ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 58.

⁹² Jeter, *Campbellism Examined*, 73.

⁹³ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 118.

nothing new to the orthodoxy of Christendom, Campbell's understanding of the simplicity and isolated nature of this belief was peculiar, and the popularity of this simple tenet, is evidence of the tumultuous state of Christianity in the early nineteenth century.

A final defining feature of the Restoration Movement was the belief that the ancient Church presented the purest expression of faith and that this Church could be restored two thousand years later, in the early nineteenth century. In his frustration and disgust over the condition of religion at his time, Alexander Campbell looked longingly toward the past to retrieve what he believed to be the pure model of Christian life. His optimism in restoring the ancient faith was shared by other converts. William Clark, a Restorationist from North Carolina, wrote "There are four or five us in this section of the country who are engaged in publishing the ancient gospel."⁹⁴ Another convert, J. B. New, from Indiana wrote "The church in this place was built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, on the first Saturday of November, 1831."⁹⁵ Campbell wrote of nothing being essential to Christian union "other than the apostles' teaching and testimony."⁹⁶ In his accusations against the veracity of the Roman Catholic Church, Campbell condemned the inclusion of nuns, monks, cardinals, penance, and confession for not being part of the "ancient, primitive, apostolic church of Christ."⁹⁷ Although in criticism of this view, Jeremiah Jeter wrote that the assumption that the "ancient Gospel" was the true body of Christ was not shared by everyone,⁹⁸ Campbell and his followers

⁹⁴ William Clark, "Extracts From Letters," *The Millennial Harbinger* 5, no. 1 (January 1834) : 44.

⁹⁵ J. B. New, "Extracts From Letters," *The Millennial Harbinger* 5, no. 2 (February 1834): 96.

⁹⁶ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 107.

⁹⁷ Campbell and Purcell, "A Debate," 12.

⁹⁸ Jeter, 40.

were convinced that “a restoration of the ancient order of things was all that was necessary to the happiness and usefulness of Christians.”⁹⁹

Other “Restorers”

The leaders of the Restoration Movement, and those who came to be known as the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ, were not the only ones who harbored disdain for sectarianism and sought to restore a unified and supposed simple faith of the past. As traveling lay ministers made their way throughout the American frontier, countless “Christian-only” congregations were formed. The people of the frontier were known for their independence and self-sufficiency, and were thus impressed by the plea to break loose from the shackles of formal church authority. The commonsense and simple solutions to the problem of sectarianism also appealed to the people of the frontier, most of whom had little affiliation with theological jargon and formalisms.¹⁰⁰ The “Republican Methodists,” who rebelled against Francis Asbury’s authority in 1792, were another primitive gospel movement. One of the leaders of the Republican Methodists is credited with initially convincing Barton Stone, who read his book *On the Sacred Import of the Christian Name*, to adopt only the name “Christian” for his movement.¹⁰¹ Restorationist principles were as popular within traditional churches as they were successful in promoting dissent from these churches.

⁹⁹ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptist* (February 7, 1825), 127, as cited in Humble, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Webb, 159.

¹⁰¹ W. Dennis Helsabeck, Jr., “Haggard, Rice (1769-1819),” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, edited by Foster, et al., 377.

Converts to the Restoration Movement

Among the converts to the Campbell-Stone Movement were individuals, mostly from the frontier, who were convinced that Restorationism advanced a necessary reformation and that they were among the only true disciples of Christ. One convert wrote to Alexander Campbell, “The disciples, with few exceptions, are growing in grace. The opposition is raging, but the truth is mighty.”¹⁰² Another wrote, “The reformation is still advancing with rapid strides.”¹⁰³ Restorationist convert Walter Scott, who introduced a simple, five-step formula for salvation, was one of the most successful evangelists for the cause of the Movement.¹⁰⁴ Like Alexander Campbell, Scott launched forceful attacks against all the Christian sects, and believed that he himself had restored the true gospel for the first time since the days of the apostles.¹⁰⁵ “Raccoon” John Smith was a self-taught frontiersman from the Baptist Church before he became convinced of the merits of the Restoration Movement.¹⁰⁶ Sidney Rigdon was also a Baptist who converted to Restorationism after attending one of Alexander Campbell’s debates.¹⁰⁷ John R. Howard’s preoccupation over finding the true church led to belief that only the Restorationists evinced the “original marks” of the church.¹⁰⁸ Arthur Criehtfield, likewise, was so convinced of the evils of sectarianism that he joined the Restoration Movement

¹⁰² John Favor, “Extracts From Letters,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 1 (January 1835): 38.

¹⁰³ Allen Wright, “Extracts From Letters,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 1 (January 1835): 39.

¹⁰⁴ Garrison, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Humble, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Webb, 144.

¹⁰⁷ Webb, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, 56.

and launched a journal known as the “Heretic Detector.”¹⁰⁹ The ferociousness and enthusiasm of the Restoration converts speaks to the religious upheavals of early nineteenth century America.

Democratic and Modernistic Influences

The popularity of the Restoration Movement’s response to the crisis of sectarianism can best be attributed to its incorporation of democracy and modernity. In his emphatic cry that the voice of the people was the voice of God,¹¹⁰ Alexander Campbell reflected the ideals of President Jackson, who stressed the rights of ordinary men and women to make their own political decisions.¹¹¹ Moreover, Campbell consecrated the cause of the Restoration Movement by launching the *Christian Baptist* on July 4 1823 as a “commencement of the struggle for the liberation of the churches.”¹¹² In essence, the Restoration Movement was a people’s movement, more democratic than any of the traditional denominations. When Campbell and the other Restorationists repeatedly blasted the clergy, they flattered the people¹¹³ and offered them even greater freedom than that which was gained through religious disestablishment. Additionally, the Restoration Movement appealed to the modernistic impulses of the early nineteenth century through the presenting the Bible as a book of facts and preaching the simple, commonsensical truth therein. Campbell possessed early modern optimism toward both

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, 59.

¹¹⁰ Campbell and Purcell, “Debate,” 44.

¹¹¹ Butler, 215.

¹¹² Jeter, 20.

¹¹³ Jeter, 81.

the prospect of untangling Christianity from all human opinion and recreating the ancient church. Thus the Restoration Movement, like any other movement, was one entrenched in context and circumstance.

Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon Converts

While Restorationism was the more popular and democratic movement, their converts' total rejection of sectarianism, desire for unity, and primitive aspirations, resembled the motivations of Mormon and Catholic converts at this time. Like the Restorationists, the Mormons insisted that true Christianity had been thoroughly corrupted and that restoration was made possible through a reformation in nineteenth century America.¹¹⁴ Catholic convert Elizabeth Seton also expressed a primitive longing in her conclusion to join the Catholic Church. "For if faith is so important to our salvation," she wrote, "I will seek it among those who received it from God Himself."¹¹⁵ Among the Restorationist, Mormon, and Catholic converts existed a longing look back at Christian history to retrieve something which they perceived had been lost.¹¹⁶ Of course there were more obvious differences among these three traditions. Alexander Campbell devoted a series in the *Millennial Harbinger* to what he termed the "Mormon Delusion," and referred to Catholicism as "the Beast."¹¹⁷ Yet like Restorationism, Mormonism and Catholicism offered a striking contrast to the traditional Protestant churches in the early

¹¹⁴ Butler, 224.

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Seton, Journal for Amabilia Filicchi, New York, January, 1805, in *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, eds. by Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 164-5.

¹¹⁶ Butler, 113.

¹¹⁷ Alexander Campbell, "Mormonism Unveiled," *The Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 1 (January 1835): 44-45; Alexander Campbell, "Prefatory Remarks," *The Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 1 (January 1830): 6.

nineteenth century through their emphasis on unity and dogmatism. Thus, converts to each of these traditions sought restoration and a re-formation of popular nineteenth century American Christianity despite the religious liberties that flourished at this time.

Conclusion

While the Restoration Movement was marked for simplicity in answering the crisis of sectarianism, this movement soon fell prey to the very grievances it criticized. By the 1840s followers of the Restoration Movement began to behave like a sect, counting members for their own ranks.¹¹⁸ By 1907 followers of the Stone-Campbell Movement formally split into Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ, each with their own missionary societies, colleges, and periodicals.¹¹⁹ In recognition of this irony, Jeter wrote, “It does not appear to have been the purpose of Mr. Campbell, at least in the commencement of his reformation, to organize a new sect. That his labors tended to that result was clear to every discerning, attentive, and impartial observer.”¹²⁰ The Restoration Movement, furthermore, contributed to the confusion and hostility of sectarianism. Some perceived no distinction between the Restorationists and other churches, while others considered the Movement a “dangerous system of error.”¹²¹ There was much confusion, as evidenced by the numerous queries sent to Alexander Campbell’s journals, about the nature of

¹¹⁸ Hughes, 55.

¹¹⁹ Foster, et al., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, xxxviii. Those who emphasized restoration of primitive Christianity joined the ranks of the Disciples of Christ, while those whose focus was on ecumenism joined the Churches of Christ. See Hughes, 13.

¹²⁰ Jeter, 21.

¹²¹ Jeter, x.

baptism, the purpose of benevolence societies, and how the Restorationists ought to get along with other denominations.¹²² Despite these inherent ironies, the Restoration Movement grew rapidly in the early nineteenth century, and continued its momentum to the present day, now encompassing 1,700,000 members.¹²³ A fundamental source of this popularity was acceptance of literal Bible reading and the restoration of the ancient church as solutions to the crisis of sectarianism. This powerful hope for change among the Christian churches revealed a prevailing disquietude during one of America's most professedly religious eras.

¹²² See for example the questions of Isaac W. Tenner, "Social Worship," *The Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 1 (January 1835), 13.

¹²³ Hughes, 1.

CHAPTER THREE

Conversions to Catholicism

Unlike Restorationism, Catholicism was highly controversial and incredibly unpopular in the nineteenth century. Protestantism was the unofficial established Church for Americans, while Catholicism was understood to be the Whore of Babylon and the arch-enemy of all true faith. In comparison to the formidable presence of Protestantism in America, the Catholic Church existed as a mere remnant of the European Old World which Americans had defiantly left behind. There was an alarming lack of churches and priests in the United States, despite John Carroll's monumental appointment as the first bishop in the United States in 1790. Even by the antebellum era, the Catholic Church in America remained a missionary church which struggled for survival.¹ Catholics could claim the least number of parishes among the Christian denominations in the United States in 1815, and by 1830 they still constituted at most only 2.5 percent of the population.² Thus, Roman Catholicism, culturally suspect and frequently unable to accommodate parishioners, was an implausible choice for Americans during an era of fierce religious competition. In this way, Catholic converts in the early nineteenth century represent a radical rejection of popular religious traditions.

¹ Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience 1830-1900* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 3.

² Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism*, 3. James M. O'Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 54.

Anti-Catholicism

Converts to the Roman faith were entrenched in a culture which believed the Roman Catholic Church to be irredeemably corrupt. Protestant Americans considered themselves to be among the true remnant to emerge, via Reformation and Revolution, from the superstitious and tyrannical Church of Rome.³ Many perceived Catholicism as a human institution that jeopardized the place of God's word, thus holding its parishioners captive from the truth.⁴ The widely read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* had for centuries reinforced a distrust of Catholicism, which was portrayed as corrupt, foreign, and contrary to personal liberty.⁵ One convert commented on the prejudice among Americans against any earnest examination of Catholicism. Such an idea "was instantly met with a cry of alarm, 'this practice is highly dangerous.'"⁶

Although militant anti-Catholicism had subsided somewhat after the American Revolution, the 1830s and 1840s witnessed a resurgence of violent anti-Catholic demonstrations in response to the rising influx of Catholic immigrants.⁷ Articulating a synthesis between American values and Protestantism, Nativists argued that Catholics, by virtue of their allegiance to Rome and the pope, were not true Americans and that their

³ Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 4.

⁴ Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 163.

⁵ Edward R. Norman, *Roman Catholicism in England: From the Elizabethan Settlement to the Second Vatican Council* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4. See also Mark S. Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 8.

⁶ L. Silliman Ives, *The Trials of a Mind in its Progress to Catholicism: A Letter to His Old Friends* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co., 1855), 14.

⁷ Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 24.

very way of life threatened American values.⁸ In 1842 the American Protestant Association Against the Catholic Church was formed and adopted a constitution to encourage the union of Protestant ministers against the “dangers which threaten the liberties...of these United States from the assaults of Romanism.”⁹ Seven years later the “Know Nothing” Party, or the “American Party,” was established as an organized political front against Catholicism.¹⁰ In the summer of 1834 the evangelical Protestant minister, Lyman Beecher delivered an address on the supposed plot of the papacy to seize the Mississippi River Valley. This address, along with a supposed escape nun, was enough to rile an angry mob who set fire to an Ursuline convent in Charleston, Massachusetts.¹¹ Further anti-Catholic violence ensued when the Know-Nothing Party razed a Philadelphia Catholic library, a convent, and two churches.¹² Thus, while American Protestants were often divided over doctrine, many were united in adamant opposition to Catholicism.

Despite the minor presence of the Catholic Church in the United States and the common belief in the corruption of Catholicism, the divisive issues within the popular Protestant churches drove a small but significant number of Protestants into the Roman Church. The disturbance over Christian fractionalization, variant beliefs and practices,

⁸ O’Toole, *The Faithful*, 89.

⁹ “The Launching of the American Protestant Association Against the Catholic Church, November 12, 1842,” in *Documents of American Catholic History*, by John Tracy Ellis, ed., (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), 264.

¹⁰ Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 564.

¹¹ O’Toole, 89.

¹² Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, 24.

and individualism, had their corresponding attractions among these converts toward authority, sacramentalism, and unity. Those who converted to Catholicism believed their choice would lead to freedom and rest through the acceptance of Church authority. In addition, the visibility of the institutional church and the tangible reality of the Real Presence in the Eucharist were compelling for these converts. Finally, the idea of there being one church was pivotal for American Catholic converts, who lamented the increasing incoherence of churches on the American landscape.

High Churchmanship and Romanticism

Two trends in the early nineteenth century coincided with and influenced the crisis of faith experienced by these converts: a flowering of High Churchmanship and Romanticism. Most Catholic converts in antebellum America were either previously High Church Episcopalians or liberal Protestant Transcendentalists. The High Church movement represented a shift away from the increasingly sermon-focused Protestant practices toward a more sacramental theology that incorporated the senses through art, vestments, the liturgical calendar, and unity with historical ecclesiastical authority.¹³ A number of American Episcopalians were influenced by the Oxford Movement abroad during the 1840s and 50s. Transcendentalism, with its rejection of the rationalism of the Unitarians in favor of a mysterious faith, resembled the High Church movement.

There were a considerable number of Catholic converts among the Episcopal clergy during the 1840s and 1850s. Augustine Francis Hewit (1820-1897) and Francis Asbury Baker (1820-1865) were priests in the American Episcopal Church prior to their

¹³ Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 612.

conversions to Catholicism in 1846 and 1853, respectively. They were both High Churchmen and close followers of the Oxford Movement.¹⁴ Hewit wrote that neither he nor Baker initially even considered Roman Catholicism when they became convinced of High Church principles. “The accusation of Romanizing was treated as calumny, and we had no thought of anything except . . . endeavoring to establish intercommunion.”¹⁵ Thus a desire for church unity led certain individuals with High Church leanings toward Roman Catholicism. Clarence Walworth (1820-1900), another Episcopalian, Catholic convert, was disturbed by what he perceived as the “full liberty” in the Anglican Church “to believe what I liked and to change my beliefs unquestioned.”¹⁶ For Walworth, along with other High Church Catholic converts, freedom of choice was not true liberty, but the opportunity for heterodoxy and confusion.

Although these men converted from the Episcopal Church, they were indirectly tied to other mainline Protestant denominations. Francis A. Baker was the grandson of a Methodist preacher, and he was named after the famous Methodist itinerant preacher, Francis Asbury. He received his education from Princeton College, but his rejection of both Methodist and Calvinistic doctrine led him to the Episcopal Church.¹⁷ Augustine F. Hewit was raised by a prominent Congregationalist minister, and educated at the Congregationalist seminary of East Windsor. Like Baker, the development of his

¹⁴ Allitt, 71.

¹⁵ A. F. Hewit, *Life of the Rev. Francis A. Baker: Priest of the Congregation of St. Paul* (New York: The Catholic Publication House, 1868), 32.

¹⁶ Allitt, 63.

¹⁷ Hewit, *Life of the Rev. Francis A. Baker*, 13, 15-16.

theological understanding led him first to the Episcopal Church.¹⁸ What is striking about these situations is that certain mainline Protestants in America were coming to believe in the divine origin of episcopacy. From there they accepted Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in an era which predominately rejected clerical authority. Thus, the journey of these Catholic converts was one of increasing distance from the more accepted forms of Protestantism in America. The result was a trend which Clarence Walworth described as the “the Oxford Movement in America.”¹⁹

Elizabeth Ann Seton

Before the two decades of the “American Oxford Movement,” Elizabeth Seton, the first American-born person to be canonized as a saint, converted to Catholicism in 1805. Although not as well known as prominent Catholic converts such as Orestes Brownson, she warrants extended attention because of the nuances of her conversion experience, and because she was profoundly influential for the Catholic Church, founding both parochial schools and the Sisters of Charity in America. Seton predated the Oxford Movement, and as a woman her place in church and society was drastically different from her male counterparts. However, like these converts, she came from the Episcopal Church, was influenced by High Church ideas, and became distraught over the condition of popular forms of Protestantism in America.

¹⁸ A. F. Hewit, *King's Highway*, (New York: The Catholic Book Exchange, 1893), ix.

¹⁹ Rev. Clarence A. Walworth, *The Oxford Movement in America, or Glimpses of Life in an Anglican Seminary* (New York: The Catholic Book Exchange, 1895).

Seton was initially satisfied with the faith she was born into, “I am at rest in this fold,” she wrote.²⁰ Even after she was predisposed to Catholic traditions through the High Church tendencies of her pastor, Rev. Henry Hobart at Trinity Episcopal Church in New York, she did not consider converting to Catholicism.²¹ It was not until she encountered Catholicism in Italy that she contemplated conversion. Elizabeth Seton and her husband sailed for Italy in 1802, where it was believed the weather might ensure her husband’s recovery from tuberculosis. William had business partners in Leghorn, the Filicchis, at whose home the Setons would stay.²² Upon their arrival in Italy, however, the Setons were thrown into the Lazaretto Prison by the Italians who feared that their ship brought yellow fever.²³ There William’s health declined dramatically, and after they emerged from the Lazaretto, on December 21, 1802, he passed away.²⁴ After Seton mournfully buried her husband at the Protestant cemetery in Leghorn, she would spend the next five months with the Filicchis, who were devout Catholics.²⁵

It was from Antonio Filicchi, his wife, Amabilia, and his brother, Filippo that Seton first received direct knowledge of the practices and teachings of the Roman

²⁰ Joseph I Dirvin, C.M., *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 86.

²¹ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought From the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 245.

²² Charles P. Connor, *Classic Catholic Converts*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 20.

²³ Elizabeth Seton, November 19, 1803 in the *Italian Journal*, in Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 104.

²⁴ Elizabeth Seton to Rebecca Seton, Mach 5, 1804 in Archives of St. Joseph’s Provincial House, 286-288, in Kelly and Melville, *Elizabeth Seton*, 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

Catholic Church.²⁶ Amabilia Filicchi took Seton on a tour of Florence and to a number of Chapels. Seton was moved by the beauty and religious devotion she witnessed. On visiting a Medici Chapel, she wrote to her sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton,

. . . Altar loaded with gold, . . . pictures of every sacred subject and the dome a continued representation of different parts of Scripture—all this can never be conceived by description—nor my delight in seeing old men and women, young women, all sorts of people kneeling promiscuously about the Altar . . .²⁷

As she beheld many great works of arts, she was most taken by a portrait of Christ's descent from the cross, of which she wrote it was "nearly as large as life [and] engaged *my whole soul*." After touring Florence with Amabilia for eight days, Seton wrote home, "My Rebecca . . . how many new thoughts and affections pass my mind in a day . . ."²⁸

The Catholic belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist impressed Seton most profoundly. To Rebecca she wrote, "Mrs. F. took me with her to mass as she calls it, I don't know how to say the awful effect at being told . . . *God* was present in the blessed sacrament . . ."²⁹ One day at Mass, Seton was appalled by an English tourist, who whispered to her, "This is what they call the real presence . . ." At his remark, Seton recorded, "my very heart trembled with shame . . . involuntarily I bent from him . . . and thought secretly the words of St. Paul with starting tears 'they discern not the Lord's

²⁶ Ellin M. Kelly, ed., *Elizabeth Seton's Two Bibles: Her Notes and Markings*, (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1977), 15.

²⁷ Elizabeth Seton, *The Italian Journal*, in Kelly and Melville, 126.

²⁸ Archives of St. Joseph's Provincial House, 3:15, in Kelly and Melville, *Elizabeth*, 129-130.

²⁹ Elizabeth Seton, *Italian Journal*, February 2, 1804, in *ibid.*, 131.

body.”³⁰ In February, Seton wrote to Rebecca, “My sister dear how happy we would be if we believed what these souls believe, that they possess God in the Sacrament.”³¹

Upon her return to New York, Seton voiced these new inclinations to some of her friends, who in turn believed she was merely dissatisfied with the Episcopal Church.³² “The most excellent woman I ever knew, who is of the Church of Scotland, finding me unsettled . . . said to me, ‘*Oh, do dear Soul come and hear our J. Mason and I am sure you will join us.*’” Seton continued explaining that “a little after came one I loved for the purest and most innocent manners of the Society of Quakers . . . coaxed me too with artless persuasion, *Betsy, I tell thee thee had best come with us.*” “Mary the Methodist” also confronted Seton and accused her of being without conviction of soul. “And my Faithful old friend Mrs. T of the Anabaptists meeting says with tears in her eyes *Oh could you be regenerated, could you know our experiences and enjoy with us our heavenly banquet . . .*”³³ Some friends reminded Seton of her obligations as a mother. “Now they tell me take care *I am a Mother*, and my children I must answer for in Judgment, whatever faith I lead them to.”³⁴ Although Seton was confronted by such forceful persuasions, and indeed perhaps because of these confrontations, she became increasingly convinced of the existence of one, true church. In the same letter to Amabilia she wrote,

³⁰ Ibid., 132.

³¹ *Italian Journal*, February 24, 1804, in *ibid.*, 133.

³² Mary Kathleen Flanagan, “The Influence of John Henry Hobart on the Life of Elizabeth Ann Seton” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1978), 164.

³³ *Journal for Amabilia Filichi*, July 19, 1804, in Kelly and Melville, 159-160.

³⁴ Ibid., 160.

“Your word is truth, and without contradiction . . . one Faith, one hope, one baptism I look for, wherever it is”³⁵

Seton’s attraction toward the Roman Catholic Church dramatically altered her friendship with her pastor, Rev. Henry Hobart. In dismay at her conjecture, Hobart supplied Seton with a copy of *Dissertation on the Prophecies* by Thomas Newton. In this book Newton argued that the “man of sin” from the Biblical prophecies was the bishop of Rome.³⁶ The horror of Newton’s argument and the loss of Hobart’s friendship caused Seton deep inner turmoil. Antonio Filicchi continued to encourage her toward Rome, however, offering her Robert Manning’s *England’s Conversion and Reformation Compared and The Lives of the Saints*.³⁷ Seton struggled back and forth, describing herself at this time as “unsettled and perplexed.”³⁸ Completely consumed with the decision, Seton wrote to Antonio of not being able to “speak with freedom on any other [subject]”³⁹ As she struggled for answers she wrote that the Scriptures, “once my delight and comfort are now the sources of pain”⁴⁰ Suddenly the Bible was not self-evident to her, and her own moral autonomy not enough to ensure her. Seton reflected on

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Connor, *Classic Catholic Converts*, 22 and Flanagan, “The Influence of John Henry Hobart,” 201.

³⁷ Kelly and Melville, 141, 148. See also Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 298.

³⁸ Kelly and Melville, 147.

³⁹ Elizabeth to Antonio, September 29, 1804, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, in Kelly and Melville, 149.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth to Antonio, December 13, 1804, 154, The Archives of the Sisters of Charity, Mount St. Joseph, Ohio, in *ibid.*, 154.

the current state of religion in her country, of which she wrote to Antonio, “but oh my Brother, religion here has a sandy foundation indeed.”⁴¹

She passed a point of no return concerning her commitment to Protestantism while attending Sunday service at her Episcopal church in September of 1804. Of that morning she wrote, “my face towards the Catholic Church in the next street, and found myself twenty times speaking to the blessed Sacrament there instead of looking at the naked altar where I was.”⁴² Shortly thereafter, Seton gave up her struggle and decided to become a Catholic. “Come my Soul,” she wrote, “let us turn from these Suggestions of one side or the other and quietly resolve to go to that Church.”⁴³ Risking everything, she continued, “Come then my little ones we will go to Judgment together.”⁴⁴ On March 14, 1805, she was officially received into the Roman Catholic Church. Seton described her entrance into the Church much in the same manner as Levi Ives would by the mid-century, as “receiving an immediate transition of life, liberty, and rest.”⁴⁵ At last her conscience, that faculty so valued by Protestants, was at peace.

Seton’s critique of popular Protestantism in America was strikingly similar to the High Church converts who followed her. Her comment on the unstable foundations of Christianity in America was echoed by Rev. Hewit, who described the Protestant churches in America as “built on sand . . . rapidly being undermined and washed away.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid., January 24, 1805, 156.

⁴² Elizabeth Seton, September 1804, in *ibid.*, 161.

⁴³ Elizabeth to Antonio, September 19, 1804, in *ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Seton, *Journal for Amabilia Filicchi*, January 1805, in *ibid.*, 164-5.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Hewit, *King’s Highway*, 290.

Her sense of confusion and distress over the truth was also expressed in Levi Ives' reflections on his journey to Catholicism:

When I asked for certain knowledge of God's will, I heard around me only 'confusion of tongues.' When I asked for authority, I found only individual opinion; . . . for unity in fundamental faith, division and crimination; —no claim to universality, and no agreement even in the narrowest sectarianism!⁴⁷

Thus, all of these converts were troubled over the same issues in American Protestantism, and all of them became drawn to the authority, unity, and sacramentalism of Catholicism.

In another way, Seton's attraction to the mysterious elements of Catholicism aligned her with a second contingent of Catholic converts in antebellum America: the Romantics. "Faith for all its defects supplies," wrote Seton of her entrance into Catholicism, "and Sense is lost in Mystery."⁴⁸ The mysterious elements—the transcendental experience of faith—predisposed a number of Transcendentalists to convert to Roman Catholicism. Like the High Church converts, they came to reject certain aspects of democratized religion and to accept formerly repellent characteristics of Catholicism. As opposed to High Church converts, however, those from Transcendentalism entered the Catholic Church through a more indirect route. For such converts as Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker, rejection of Protestantism came through immediate confrontation with democratized religion and full immersion in the heyday of religious "isms," utopian experiments, and even angelic visions.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁸ Seton, *Journal for Amabilia*, March 25, 1805, in Kelley and Melville, 167.

Orestes A. Brownson

One of the most famous Catholic converts in antebellum America was the former Transcendentalist, Orestes A. Brownson (1803-1876). According to some, he was the most provocative and imaginative nineteenth century American Catholic writer.⁴⁹ For the first half of his life Brownson took advantage of democratized Christianity to “choose” his own faith. In fact, he was thought to be somewhat of a religious weathervane, converting five different times before entering the Catholic Church.⁵⁰ His restless attitude toward religion was characteristic of those from New York’s and Vermont’s “Burned-Over District.” Brownson was born in Stockbridge, Vermont, in 1803, during a time of revival which helped ignite the Second Great Awakening.⁵¹ For the next two decades rampant revivals fostered enthusiasms and eccentricities in this district. The average emigrant to the Burned-Over District changed churches several times, depending on nearby revivals.⁵² The Burned-Over District was also the prime location for the birth of new religious sects and experiments, as hierarchical church authority gave way to the sovereignty of the people. It was here that the Shakers began their utopian community, and here where Mormonism and Millerism were founded.⁵³ Brownson was thus raised in perhaps the most democratized location on the American landscape.

⁴⁹ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 482.

⁵⁰ Brownson received a reputation as being America’s philosophical weathervane from James Russell Lowell’s *A Fable for Critics* (1848-1849). See Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*, xiii.

⁵¹ Carey, *Orestes Brownson*, 2.

⁵² David J. O’Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 8.

⁵³ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*, (New York: Harper & Rowe Publishers, 1950), 16.

When Brownson was fourteen he reportedly had a conversion experience at a Presbyterian church in Ballston Spa, New York.⁵⁴ After nine months, however, he rejected Presbyterianism and joined the Universalist congregation in 1824.⁵⁵ Brownson was swayed by the “reasonableness” of the Universalist arguments against certain Calvinist doctrines.⁵⁶ Universalism also appeared to Brownson as the means by which to transcend denominational sectarianism, as salvation was believed to be universal. His hopes of transcending denominationalism, however, quickly dissolved. After Brownson expressed lingering doubts about the relationship between faith and reason, his peers accused him of being an atheist.⁵⁷ In response Brownson rejected Universalism and officially declared himself “no longer a sectarian, nor member of any sect”⁵⁸ From this point, Brownson aligned himself with the secular Workingman’s Party, a socialist group devoted to universal public education.⁵⁹

Brownson was compelled to reenter the Christian fold a year later when he arrived at his life-long conclusion that religion was intrinsic to social justice.⁶⁰ Brownson became persuaded of this after reading the sermons of Unitarian minister, William Ellery

⁵⁴ Joseph F. Gower and Richard M. Leliaert, eds., *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 2.

⁵⁵ Carey, 13, 15.

⁵⁶ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 484.

⁵⁷ Arie J. Griffioen, *Orestes Brownson and the Problem of Revelation: The Protestant Years* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 131.

⁵⁸ O.A. Brownson, “To the Universalists,” *The Free Enquirer*, November 28, 1829, 38.

⁵⁹ Carey, 30.

⁶⁰ Griffioen, *Orestes Brownson and the Problem of Revelation*, 32.

Channing.⁶¹ For Brownson, no other organization embodied “liberal non-sectarianism” better than the Unitarian Church. Brownson believed that Unitarianism presented the best harmonization of reason, faith, and morality.⁶² Inspired by this apparent harmony between the Bible and reason, Brownson moved his wife and two children to Walpole, New York, in 1832, where he became a Unitarian pastor.⁶³ There he preached about the “Church of the Future,” in which there existed neither Protestantism nor Catholicism.⁶⁴ Brownson remained under Unitarianism longer than any other church before his conversion to Catholicism, but by the late 1830s, he started to struggle with certain aspects of Unitarianism.⁶⁵

In 1836 Brownson, along with seventeen former Unitarians, joined the Transcendentalist movement. Brownson’s decision was influenced by Samuel T. Coleridge’s assertion that Christianity was a life, and not simply a doctrine.⁶⁶ Writing as editor for the *Boston Quarterly Review* and participating in the utopian experiment at Brook Farm, Brownson was a formidable presence within the Transcendentalist movement. He distinguished himself from the leaders of this movement at the time, however, through his rejection of total subjectivity. Ralph Waldo Emerson elevated the individual’s experience at the expense of all outside structures of religious authority.

⁶¹ Carey, 34.

⁶² Holifield, 200, and Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 284.

⁶³ Carey, 38.

⁶⁴ Holifield, 348

⁶⁵ Holifield, 214.

⁶⁶ Carey, 70.

Unlike Emerson, Brownson referred to himself an “eclectic Transcendentalist,” emphasizing the importance of the historical, political, and social constructs in relation to transcendental experience.⁶⁷

It was Brownson’s direct confrontation with this extreme form of subjective and individualistic faith that once again led him to reject another religious sect. After hearing a lecture given by Theodore Parker in 1841, Brownson was horrified by what he perceived as the dreadful implications of liberal Christianity. In “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity,” Parker argued that Christianity did not depend on the real existence of Christ.⁶⁸ “The authority of Jesus,” said Parker, “as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words and not in their truth on his authority.”⁶⁹ For Parker, doctrines, forms, and people were transitory, and “truths,” which passed the test of time, were permanent. This was plainly conceded in the Bible, Parker argued further. “Come to the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth, —Christianity is a simple thing . . . the only creed it lays down is the great truth which springs up spontaneous in the holy heart, —there is a God.”⁷⁰ In his review of Parker, Brownson emphatically announced that he considered himself no longer a Protestant. He subsequently renounced the belief in private interpretation of Scripture because he thought it led to divisiveness, individualism, and heresy in Christianity.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Patrick W. Carey, ed., *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson: Volume V: The Transcendentalist Years, 1840-1841* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 3.

⁶⁸ Ahlstrom, 597.

⁶⁹ Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 270.

⁷⁰ Miller, *The Transcendentalists*, 277.

⁷¹ Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson*, 116.

In a letter to William Channing a year after Parker's lecture, Brownson wrote, "The literal person we call Christ, *is* Christianity To reject him historically is to reject Christianity."⁷² Brownson believed the ideal of unity was only possible through a Mediator, and that this Mediator must both be God and humanity so as to relate to humankind while elevating persons to reach the divine.⁷³ "The Gospel contains now to me not a cold abstract system of doctrine, a collection of moral apothegms, and striking examples of piety and virtues," wrote Brownson, "It points me to Life itself I now need to know nothing but Jesus and he crucified."⁷⁴ Influenced by Transcendentalism, Brownson had rejected a Christianity built on intellectual assent to doctrines, yet unlike the Transcendentalists, he began to accept a Christianity built on the Incarnation. In his new appreciation for the life of Christ as the center of Christianity, Brownson echoed the High Church position, which also connected this idea of the Incarnation with tangible communion with God through one visible church.

Acceptance of the literal and mediatorial life of Christ led Brownson to incorporate the literal and mediatorial existence of the church. "It is Christ, indeed, that comes, but only through his prepared body, his ministry, that reaches the sinner where he is, and begets him to moral life and soundness," wrote Brownson.⁷⁵ These beliefs were strikingly different from Brownson's inherited Burned-Over District mentality, where

⁷² Orestes A. Brownson, "A Letter to Rev. William Ellery Channing, D.D.," June 1842, in *The Brownson Reader*, ed. Alvan S. Ryan (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 269.

⁷³ Brownson to Channing, in Ryan, *The Brownson Reader*, 268.

⁷⁴ Brownson to Channing, in Ryan, 271.

⁷⁵ Orestes A. Brownson, "No Church, No Reform," *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, (April 1, 1844): 182.

nominal church affiliation mattered little.⁷⁶ It is perhaps this upbringing which fueled Brownson's fascination with a visible church. Brownson recognized this as the very solution to all Christian division. "I can now go and utter the very word this age demands. That word is COMMUNION."⁷⁷ In 1844 Brownson conceded, "If we cannot have a church unless we go to Rome, let us go to Rome."⁷⁸ On October 22, 1844 Brownson was formally received into the Roman Catholic Church. He was followed by his wife and seven children in November and December of that year.⁷⁹ Brownson, although a religious wanderer for the first half of his adult life, spent his remaining thirty-two years in the Catholic Church.

Isaac Hecker and Other Transcendentalist Converts

Brownson's experience was similar to other Transcendentalists who converted to Catholicism at this time. Next to Brownson, Isaac Hecker (1819-1888) was one of the best known converts to Catholicism in the nineteenth century. Like many of the High Church converts, Hecker entered the priesthood after he became a Catholic. In fact, Hecker joined forces with converts Francis Baker, Augustine Hewit, and Clarence Walworth to found the Paulist Institute, a missionary community for English parishes. Brownson was influential in Hecker's decision to join the Catholic Church. However, Hecker experienced inner turmoil over the question of the true church even before he met

⁷⁶ Cross, *The Burned Over District*, 8.

⁷⁷ Browning to Channing, in Ryan, 272.

⁷⁸ Orestes A. Brownson in review of *The Novelties Which Disturb our Peace* by Episcopal Bishop John H. Hopkins, 1844, in Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson*, 144.

⁷⁹ Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson*, 141.

Brownson.⁸⁰ Like Brownson, Hecker was raised in the Burned-Over District, surrounded by religious innovations and revivalistic fervor, yet unlike Brownson, Hecker was not a religious wanderer.⁸¹ He was baptized as a Lutheran, raised as a Methodist, and became a member of the Transcendentalist Club, but Hecker never declared any religious affiliation until his conversion to Catholicism.

In 1842 Hecker experienced a turning point in his life, in the form of a vision. Purportedly, he was visited by “a beautiful angelic pure being.” In his diary, he wrote, “In my life previous to this vision I should have been married ere this.”⁸² This experience sent him on a quest which initially led him to join the utopian community at Brook Farm at the suggestion of Brownson. He was intrigued by Transcendentalism and also began to study Christianity. Throughout this time, he expressed a longing to be part of a unified church.⁸³ Hecker struggled in his search for this church, briefly considering the Episcopal Church, but declaring even then that he could “never join a Protestant Church.”⁸⁴

Other members of the Transcendentalist Club had similar questions about the meaning of religion and the true church. In his diary, Hecker wrote, “At tea we had a chat upon the Church: Ripley, Dana and others that I can perceive that it is a topic which

⁸⁰ O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker*, 18.

⁸¹ O'Brien, 15, 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-37.

is not altogether un-interesting to them.”⁸⁵ Although Hecker was surrounded by a variety of churches in his home town and although he took part in an innovative and exciting religious, utopian experiment, he still felt lost, without religion, without truth. “My soul is so disquiet. My heart aches. It is as if my soul is weeping continually,” wrote Hecker, a year before his conversion to Catholicism.⁸⁶ After discussing his sentiments with Brownson, Hecker too became convinced of the need for a unified church, but before he decided which church was the true church, he decided to consult both Episcopalian and Catholic clergy on the issue. Soon after, Hecker confessed, “I have not wished to make myself Catholic but it answers to the wants of my soul. It answers on all sides. It is so rich full. One is in harmony all over.”⁸⁷ In January of 1844, Hecker was received into the Catholic Church, nine months before Brownson.

Following his entrance into the Catholic Church, Hecker returned to visit his friends at Brook Farm. Emerson suggested that Hecker’s attraction to the Catholic Church was due to the architecture and the art of Catholic Europe. In his diary, Hecker noted that his response was swift and negative, for he had never seen Catholic Europe prior to his conversion.⁸⁸ Unlike Elizabeth Seton, Hecker had never experienced the overwhelming religious décor of Italy. Yet, asceticism did hold some appeal for Hecker. Before his conversion, he attended a Catholic Mass, and of this experience he wrote, “There may be objections to having paintings and sculpture in the Church but I confess

⁸⁵ Isaac T. Hecker, April 15, 1843, in *Isaac T. Hecker: The Diary*, edited by John Farina (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 94.

⁸⁶ Hecker, April 17, 1843, in Farina, 96.

⁸⁷ Hecker, April 24, 1843, in Farina, 97.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

that I never enter a place where there is either but I feel an awe of invisible influence which strikes me mute.”⁸⁹ For the most part, however, the catalyst for the conversions of Hecker and Brownson was not direct confrontation with Catholicism initially, but rather unsettling immersion in the ferment of democratized Protestantism.

As Hecker noted, the question of the church held a place in the minds of other Transcendentalists. Sophia Ripley (1803-1861), who co-founded Brook Farm with her husband, George Ripley, was also among the Transcendentalist, Catholic converts. Ripley did not even consider entrance into a different Protestant denomination before her conversion to Catholicism. She dismissed the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity as “horrible” and expressed that Protestant devotion was “unreal and shadowy.”⁹⁰ After her entrance into the Catholic Church, Ripley poured her energy into translating from French to English *Religion in Society, Solution of Great Problems* by the Abbe Martinet.⁹¹ In this book, Martinet wrote that Catholicism was in harmony with the human experience and that the Catholic Church was the answer to people’s deepest longings.⁹² Thus it was that Brownson, Hecker, and Ripley, three individuals who stood at the cusp of religious innovation and freedom, became compelled to enter an authoritarian and seemingly undemocratic church.

⁸⁹ Hecker, April 15, 1843, in Farina, 94.

⁹⁰ Sophia Ripley Dana Willard, letter to Ruth Charlotte Dana, March , 1848 (Massachusetts Historical Society, Dana Collection), in *Sophia Willard Dana Ripley: Co-Founder of Brook Farm*, by Henrietta Dana Raymond (Portsmouth: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1994), 69.

⁹¹ Raymond, *Sophia Willard Dana Ripley*, 69.

⁹² Raymond, 71.

Conclusion

American Catholic converts of the early republic and antebellum periods represent a seeming anomaly in American religious history. Before his conversion, Isaac Hecker wrote, “The Roman Catholic Church is not national with us and hence it does not meet our wants nor does it fully understand and sympathize with the experience and disposition of our people . . . it is principally made up of adopted and foreign citizens.”⁹³ While there was not a nationally established church in the United States, Protestantism, in all its various forms, was ubiquitously understood as the religion of America. It was the “native” religion and it represented the “American way.” The antithesis of this way was Roman Catholicism. Yet discontent with various forms of Protestantism in America resulted not only in conversions to Catholicism, but also in conversions to Transcendentalism, High Church Episcopalianism, Restorationist churches, Mormonism, and many other “isms” besides. Conversions served to both answer and contribute to the discontent. What is peculiar about Catholic converts is their choice of the one church which seemed to symbolize all that contradicted American values.⁹⁴ Catholic converts in the early nineteenth-century thus reveal the complexity of American values and religion, for in Catholicism these former Protestants sought life, liberty, and happiness.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conversions to Mormonism

More miraculous than the belief that Joseph Smith, a poor farmer of rural New York, unearthed and translated over five hundred pages of lost scripture after he received new revelation from God, is the reality that the Book of Mormon gained equal if not superior status with the Bible for thousands of converts in the early nineteenth century, an era marked for its almost unanimous subscription to the Bible-only mantra. By the time Smith was murdered in 1844, fourteen years after the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was established, Mormon converts in America had reached 26,000.¹ By 1877, the year that Smith's successor, Brigham Young died, that number had increased to 115,000 members. Through the next century and a half the Mormon Church experienced continual expansion, claiming eleven million members throughout the world by 2002.² Early convert to Mormonism Orson Pratt described the founding and early growth of the Mormon faith as "the greatest moral and physical revolution which the inhabitants of this globe ever witnessed."³ Pratt's early analysis proved true, at least in America, as Mormonism quickly became and remains the largest and most successful religion of American origins.

Although one of the hallmarks of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints today is fervent patriotism, during the first four decades of its existence, a time when

¹ Douglas J. Davis, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

² Davis, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 8.

³ Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, Religion in America (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 1-2.

patriotism flourished in the most successful churches, Mormonism represented a very anti-American approach. In addition to subscribing to a new Bible, Mormons sought to create an “absolute autocracy in the center of a republic.”⁴ The endorsement of polygamy and baptism of the dead, among other Mormon beliefs and practices, also presented a striking contrast to conventional Christian traditions. The early growth of the Mormon Church thus deserves careful consideration. How was it that a system so divergent from mainline Christian churches, especially the popular Protestant denominations, and so contrary to American democratic values, was able to gain such prominence? Many historians describe Smith as a “religious genius,” who was able to tune into the religious longings of his contemporaries.⁵ Like the Restorationist Movement, Mormonism was in part born out of discontent with the religious atmosphere in the early nineteenth century, especially sectarianism. By claiming prophetic status, Smith offered converts assurance through religious authority, and by delineating specific doctrines and practices, Mormonism provided a sense of community in the face of religious individualism. In this way, the founding of Mormonism represents a similar response to the crisis of sectarianism as found among Restorationist and Catholic converts in antebellum America. However, Mormonism stands as the most extreme solution to the crisis in terms of its break with conventional Protestantism. Thus the popularity of Mormonism reveals both the desperate need for religious answers and the

⁴ John Hyde, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: W. P. Fetridge & Company, 1857), v.

⁵ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 503.

ease with which orthodox Christianity could be rejected in the absence of religious authority in the early nineteenth century.

Joseph Smith

Understanding the characteristics of Mormonism primarily requires examination of the prophet and founder of this church, Joseph Smith (1805-1844). The complex story of the Mormon Church was and is intrinsically tied to Smith, especially from 1830 to 1890.⁶ Smith was born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont. He was the fourth child born to Lucy Mack Smith and Joseph Smith, Sr. The Smiths were poor farmers who moved twelve times between 1803 and 1816 because of financial difficulties before finally settling in Palmyra, New York, in the expanding frontier.⁷ They were not alone in their struggles; thousands of other New Englanders migrated west at this time in search of better weather and soil for their farming endeavors.⁸ Joseph Smith, Jr. received less than two years of schooling and spent most of his time helping his parents and brothers on the farm.⁹ In addition to financial instability, Joseph Jr. was raised in an atmosphere of religious unrest. In his autobiography he described the squabbling of sectarianism in Palmyra. “Great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people.”¹⁰

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Chu Hartley Publishers, 1992), 72. Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 216.

⁷ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 18.

⁸ Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Religion in American Life*, 216.

⁹ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, xx.

¹⁰ Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story* (Desert City: Salt Lake News Press, 1920), 1.

The Smith family represents an example of the common life for Americans who migrated west at this time, a life of little educational opportunity and financial and religious turbulence.

As he reached his young adult years, Joseph Jr. became consumed by the multitude of churches and the question of which was the true church. In 1820, the year of Smith's first vision, there were five churches competing for membership in Palmyra.¹¹ The Second Great Awakening began at the turn of the century and reached a climax in Palmyra following the War of 1812, thoroughly indoctrinating the town in revivalistic religion.¹² Although he did not participate in the revivals, Smith was acquainted with revival preaching and the array of doctrinal contention.¹³ He described the town as being caught up in "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" resulting in a great scene of confusion and bad feelings."¹⁴ "Some were contending the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterians, and some for the Baptists," wrote Smith. "A scene of great confusion ensued, priests contending against priests, and convert against convert, so that all their good feelings, one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions."¹⁵ The lack of an overarching religious authority kept Smith on the outskirts of respectable religion, despite his expressed longings to become a

¹¹ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 5.

¹² Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950), 140.

¹³ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 503.

¹⁴ Smith, *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story*, 1.

¹⁵ Smith, 1.

church member, and the confusion this introduced served as a catalyst to his first vision, leading to the founding of Mormonism.

When his anguish over the true church became more than he could bear, Smith did not seek the wisdom of a local minister, but retired to the woods alone for answers. In addition to the church question, the other pressing concern of Smith's was how to be saved. These two questions were part of the same issue, as Smith felt salvation was only available in the true church.¹⁶ Smith wrote that while he "was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contest of these religionists,"¹⁷ he was struck by a verse in the Epistle of James. "If any of you lack wisdom," reads the verse, "let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally." Shortly after reading this, in the spring of 1820, Smith ventured to the woods to ask for wisdom from God. "I had scarcely done so," wrote Smith, "when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me."¹⁸ In this vision Smith claimed the heavens were opened and the Lord spoke to him. Smith asked the Lord which church he should join, and the Lord in the vision replied, "none of them, for they are all wrong."¹⁹ "The world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the Gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me," the Lord continued.²⁰ After this encounter Smith did not fully understand or discuss his

¹⁶ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 38.

¹⁷ Smith, 2.

¹⁸ Smith, 3.

¹⁹ Smith, 4.

²⁰ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 39.

new mission. He did, however, firmly resolve to join none of the existing churches.²¹ “I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the sectarian world was concerned,” he wrote.²²

Smith had a second vision in September, 1823, after he and his family spent the evening “conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches . . . and the many thousands of opinions in existence as to the truths contained in scripture.”²³ Smith described that when he was in his room that night “calling upon God,” an angel appeared to him, who said his name was Moroni.²⁴ The angel assured Smith that he had received forgiveness for his sins and that God was commissioning Smith to a miraculous and unimaginable work.²⁵ Moroni told Smith that a book of gold plates was deposited which contained the account of the former inhabitants of the North American continent. In addition, Moroni declared that “the fullness of the everlasting gospel was contained in it; as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants.”²⁶ Smith then received explicit instructions from the angel as to the location of two stones, called Urim and Thummim, which would enable him to “see” or translate the golden plates.²⁷ After this encounter, Smith obeyed Moroni and related the whole scene to his father who told him the vision was of God and that he should “do as commanded by the messenger.”²⁸

²¹ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 41. Smith, 26.

²² Smith, 26.

²³ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 43.

²⁴ Smith, 7-8.

²⁵ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 44.

²⁶ Smith, 8.

²⁷ Smith, 8.

²⁸ Smith, 11.

Exactly four years after his second vision, Smith was reportedly visited by Moroni once more and instructed by him to retrieve the golden tablets and to translate them.²⁹ Smith went to the place where Moroni told him to go, Hill Cumorah, in the nearby town of Manchester, and located the plates. “Not far from the top” of the hill, wrote Smith, “under a stone of considerable size, lay the plates, deposited in a stone box” along with the Urim and Thummim.³⁰ This discovery drastically changed Smith’s life. Before this Smith belonged to a treasure seeking band that traveled the country seeking Indian and Spanish treasure.³¹ In 1827, upon his discovery of the plates, Moroni told him that he must “quit the company of the money diggers,” and that “he must not lie, nor cheat, nor steal.”³² Smith subsequently became consumed with the plates, and how to translate, store, and protect them.³³ The plates were of great significance to Smith, for he believed the retrieval would restore the true Gospel in America.³⁴ He allowed three of his early followers, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer to view the plates and to aid in his transcription.³⁵ Although rumors of his visions and discoveries induced suspicion from some who accused him of lying, Smith began to attract a steady stream of

²⁹ Butler, Wacker, Balmer, 217.

³⁰ Joseph Smith, “The Pearl of Great Price,” in Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 5.

³¹ Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 33.

³² *Tiffany’s Monthly* 5 (Aug. 1859): 169, in Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, 33.

³³ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 58.

³⁴ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 9.

³⁵ Hansen, 7.

followers, beginning with his family, who believed that the unfolding events were a miracle of God.³⁶

The Book of Mormon

After three years of Smith translating, in March of 1830, what the newspapers referred to as the “Golden Bible” appeared in print.³⁷ This new Bible told the lost history of the Nephites and the Lamanites, two Hebraic tribes who traveled to America after the fall of the Tower of Babel.³⁸ During their reign in America from 600 B.C. until 400 A.D., the resurrected Jesus appeared to these tribes, who subsequently converted to Christianity. Their religious heritage was lost, however, when the Lamanites, dark-skinned ancestors of the American Indians, massacred the Nephites.³⁹ Fortunately, the Nephites had kept detailed records of their history on golden plates, written by one of the last of the tribe’s prophets and generals, Mormon. Aware of what would be their future significance, Mormon passed the plates down to his son, Moroni, to be buried on Cumorah Hill.⁴⁰ The Book of Mormon came to five hundred pages and read very much like the King James Version of the Old Testament historical books by the time Smith completed the translation.⁴¹ In addition to the Golden Bible title, newspapers also referred to the Book of Mormon as “a blasphemous rival to orthodox Christianity.”⁴²

³⁶ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 58.

³⁷ Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Gazetter of the State of New York* (Albany: Packard, 1824), 80, in Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 85.

³⁸ Ahlstrom, 502.

³⁹ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 502 and Bloom, *The American Religion*, 78.

⁴⁰ Hansen, 9.

⁴¹ Ahlstrom, 502-3.

⁴² Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 81.

Indeed, this rival proved threatening; less than a month after the Book of Mormon came off the press, six followers of Smith were baptized by immersion into a whole new church.⁴³

One of the reasons why the Book of Mormon gained significant momentum during the antebellum era, whether or not all people believed the book to be from divine origins, was because it offered authoritative spiritual answers.⁴⁴ People in the 1830s, especially the inhabitants of the expanding frontier, lived in uncertain times, financially, religiously, and even historically. The United States was a new country, it did not have a long and documented heritage as European countries, and the origins of the American Indians remained a mystery. Although free from the burden of European rule, Americans had difficulty interpreting their place in the New World. In addition, the majority of American Protestants rejected most of church history, associating themselves only with Protestant reformers and first century Christians. America was thus isolated geographically, historically, and religiously. This created an overarching desire for answers and security. The Book of Mormon appealed to Christians who looked for Biblical answers to the question of the Native Americans, but more importantly, it captivated Americans who wished to unite their own history and country with sacred texts and Christian history. The Book of Mormon offered Americans a deep past, extending back even to the Tower of Babel.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ahlstrom, 504.

⁴⁴ Butler, Wacker, Balmer, 219.

⁴⁵ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 101.

In the same way that the Book of Mormon allowed Americans to connect with the past, it also provided a fresh beginning. Unlike the orthodox Bible, the Book of Mormon was new, fresh, and innocent of disparate theological schools.⁴⁶ This golden Bible offered Americans who were weary of competing churches, hope of transcending sectarian divisions and restoring the true church through the recovery of ancient history.⁴⁷ Consequently the Book of Mormon condemned the condition of all the Christian churches in America at the time.⁴⁸ As the angel had told Smith in his first vision, none of the existing churches was the true church of Christ. Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, wrote that the new scripture enabled people "to see the situation in which the world now stands; that the eyes of the whole world are blinded; that the churches have all become corrupted, yea every church upon the face of the earth; that the Gospel of Christ is nowhere preached."⁴⁹ The hope caused by the Book of Mormon resembles other American religious endeavors. Like the Puritans on board the *Arbella* in 1629, Smith had high hopes of turning America into a new model of Christian charity, to be a light in a darkened world. Like the Restorationists of his own era, Smith believed he had tapped into an ancient formula for Christian perfection. Yet unlike either of these movements, Smith would venture beyond Reformation principles, to completely re-form the church.

⁴⁶ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 242.

⁴⁷ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 242.

⁴⁸ Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, 1.

⁴⁹ Ben E. Rich, *Scrap Book of Mormon Literature* (Chicago: Henry C. Etten and Co., n.d.), 1:344-45. Letter dated 6 January 1831, original in LDS church archives, Salt Lake City, Utah, in Vogel, 1.

A New Church

After he translated the Book of Mormon, Smith began to receive regular revelations from God. One such revelation was to “organize the Church.”⁵⁰ Thus on April 6, 1830, Smith and his six followers at the time performed a religious ceremony founding what they then called the Church of Christ. Oliver Cowdery ordained Smith as the first elder, seer, prophet, translator, and apostle of Jesus Christ.⁵¹ Smith’s followers looked to him as an authoritative figure because of his status as a prophet, believing that only a prophet could found a church.⁵² The luxury of living among a true prophet was matched by the thrill of Mormon doctrine that God would establish Zion on American soil. In a letter Smith sent to a newspaper editor, explaining this doctrine, he wrote, “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes. That Zion will be built upon this continent.”⁵³ This literal gathering impelled the Mormons to form a united church in a specific location. Although the Mormon Church was initially founded in Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Smith and his wife were living at the time, it was moved to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831 after the first Mormon mission westward. That same year Smith had a vision that Jackson County, Missouri would be the “place for the city of Zion.”⁵⁴ The Mormon Church was not officially relocated, however, until 1839,

⁵⁰ Smith, 21.

⁵¹ Smith, 21-22, and Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), xxiv.

⁵² E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 335.

⁵³ Joseph Smith to John Wentworth, March 1, 1842, in Bloom, 75.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Doctrines & Covenants* 57, in Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 30.

when the Mormons moved to Nauvoo Illinois, and established a theocracy with Smith as King. Nauvoo subsequently became known as the “city of Latter Day Saints.”⁵⁵

The story of Joseph Smith and the founding of Mormonism has a lot to say about the state of religion in the early republic. Although traditional Protestant ministers hailed religious freedom as the vehicle which would allow “true” religion to flourish, and although Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians did indeed proliferate during the first half of the nineteenth century, this same freedom allowed for a multiplicity of divergent sects to emerge. To Smith, growing up in Vermont and New York, American Christianity appeared corrupt, chaotic, and contradictory. Before founding the Mormon faith, Smith was never impressed with organized religion, remaining on the fringes of church life. His anguish over this scenario prompted his prayers for wisdom and his subsequent visions and discovery of the golden plates. What is ironic is that the same means by which religion in America “burned over” the land—religious disestablishment and democratization—are the means which also allowed Mormonism to become one of the most unorthodox and undemocratic movements of the early nineteenth century.

Conversions among Joseph Smith’s Family

Smith was not alone in his distress over the conditions of Christianity in the United States. He came from a family of religious wanderers and seekers who lingered on the outskirts of membership with any one church. Three of the six initial organizers of the Mormon Church were Smiths, who welcomed the prospect of new revelation and a

⁵⁵ George Peck., *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, Written by Himself* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1874), 201.

new church.⁵⁶ Although the Smiths were religious, they were not church people.⁵⁷ Lucy Smith remained isolated from any church for seventeen years, and Joseph Sr. refused to participate in organized religion.⁵⁸ As the predominant culture of the 1830s was family culture, Mormonism thus began not just with Joseph Smith, but with his family. With less than two years of schooling and no formal church membership, Smith spent his days under the direct influence of his family, on whose farm he labored until founding the Mormon Church. Growing up, Joseph Jr. watched as his parents struggled for sure footing both religiously and financially. Like most farmers from Vermont during the early nineteenth century, the Smiths moved west after facing insurmountable financial difficulties.⁵⁹ In search of financial security, Smith Sr. condoned his son's joining a group of treasure hunters who scoured the land and consulted various mediums in search of riches.⁶⁰ The early converts to Mormonism within Smith's own family thus shed further light on the religious and cultural climate at the time of the founding of the Mormon Church.

Lucy Mack was born in Cheshire County, New Hampshire, on July 8, 1776, just four days after the United States declared their independence.⁶¹ When she was nineteen, Lucy went to stay with her sister, who was ill and living in Tunbridge, Vermont. She described herself at this time in her life as being "pensive and melancholy" and reflective

⁵⁶ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 3-4.

⁵⁷ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 5.

⁵⁸ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 5.

⁵⁹ Ahlstrom, 502.

⁶⁰ Ahlstrom, 502.

⁶¹ Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 36.

over the meaning of life. In the midst of her anxiety, she wrote, “I determined to obtain that which I had heard spoken of so much from the pulpit—a change of heart.”⁶² As was the growing trend of individualism at the time, Lucy sought this change of heart through solitary Bible reading.⁶³ During her meditations, however, she distressed over another matter: “If I remain a member of no church, all religious people will say I am of the world; and if I join one of the different denominations, all the rest will say I am in error.” Lucy expanded on this reflection, “no church will admit that I am right, except the one with which I am associated. This makes them witnesses against each other; and how can I decide in such a case as this, seeing they are all unlike the Church of Christ.”⁶⁴ Already, by 1794, the Puritan hegemony in New England had begun to crumble in the face of religious disestablishment and populist impulses within the churches. Even as a young girl, Lucy experienced the gravity of this situation. As opposed to thriving under the banner of religious freedom, Lucy felt paralyzed and imprisoned from freely joining any church.

While Lucy was in Tunbridge, she met and married Joseph Smith. Although she hesitated to officially join any one church, her desire for a change of heart led Lucy to attend Methodist meetings. To appease his wife, Joseph Sr. went with her. Their acquaintance with the Methodists, however, did not last long, as Joseph Sr.’s father, Asael Smith vocally disapproved of such actions as being “unreasonable.”⁶⁵ Lucy finally

⁶² Lucy Smith, 37.

⁶³ Lucy Smith, 37.

⁶⁴ Lucy Smith, 37.

⁶⁵ Lucy Smith, 54.

decided that “there was not then upon the earth the religion” she sought.⁶⁶ After convincing a local clergyman to baptize her without requiring that she join a church, Lucy Smith lived the next seventeen years confining herself and her family to self-instructed Bible reading.⁶⁷ An itinerant Presbyterian minister came through Palmyra in 1824, “laboring in the neighborhood, to effect a union of the different churches, in order that all might be agreed and thus worship God with one heart and with one mind.”⁶⁸ Lucy wrote that this minister’s endeavors “seemed right to me,” and so she and three of her sons began to attend the local Presbyterian Church.⁶⁹ Joseph Jr. refused to attend, explaining that he could “learn more in two hours” alone in the woods with his Bible, than “in two years” at the church meetings.⁷⁰ Shortly after this, Joseph Jr. received his visions, in which he was instructed to join none of the churches. Upon hearing of these visions, Lucy believed her son and heartily embraced the new revelation.

Joseph Sr. was more adamant in his dismissal of all the Christian sects than his wife. He only attended religious services at his wife’s request and he became a member of no denomination until his son established a new faith.⁷¹ Like his son, Joseph Sr. had visions about the condition of the churches of his day. Lucy recorded that in 1811 her husband “became much excited on the subject of religion; yet he would not subscribe to any particular system of faith, but contended for the ancient order, as established by our

⁶⁶ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 25.

⁶⁷ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 25.

⁶⁸ Lucy Smith, 90.

⁶⁹ Vogel, 25.

⁷⁰ Lucy Smith, 90.

⁷¹ Bloom, 74.

Lord and Savior.”⁷² That same year, Joseph Sr. had a vision of a “barren field” through which “a death-like silence prevailed.”⁷³ When he inquired of an attendant angel the meaning of the field, the angel responded “this field is the world, which now lieth inanimate and dumb in regard to the truth, religion, or plan of salvation.”⁷⁴ After this experience, Lucy wrote that her husband “seemed more confirmed than ever” in his decision to join no church.⁷⁵ In another vision, Joseph Sr. travelled alone and wearied to his judgment.⁷⁶ In each vision he found himself on some sort of vague quest, yearning for some resolution and relief, just beyond a door or under a tree.⁷⁷ His visions reveal both the deep seated religious discontent and also profound longing for religious healing and salvation.

Joseph Sr. had similar visions throughout the next decade, and his son inherited his sentiments, becoming disillusioned with conventional Christianity. Joseph Jr. wrote that by the age of twelve he noticed that the clergy did not “adorn themselves with a holy walk” and that “by searching the Scriptures” he found that “mankind did not come unto the Lord, but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith.”⁷⁸ This assertion is strikingly similar to the predecessors of the evangelical boom, which Joseph Jr. was rejecting. Mid-eighteenth century figures such as Gilbert Tennent and James Davenport

⁷² Lucy Smith, 56.

⁷³ Lucy Smith, 57, Vogel, 28.

⁷⁴ Lucy Smith, 57.

⁷⁵ Lucy Smith, 57.

⁷⁶ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 50.

⁷⁷ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 50.

⁷⁸ Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 4-5.

warned of the dangers of “an unconverted ministry” and encouraged parishioners to distrust clerical authority.⁷⁹ Distrust for authority figures incited the flames of revivalism which swept the nation, making Christianity more and more a movement by and for the people. By the time Joseph Jr. began receiving visions, his father “expressed no skepticism,” having himself distrusted conventional orthodoxy in favor of his own conscience and visions.⁸⁰ When Joseph Sr. was baptized into the Mormon Church, his son was so relieved that his father had finally found a spiritual home that he exclaimed, “Oh! My God I have lived to see my father baptized into the true church of Jesus Christ!”⁸¹

Joseph Jr.’s father in law, Isaac Hale, was not as easily convinced of the merits of Mormonism. He denied his daughter’s hand in marriage to Smith twice, believing Smith to be an “impostor and a knave.”⁸² Emma Hale, wrote that her father was “bitterly opposed” to Smith.⁸³ Yet Mr. Hale’s aversion toward Smith was not passed down to Emma, who married Smith anyway, secretly eloping with him in January of 1827.⁸⁴ Although Emma’s decision to adopt her husband’s new revelation is not documented in any detail, she appeared to have easily transitioned from the Methodist tradition in which

⁷⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 59-60.

⁸⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 35.

⁸¹ Joseph Knight Sr., “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” ed., by Dean C. Jessee. *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976), 37, in Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 110.

⁸² Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1; Peck, *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck*, 68.

⁸³ Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 49, quoted in Newell and Tippetts, *Mormon Enigma*, 1.

⁸⁴ Newell and Tippetts, 1.

she was raised to Mormonism. Nothing is written of Emma's ever questioning Smith or wavering in her appropriation of his new religion. In less than a year after they were married she served as scribe for her husband as he began translating the Book of Mormon, with her situated on one side of a curtain and him on the other.⁸⁵ Unlike Smith, Emma had been entrenched in conventional Protestantism before her conversion to Mormonism. She and her family were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and her uncle, Nathaniel Lewis, was a popular Methodist lay preacher.⁸⁶ Although Emma never explicitly criticized the church of her childhood, the fact that she shirked the approval of her father and her uncle reveals how easily she could discard traditional Christian orthodoxy.

Other Mormon Converts

Other early converts to Mormonism included Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, who also served as scribes while Smith translated from the gold plates. Martin Harris was "a farmer of respectability," who had given Joseph and Emma fifty dollars to help them move from Palmyra to Harmony, Pennsylvania.⁸⁷ Although Harris was initially suspicious of the plates, he prayed to God for answers regarding them and was reportedly shown by God that they were authentic.⁸⁸ Subsequently in 1828, Harris joined the couple in Harmony and became Smith's secretary in 1828.⁸⁹ Like Smith, Harris had lingered on

⁸⁵ Ahlstrom, 502.

⁸⁶ Newell and Tippitts, 2.

⁸⁷ Smith, *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story*, 13.

⁸⁸ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 61.

⁸⁹ Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 5.

the edges of organized religion before his conversion to Mormonism. Harris claimed he had had a vision in 1818 in which “the Spirit” told him “to join none of the churches for none had Authority from the Lord.”⁹⁰ In addition Harris wrote that the Spirit warned that he might as well “plunge myself into the water as to let any of the Sects baptize me.”⁹¹ Oliver Cowdery was a young school teacher who also became intrigued by Smith’s mission while he was visiting his parents in Palmyra.⁹² In 1829 he became Smith’s new scribe. After he helped Smith translate the account of the remnant of “the seed of Jacob” in America, Harris confessed, “It was easily to be seen, that amid the great strife and noise concerning religion, none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel.”⁹³ Shortly afterward, Smith and Cowdery were given religious authority when Peter, James, and John conferred on them the “Priesthood of Melchizedek.”⁹⁴ The inception of this elevated post fulfilled a deep yearning for ultimate religious authority in the hearts of Joseph Smith’s earliest converts.

Mormonism especially appealed to those sympathetic to the Restoration Movement and other independent Christians. Like Alexander Campbell, Joseph Smith renounced all existing churches and creeds of his day as corrupt.⁹⁵ Smith and Campbell both believed that “true” Christianity, despite the achievement of religious freedom, had

⁹⁰ Testimony of Martin Harris, 4 September 1870, LDS church archives, quoted in Vogel, 40.

⁹¹ Testimony of Martin Harris, 4 September 1870, quoted in Vogel, 40.

⁹² Hansen, 6.

⁹³ *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, 14-15, quoted in Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 74.

⁹⁴ Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, 35.

⁹⁵ Smith, *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story*, 4.

been lost, and that God would reinstitute the one, true Church in the United States.⁹⁶

Although his quest led him beyond the Bible, Smith, like Campbell, sought a solution to this corruption in a restoration of the Gospel “as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants.”⁹⁷ Their overarching goals were the same: they sought to transcend the complexities and confusion of sectarianism and unify the faith in simplicity through divine mandate. The Mormons, when they first formed, even referred to themselves as the Church of Jesus Christ, and in his vision of the resurrected Christ in 1829, the Lord told Smith he would establish his church “like unto the church which was taught by my disciples in the days of old.”⁹⁸ Mormons, however, understood returning to the ancient order in a manner which extended beyond the implications ever imagined or tolerated by the Restorationists through a retrieval of a new Bible, a reinstatement of prophets, priests, and miracles, and doctrines and practices explicitly contrary to traditional orthodoxy.⁹⁹ Moreover, Campbell accused Smith of being a false prophet of the true gospel.¹⁰⁰

While Campbell himself never considered Mormonism as a viable solution to the crisis of sectarianism, many of his followers did. When Mormon missionaries arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, in October, 1830, where Sidney Rigdon led a congregation of Restorationists, they discovered a “prepared people.”¹⁰¹ Rigdon, already convinced of a

⁹⁶ Butler, Wacker, Balmer, 224.

⁹⁷ Smith, 8.

⁹⁸ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 111; *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ* (Zion [Independence, MO]: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 4:5, quoted in Vogel, xi.

⁹⁹ George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 92.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Campbell, “Mormonites,” *The Millennial Harbinger* 2, n. 2 (1831): 91.

¹⁰¹ Vogel, 37.

revolutionary recovery of the ancient truth, enthusiastically believed the Mormon missionaries who claimed to have discovered an entirely new ancient testament.¹⁰² Soon after their arrival, the Mormons baptized an eager Rigdon and his entire congregation of independent Christians.¹⁰³ Smith believed that the event was the fulfillment of divine prophecy, and he made a momentous decision to move the Mormon Church to Kirtland.¹⁰⁴ When Campbell received news of his former companion's conversion, he wrote, "It was with mingled emotions of regret and surprise that we have learned that Sidney Rigdon has renounced the ancient gospel . . . and that he has fallen into the snare of the Devil in joining the Mormonites."¹⁰⁵ Rigdon's predisposition toward Restorationism compelled him to be a powerful influence for the Mormon Church, with Smith ordaining him a prophet in the "United Order of Enoch."¹⁰⁶

Parley Pratt was another former Campbellite who joined the ranks with Smith.¹⁰⁷ Pratt had accepted that the Restorationists preached the true gospel in form, but he struggled with the apparent lack of spiritual authority.¹⁰⁸ "Still one great chain was wanting," wrote Pratt, "and that was the authority to minister in holy things—the apostleship, the power which should accompany the form."¹⁰⁹ The Mormons' claim to

¹⁰² Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, 10.

¹⁰³ Ahlstrom, 504.

¹⁰⁴ Ahlstrom, 504.

¹⁰⁵ Campbell, "Sidney Rigdon," *The Millennial Harbinger* 2, n. 2 (1831): 100.

¹⁰⁶ Ahlstrom, 504.

¹⁰⁷ Ostling, *Mormon America*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Vogel, 39.

¹⁰⁹ Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt, Jr. (Salt Lake City: Desert Book, 1976), 26, quoted in Vogel, 39.

direct revelation from the Lord was thus highly appealing to Pratt and was the tipping point in his decision to convert. Another Mormon convert who was a former Restorationist, John Murdoc, echoed Pratt's sentiments. "They have lost all authority," he lamented of the existing dissonant churches of his day.¹¹⁰ Lydia Partridge, who converted with Rigdon's congregation, likewise complained that the true gospel was taught by "none of the sects of the day."¹¹¹ As evidenced in these testimonies, converts to Mormonism, like converts to Restorationism and Catholicism, all expressed anguish over sectarianism and a desire for authority and unification.

Mormonism did not merely draw converts from Restorationist churches, but also from other Protestant churches. Campbell wrote that "several hundred persons from different denominations believed it."¹¹² Mormonism was particularly attractive to Methodists. Both Smith's wife and mother were former Methodists before their conversions to Mormonism, as was his famed successor, Brigham Young. Campbell blamed Methodist susceptibility to Mormonism on their "vociferous ejaculations, and notions about new visions and revelations of the Spirit."¹¹³ A number of Presbyterians were also drawn to Mormonism. In 1832 William Huntington withdrew his membership from the Presbyterian Church and became a Mormon, claiming that the Presbyterians "had Godliness but denied the power thereof."¹¹⁴ James Strang was a Baptist who grew

¹¹⁰ Vogel, 38.

¹¹¹ Edward Partridge Papers, 26 May 1839, LDS church archives, quoted in Vogel, 38.

¹¹² Campbell, "Mormonites," 91.

¹¹³ Campbell, "Sidney Rigdon," 101.

¹¹⁴ "Diaries of William Huntington," 1:2, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, in Vogel, 40.

up in the burned-over district of New York before he converted to Mormonism.¹¹⁵ Strang recalled that in 1843 he became “curious about the new religious movement, [and] traveled to Nauvoo to meet Smith.”¹¹⁶ The next year he was baptized by Smith and even claimed to have seen a vision of his own.¹¹⁷ After Smith’s death in 1844, Strang declared himself the new prophet and president of the Church. Although the Mormons tried Strang for heresy, he gathered a significant following who believed him to be the true successor. In 1850 he reportedly discovered brass plates inscribed with pastoral letters and set himself up as “King of Zion” and king of the earth.¹¹⁸ There still exists today a sect of “Strangites” who believe that James Strang was the true successor of Smith.¹¹⁹ Mormonism proved to be a compelling force in drawing Protestants into its ranks.

Many nineteenth century Americans, however, were threatened and repelled by Mormonism. Like Catholics, Mormons were vilified by Protestant writers as being a threat to American values.¹²⁰ In fact Catholics and Mormons were similarly accused of practicing sinister rituals and of promoting theocracy through religious hierarchy and hegemony.¹²¹ The growing popularity of Mormonism and the resurgence of American Catholicism at this time reveal religious longings which were deeper than any hostile

¹¹⁵ Susan Easton Black, “James J. Strang,” in *Dictionary of Heresy Trials in American Christianity*, edited by George H. Shriver (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 393.

¹¹⁶ Black, “James J. Strang,” 394.

¹¹⁷ Black, 394.

¹¹⁸ Black, 395-9.

¹¹⁹ Black, 400.

¹²⁰ Matthew J. Grow, “The Whore of Babylon and the Abomination of Abominations: Nineteenth Century Catholic and Mormon Mutual Perceptions and Religious Identity,” *Church History* 73, no. 1 (March 2004): 140.

¹²¹ Grow, “The Whore of Babylon and the Abomination of Abominations,” 141.

accusation. This is one reason why men and women who were raised in traditional Christian churches readily accepted Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as the true embodiments of religious authority.¹²² Although Catholics and Mormons were combative toward each other, both of these traditions appealed to Americans who had wearied of the disarray of the Protestant dominion. In the midst of spiritual mobility and individualism, Mormonism and Catholicism offered religious unity, authority, and heritage. The similar appeal of these two traditions can be seen in the contemporaneous conversions of Orestes Brownson to Catholicism and his brother, Oran Brownson to Mormonism. Both brothers converted from mainline Protestantism to these radically different churches on the basis of religious authority. For Orestes, the Catholic Church was the “only church . . . that I must accept as authoritative.”¹²³ For Oran “proper authority” only rested “among the Mormons.”¹²⁴ Although the Brownson brothers sharply disagreed with each other over their respective solutions, they each felt so dismayed over the state of mainstream Christianity that they joined two of the most despised churches in America.¹²⁵

Mormon Answers to the Crisis of Sectarianism

As opposed to “heart religion,” often promoted by popular evangelical churches which focused on personal conversion, Mormonism supplied faith with tangibility. For Mormons the word “church” did not simply denote the invisible body of believers. The

¹²² Hansen, 27.

¹²³ Orestes Brownson, *The Convert* (1857), in Alvan S. Ryan, ed. *The Brownson Reader*, (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 289.

¹²⁴ Grow, 139.

¹²⁵ Grow, 140.

earliest Mormons demanded the preparation of a literal place for their Church.¹²⁶ Thus Kirtland, Nauvoo, and Salt Lake City have been intrinsically tied to the identity of Mormonism. Mormons also embraced rituals and traditions such as special rites for baptism, ordination, and councils. This driving impulse in Mormon conversions, toward a literal church and ritualism, was also a source of conversion among Catholics who felt freed from religious confusion and isolation through church structure and tradition. Another answer provided by the Mormons to the crisis of sectarianism was religious unification. Smith's understanding of the church translated into the building of religious communism wherein church members adhered to strict social obligations to their church, each other, and their community. The religious hegemony assumed by Mormons, who gathered in one church as opposed to scattering into various denominations, resembled the closely knit Puritan communities and thus reveal a yearning to return to a time before widespread religious democratization.¹²⁷ Again, like Catholic converts, who felt compelled by the notion of a unified church, Mormons embraced a United Order.¹²⁸

Heterodoxy

Alexander Campbell blamed the popularity of Mormonism on the Book of Mormon's assessment of religious controversies. "This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi . . . every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decides all the great controversies," wrote

¹²⁶ Davies, 30.

¹²⁷ Cross, 145.

¹²⁸ The United Order of Enoch was the name for Smith's economic plan of church stewardship. See Joseph Smith, *Doctrines & Covenants* 36 in *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, vol. 1 edited by Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 345.

Campbell.¹²⁹ As evidenced by the Book of Mormon, there was wide space for religious innovation in dealing with these controversial topics.¹³⁰ Although Mormons referred to themselves as Christians, they embraced a number of eccentric beliefs. In 1836 Smith received a special revelation which led to the policy of baptism for the dead.¹³¹ Mormons underwent baptisms on behalf of their deceased loved ones so that the dead might inherit heaven. After this, Smith received another revelation in which he learned that Jesus Christ became God only gradually. Mormons thus came to believe that in the same way in which Christ received a divine nature, through his obedience to the Father, they too could achieve equal status with the godhead.¹³² Not only did the Mormons reject the eternal deity of Jesus, but they also abandoned the belief that God created the world after Smith received revelations on the eternality of matter.¹³³ The most controversial aspect of Mormon innovation was Smith's decree and practice of plural marriage. Smith believed in the transitory nature of marriage, but he endorsed the "eternal seal" through which one might inherit greater heavenly glory.¹³⁴ After he developed this doctrine in 1841, Smith himself was sealed polygamously to seventeen women before his death in 1844.¹³⁵ For those who rejected these ideas, Smith called down a curse, saying, "Woe be

¹²⁹ Campbell, "The Mormonites," 93.

¹³⁰ Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 103.

¹³¹ Holifield, 337.

¹³² Holifield, 338.

¹³³ Bloom, 98.

¹³⁴ Hyde, 88; Holifield, 337.

¹³⁵ Number gathered from "A Joseph Smith Chronology," in *An American Prophet's Records*, Faulring, ed.

unto him that shall say, We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.”¹³⁶

Religious Persecution and the Murder of Joseph Smith

These new beliefs and practices met with fierce hostility from many contemporaries who wished to protect their churches and their country from such dissonant views. Scathing articles were published daily which derided the Mormons, and books, which claimed to reveal the treachery of the faith, became bestsellers.¹³⁷ Politically speaking, Mormons were a national menace for their practice of “plural wives” and their attempt to create a theocracy.¹³⁸ Smith and his followers were attacked by angry mobs on multiple occasions, with Smith being tarred and feathered in one instance and a group of Mormons massacred in another.¹³⁹ Notoriety worked in favor for the Mormons, however, as it gained them an attentive audience. “When I look into the Eastern papers and see how popular I am, I am afraid I shall be President,” wrote Smith.¹⁴⁰ That year, in January of 1844, Smith announced his candidacy for President of the United States. By this time Nauvoo was the fastest growing city in the United States, with Smith as Mayor. The following May a group of Mormon dissenters opened a press against Mormonism. The first and only issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor* outlined a plan of

¹³⁶ The Book of Mormon, Nephi 28:29-30.

¹³⁷ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127.

¹³⁸ Moore, *Selling God*, 127.

¹³⁹ See “Chronology” in Faulring.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Smith, March 7, 1844, in Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record*, 457.

opposition to Smith's bid for the presidency along with other articles which combated various Mormon doctrines. In a fatal move Smith quickly ordered the *Expositor* destroyed. After the publishers of the press claimed that this was a violation of the freedom of the press, Smith was arrested.¹⁴¹ Before he made it to trial, a group of recently discharged prisoners returned to the Carthage jail and murdered Smith.¹⁴²

Conclusion

When confronted with his murder, a bereaved Lucy Smith mused that she heard her son whisper, "Mother, weep not for us, we have overcome the world by love; we carried to them the Gospel."¹⁴³ In Smith's time the gospel according to the Mormon Church was indeed a compelling answer to the crisis of sectarianism. In many ways the story of the birth of Mormonism both reflects and rejects what incited this crisis. On the one hand, religious freedom and the democratization of Christianity allowed the Mormon Church to be established and offered Smith, an uneducated farmer, greater authority than any licensed pastor. In addition, Mormonism was democratic in its appeal as Smith expected participation in the priesthood by all lay men of the church.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, Mormonism delineated itself sharply from popular Christian traditions. As opposed to popular Protestant denominations which heralded the Bible and one's conscience as the only guides, Mormonism offered the Book of Mormon, a contemporary prophet, and continual revelation as companions in the faith. While the life of Joseph

¹⁴¹ Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 538-550.

¹⁴² Lucy Smith, 279.

¹⁴³ Lucy Smith, 279.

¹⁴⁴ Cross, 145.

Smith was truly enigmatic, his convictions and aspirations were shaped by his time. The crisis of sectarianism molded Smith into a religious seeker. Like Restorationist and Catholic converts of the antebellum era, Smith despaired over the proliferation of choosing a church from so many options and longed to be part of a united religious community. The intensity of Smith's religious anguish was matched by profound and extreme answers in the Mormon faith.

CHAPTER FIVE

Epilogue

The early republic and antebellum eras are often portrayed as times of religious flourishing and harmony, when the state got along with the church, when revivalism gave a voice to the voiceless, and when churches grew faster than the population. One college textbook of American history defines religion in the 1830s as a time when “converts broke with the formalism of elite religion to rededicate themselves to a higher morality that seemed to lead to a more democratic hereafter.”¹ This textbook focuses on the ways in which the Second Great Awakening fueled social activism and social reform.² Although this narrative is not false, it is not complete, and it promotes an idealistic view of the past. In addition, a number of historians emphasize popular Protestantism’s impact on women’s rights, offering numerous examples of women assuming leadership in the churches before being granted similar freedoms elsewhere. While these aspects of American religious history are significant in their own right, one must also examine the unintended effects of freedom and egalitarianism, such as disunity and competition. Catholic convert, Orestes Brownson, charged that the democratization of Christianity prohibited religious freedom and even promoted a new form of despotism, what he described as “despotism of the people.”³ As evidenced by the proliferation of Christian

¹ James J. Lorence, ed., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People (to 1877)*, vol. 1 of *Enduring Voices* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 202.

² Lorence, *The Enduring Vision*, 202-208.

³ Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 123.

denominations and the pervasive outcry against sectarianism, the early days of religious freedom in America were not as liberating as one might suppose.

Recent historians of American religious history have paid more attention to the disorder, extremism, and fractionalization of the churches in this time period. In his book *The Democratization of Christianity*, Nathan O. Hatch argues that by erasing “the difference between leaders and followers, Americans opened the door to religious demagogues . . . [who] could exercise tyranny unimagined by elites in the more controlled environment of the colonial era.”⁴ *Awash in a Sea of Faith* is a fitting title for Jon Butler’s book on American religious history, in which he illustrates the pandemonium caused by the “astonishing varieties of religion created in America and duplicated nowhere else.”⁵ Mark Noll takes the position in his book *America’s God* that theistic common sense moral reasoning, anti-authoritarianism, and the Bible-only principle instigated the tensions which led to the American Civil War.⁶ Harold Bloom is perhaps most caustic in his evaluation, contending that religion of the 1830s, as promoted by the ideals of freedom and the philosophies of such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Joseph Smith, was “a faith of and in the American self.” It is this type of faith, he argues, which has defined the American religion.⁷ These assessments shed light on the

⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16.

⁵ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 256.

⁶ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 371, 426.

⁷ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Chu Hartley Publishers, 1992), 40.

complexity of American religious history in the early nineteenth century and remind readers that the evangelization of the United States was not without consequence.⁸

What most historians have not elaborated on is how the rise of Restorationism, Catholicism, and Mormonism in the early nineteenth century represents a remarkable inversion of American democratic values, such as freedom and independence, as they were understood at the time. The Restoration Movement is often seen as the most American of the Christian denominations for its emphasis on the Bible only and its extreme appropriation of the priesthood of the believer.⁹ Yet Restorationism was born out of defiance toward religious pluralism. One of their most defining hallmarks was the doctrine of baptism for the remission of sins, which sharply contrasted with the Arminian American elevation of personal choice. Today the Mormon Church is associated with fervent American patriotism, and historians often group the founding of Mormonism with that of Restorationism for their shared belief in the primacy of the American continent in the advancement of the Christian Kingdom.¹⁰ During the time of their early growth, however, Mormons were charged with being unrepblican in their obedience to a leader of whom one critic wrote, “out-popes the Roman”¹¹ and for establishing a theocracy in the center of a republic. The Catholic Church is not typically listed among the most American of traditions, but little attention has been given to the significance of Catholic

⁸ Noll, *America's God*, 444.

⁹ Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity*, 220. Here Hatch describes Restorationism as “the most American of denominations.”

¹⁰ Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 213-216.

¹¹ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1891), 113.

conversions at a time when Catholicism was perceived as the arch-nemesis of democracy and true religion. American conversions to these three seemingly subversive religious traditions thus reveal undercurrents of unfulfilled yearnings for authority, tradition, and community during the early nineteenth century.

When comparing basic beliefs and practices, Restorationism, Catholicism, and Mormonism are markedly distinct from one another. Yet converts to these three traditions in the first half of the nineteenth century shared a number of motivations. These included the desire for Christian unity, the belief that the “true church” was a unified Church, the conviction that popular Protestant churches were all fatally flawed, and the longing to reconnect with Christian history. The ultimate motivation for these movements’ converts was prompted by a sense of crisis over the state of Christianity in America. In the *Christian System*, Alexander Campbell wrote that the “all absorbing question” of Christendom was “How may schism cease and all Christians unite, harmonize, and co-operate in one great community, as at the beginning?”¹² Orestes Brownson contended that “the Church question” was the “great and paramount question of the day,” which would answer how to “return to the unity and catholicity of the Church.”¹³ Joseph Smith was consumed by a similar question, as he implored of God before receiving his first vision, “Who of all these parties is right, or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?”¹⁴ The

¹² Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation*, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1866), 12.

¹³ Orestes A. Brownson, “Nature and Office of the Church,” *Brownson Quarterly Review* 1, no. 2 (April 1844): 245, 247.

¹⁴ Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story* (Desert City: Salt Lake News Press, 1920), 2.

primacy of these questions demonstrates the instability and confusion over religion in America at the time. The answers that each of these converts found in their respective churches reveal how religious security could be more liberating than religious freedom.

After visiting the United States for three years, Frances Trollope returned to England sadly disillusioned. In what would become her famous travel book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Trollope wrote,

My residence in the country has shown me that a religious tyranny may be exerted very effectually without the aid of the government, in a way much more oppressive than the paying of tithe, and without obtaining any of the salutary decorum, which I presume no one will deny is the result of an established mode of worship.¹⁵

Trollope was astonished by the “endless variety of religious factions,” and that “each of which assumes a church government of its own.”¹⁶ Although she ventured from the Old World to the New, and from what most described as religious tyranny to religious freedom, she did not feel liberated, nor inspired to “rededicate [herself] to a higher morality.” Rather, Trollope soberly concluded,

It is impossible, in witnessing all these unseemly vagaries, not to recognize the advantages of an established church as a sort of head-quarters for quiet unpretending Christians, who are contented to serve faithfully, without insisting upon having each a little separate banner, embroidered with a devise of his own imagining.¹⁷

That freedom is not free is a common truism. In American religious history, this truism is evidenced in the crisis of sectarianism in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Restorationist, Catholic, and Mormon converts may not have wished to return to an

¹⁵ Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. Richard Mullen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 89.

¹⁶ Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 89-90.

¹⁷ Trollope, 90.

established church, they did all desire to return to a time before religious disestablishment and the democratization of Christianity.

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