# Religion and Reform in Antebellum America

### Religious Revival

American religious history goes a little like this:

1. People are religious and excited about it.
2. People become bored and disillusioned with religion.
3. A huge revival stirs the spirit in everyone and starts pumping that excitement again.
4. Cycle repeat.

Remember the Great Awakening? That had excited people for quite some time, but religion had again reached a lull by the end of the century. Guys like **Charles Finney**were kind of like new George Whitfields and Jonathan Edwardses, preaching exciting, emotional sermons full of "fire and brimstone" talk. They had preach in massive tents and literally convert thousandsat a time. One part of New York became known as the "burned over district," because so many people had swarmed to hear Finney talk about the ravaging, burning fires of Hell.

So, why does all this matter? Because historians point to the **Second Great Awakening**as the motivation behind all the social reform movements that started springing up. Plus, women were some of the most involved Americans in the revival, and therefore they were often reform leaders, too.

Many who had experienced the revival were convinced of **perfectionism**—that human beings had within them the power to be, literally, perfect.God's kingdom could actually be created on earth,if enough people dedicated themselves to perfecting society.

### Reform Movements

All sorts of reform groups sprang up. The **American Temperance Society**intended to stop Americans drinking entirely—and forever. Many Americans, especially women, were convinced that it was alcohol that made all the social problems of domestic violence, unemployment, and crime—especially among immigrants. They convinced enough people that **Neal Dow**passed the **Maine Law**in 1851, prohibiting the production and creation of alcohol in that state. More states would follow.

People became more interested in health, too. **Dorothea Dix**led a movement to improve insane asylums, which at that time were almost criminal institutions. Some mentally ill patients were strung up and nailed to walls. She worked hard to make asylums places of gentler care. What followed from that was reform of the prison system, which had also been "cruel and unusual."

**Horace Mann**thought that an even better way to cure social ills was to nip them in the bud: by educating America's youth to be the best adults they could be. Mann pioneered a new public education system in America, and laws requiring compulsory school attendance were passed. Soon enough, every state had public schools, and anyone could go. So, if you need to wake up around 6 a.m. to sit in classes 'til 3 or 4—thank Mr. Mann. (Gives a whole new spin to the whole "Fight the Man" slogan, doesn't it?)

Ever eat graham crackers or Kellogg's cornflakes? Those were also invented in this time—by **Sylvester Graham**and **John Harvey Kellogg**. They thought that eating bland, healthy foods would make people healthier. Actually, they argued that it would decrease the sex drive. Many people thought too much sex was dangerous for the health, and tried to curb it. You'll never eat a s'more the same way again now, will you?

Of course, abolitionist groups sprang up. The Second Great Awakening had convinced many Americans that slavery was a horrible evil that needed to be cleansed from the earth. **William Lloyd Garrison**kick-started the movement in 1831, with his publication of the anti-slavery newspaper, **The Liberator.**Plus, he founded the**American Anti-slavery Society**in 1833.

Garrison was radical about slavery. So radical, in fact, that he wanted slaves to be freed andblack people to be on a totally equal level with whites. This freaked out a lot of other abolitionists, who refused to go that far. They split off into other groups with other names. Others joined the **American Colonization Society,**which argued that since blacks would never be accepted in America, they had to be shipped back to Africa. These people planned—and actually created—the colony of **Liberia**to send freed slaves.

These groups were fueled by a strong, new element: freed slaves themselves. **Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman,**and **Sojourner Truth**were some of a growing group of freed or escaped slaves who traveled North to join the movement and speak out about their experiences. They spoke out to huge gatherings, published autobiographies, and spread newspapers like Douglass's **North Star**.

### Utopian Societies

There were some other Americans who looked around them at all they found nasty, and said "Psh, reform isn't going to help—we need to recreate society entirely." These people had Big Plans for utopian communities—"utopia" meaning "perfect society."

Many utopian societies dabbled in a kind of socialism: having communities in which everyone shared in the work and lived together. **Brook Farm**was one example, and it was famous for bringing in several famous writers. Nathanial Hawthorne (author of the Scarlett Letter,high-school's favorite book) and Louisa May Alcott (Little Women)'s dad were two who went. The **Oneida Commune**was so radical that it took this idea of sharing to a whole new level. Its people even shared lovers. Didn't like your wife anymore? Pass her along, and trade her for your friend's. The **Shaker Community**went the other way, prohibiting sex altogether. These communities ultimately died out.

Another became hugely successful, however: the **Mormons,**led by **Joseph Smith**and the **Brigham Young,**established a whole new branch of Christianity, based on a new, holy text that they claimed to have found. Many Americans hated the Mormons, especially as they practiced polygamy (having multiple wives) and so they moved West into Utah to create their own communities.

### American Cultures

For a while, Europeans made fun of America because they didn't seem to have their own culture. "Great American writers" didn't yet exist. Poor America—they were busy creating a whole new country, how could they have the time to birth literary and artistic geniuses?

By the antebellum period, as the nation grew in population, stability, and wealth, a new kind of American culture did arise. **Transcendentalists**were writers like **Ralph Waldo Emerson**and **Henry David Thoreau**(and women, like **Margaret Fuller.**) who started a whole back-to-nature movement. They felt stifled and dirtied by the pressing cities, and argued that people could better commune with themselves, God, and all of nature if they went back to the wilderness.

Funny side-note irony: their idea of the "wilderness" was their New England backyards. Emerson liked wandering around the nearby woods, and Thoreau's "Walden Pond" was right by some train tracks, and he could walk to town for supplies. However, it was their message that was important.

Other quintessentially "American" writers were **Washington Irving,**with his creepy stories set in New England, and **James Fenimore Cooper,**who wrote the first real "Westerns" (and popularized the "**noble savage"**character of the "good Indian"). Plus, the **Hudson River School**created a whole new genre of "American" painting, depicting the vast, gorgeous expanses of American landscape.

See a trend? What's truly "American" is space,nature, exploration, and wilderness. No wonder—western expansion was something purely American and totally romantic and exciting to antebellum people.