

“GOD WILL PUT A HOOK INTO THAT MAN’S JAWS, SO THAT HE CANNOT PREACH”:

RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND THE AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISTS

By

Daniel C. Dillard
Florida State University

On 27 February 1858, at a revival meeting in the Park Street Church located in Boston, Charles Grandison Finney and his congregants offered up prayers for Theodore Parker’s death or, barring this, his conversion, confusion, or downfall. This was neither the first nor the last instance of anti-Transcendentalist intolerance. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious and non-religious observers alike attacked American Transcendentalism from a number of sides and for a number of reasons. What was it about Parker and his fellow Transcendentalists that so irked the American public?

On the subject of religious intolerance in American history, one can turn somewhat easily to case studies of Church-State relations, anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism, or heightened anti-Muslim activity since the events of September 11, 2001. Scholarship on intolerance of religious outliers – of emerging, innovative, or “alternative” movements – is much more rare. Yet even in these rare instances historians tend to focus on groups with clearly identifiable boundaries of space, membership, or creed. That is to say, intolerance of disunited or diffused religious trends, for example, seekers or those who identify as “spiritual but not religious,” has gone largely undocumented. Intolerance of the American Transcendentalists, a fragmented yet fundamentally religious group, serves as both a precursor and representative case in point of these concealed but nonetheless destructive tendencies in American history.

This essay examines the dissemination of religious intolerance against American Transcendentalism in mid-nineteenth-century print culture as well as in the later

historiographical record. Common among the various sources are accusations of strangeness and abnormality, extending from nonsense through deviance to unorthodoxy and even heresy. The enduring themes of discrimination in periodicals, essays, sermons, and correspondence published in the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, in Protestant Christian as well as secular print communities, include attempts to condemn, disregard, or make light of Transcendentalism. In response to this intolerance, increasing self-deprecation, feelings of inefficacy, and eventual disillusion arose among many Transcendentalists themselves, substantiation that intolerance confined to discourse had very real effects.

Writing about religious intolerance has its own pitfalls. The term intolerance is not only often ill defined, it is one loaded with normative value assumptions as well. “It matters what we call things,” Ann Taves notes. “As scholars, we are involved in constituting the ‘objects’ we study whether we are insiders or outsiders.”¹ For the purposes of this study, intolerance is the unwillingness to tolerate difference in beliefs, opinions, or practices, especially religious ones. In addition, although the view of religious tolerance as something positive and desirable is a historically conditioned and socially constructed ideal, the events, utterances, and writings described and explained here are historical facts and deserve our attention.² For the sake of comparison, this study includes theoretical analyses of religious intolerance in American history conceived more broadly.³ More specifically, this essay aims to answer the following questions: what are the roles of rhetoric and language in shaping religious intolerance? How is intolerance of marginal religious groups different from that of “traditional” religious groups? How might drawing boundaries constitute real acts of

¹ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 352.

² This is much like the ideal of religious pluralism historicized by William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

³ By comparison, I refer to Jonathan Z. Smith’s idea that “comparison provides the means by which we ‘re-vision’ phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems,” see *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52.

violence?⁴ What is the division between intolerance and mere theological polemics? How does secularizing or stereotyping religious outliers comprise a distinctive form of cultural bias? Lastly, why, in a country that has prided itself on pluralism and tolerance, have so many Americans been quick to deny the legitimacy of religious status to certain groups?

Religious Intolerance in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture

Looking back over the various print culture outlets of nineteenth-century America, one finds no shortage of debate over the motley crew of figures and ideas composing American Transcendentalism. However, Transcendentalists themselves were responsible for a large part of the sympathetic depictions (especially in Transcendentalist periodicals like *The Dial* and *The Harbinger* as well as in later memoirs and personal histories composed after the fact, such as Parker's 1859 *Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister* and Emerson's 1883 *Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England*).⁵ Public sentiment was much more ambivalent and often intolerant. An overwhelming curiosity in and debate over the Transcendentalists permeated newspapers, journals, magazines, published sermons, personal correspondence, and popular fiction. A central theme in much of the early conversations was an attempt to define and position Transcendentalism, a problem with which even modern scholars still struggle.

For just one early example, on 22 February 1839, the *Boston Recorder* published a letter to the editor – signed “Many Enquirers” – that began, “Mr. Editor,--Will you or some of your correspondents, give to the public a popular and easy answer to the question, What is *transcendentalism*.... few of us can pronounce the word, and fewer still can tell what it

⁴ This most convincing argument of this idea is by Regina M. Schwartz in *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁵ For studies of Transcendentalist periodicals, see Clarence L. F. Gohdes, *The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1931) or shorter essays in Joel Myerson, ed., *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1984). Emerson probably composed his recollections in 1867 but, due in large part to his worsening aphasia, it was not until 1880 that he finally compiled them with the help of friends and first delivered them as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum.

amounts to.” The writer went on to say that his circle was divided on whether or not Transcendentalism was “that form of atheism called pantheism.” The editors, after presenting an open call for efforts to solve this problem, wrote that they themselves declined the challenge for the reason that they “like so much better to ‘live and move and have our being’ on *terra firma*, than among the clouds or even above them.” In the ensuing two months, continuing until 19 April 1839, the *Boston Recorder* published parts of a series called “Transcendentalism Translated” once a week and, judging by the nature and swell of letters on the subject, these articles served to further the inquisitiveness and ambivalence of the general public in and around Boston.⁶ Similar conversations took place in such Protestant Christian publications as the *Christian Register*, *New York Evangelist*, *Biblical Repository*, *Christian Examiner*, *Christian World*, and *Christian Secretary*, amid other, more secular, ones. In addition to matters of simple definition, print outlets were attempting to locate or conceptualize the Transcendentalist within a familiar religious framework.

Perhaps the most famous attack on the Transcendentalists came from Andrews Norton, a champion of old school Unitarianism and professor at the Harvard Divinity School where, in fact, many of the Transcendentalists had studied under him. In his “A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity,” which he delivered at the request of the alumni of the Divinity School in July 1839, Norton argued that Transcendentalist opinions “are at war with a belief in Christianity.” As Perry Miller observed, these charges, made by a liberal New Englander, should not be taken lightly. “If he shouted ‘infidelity’ at them, and so invoked a slogan that carried the connotations of suppression, the hangman, and mob violence—it was because in his eyes ... the Transcendentalists were guilty of exactly that enormity.... [Infidelity] meant a falling out of line both in theology and sociology. It meant that the culprit was a threat both to the church and to the state.”⁷ However, this particular

⁶ *Boston Recorder*, 22 Feb 1839-19 April 1839, 21, 37, 41, 45, 49, 53, 57, 61, in *Proquest* [database online], America Periodical Series Online; accessed October 2008.

⁷ Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 6-7.

intolerance was a markedly elitist expression of hatred, one contained largely within print and rhetoric. What, then, kept this expression from being a merely theological contest?

Though doctrinal disputation certainly existed in this encounter between Unitarians and Transcendentalists, intolerance arose precisely where the controversy shifted from an internal, intra-group disagreement to an external, inter-relational conflict. In the former dynamic, conservatives acted with the hope that their actions would bring momentary dissenters back to orthodoxy. In the latter equation, though, the conservatives resigned themselves to condemning the irredeemable. Unitarians ultimately came to see Transcendentalism as a lost cause that set in motion concerted attempts of vilification and even demonization. The old vanguard plainly saw themselves “at war” with the Transcendentalists and did not feel the two could inhabit the same space. Rather than arguing for the benefits of religious pluralism and healthy debate, conservative Unitarians wished that the Transcendentalists simply did not exist. This desire for an opponent’s eradication, a key component of religious intolerance, is traceable to at least as early as Deuteronomy 25: 19: “Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies ... you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under Heaven.”⁸ Still, because the Transcendentalists emerged out of Unitarianism it is likely that a shared rhetoric prevented outright acts of violence. Furthermore, the fact that these particular attacks came from Unitarians themselves points to another clue that helps explain the nature of much religious intolerance: the construction of identity and the erection of boundaries.

Long beleaguered by accusations of godless liberalism from more Calvinist Congregationalists, conservative Unitarians were desperate to consolidate their religious identity. Time and again in history, groups have often undertaken this process through negative definition – namely, cognitive constructions of what one is not. In at least one sense, then, historians can posit religion as a collective production of self-understanding and

⁸ The author would like to thank John Corrigan for this source.

differentiation and thus a system that frequently employs intolerance to sustain clarity and meaning. Yet, for Unitarians, defining themselves in opposition to, say, Muslims, would not be productive. The lines drawn in this vague distinction would be too inclusive to carry much weight. As a result, Unitarians narrowed their attention to what they perceived to be “a betrayal of the citadel from within” and “a rebellion against the fathers.”⁹ This conclusion is borne out by Freud’s idea of “the narcissism of minor differences” and Jonathan Z. Smith’s premise concerning “perceptions of alterity.”¹⁰ These theories suggest that a process of Unitarian individuation could occur by exaggerating intentionally the “otherness” of the Transcendentalists – that is, by forging a schematic “us” versus “them” mentality.

Norton’s attack was the most famous expression of Unitarian intolerance, but by no means the only one. Conservative Unitarians such as Francis Bowen, Alden Bradford, C.C. Felton, William Silsbee, George Burnap, and Samuel K. Lothrop, to name just a few, spilled plenty of ink during the 1830s and 40s in their rebuttals. Nor did Unitarians restrict their intolerance of the Transcendentalists to publicized attacks. In addition to verbal and printed statements, they also propagated their intolerance through blackballing, prohibitions, and general exclusion. Unitarian publications such as the *Register*, the *Miscellany*, and the *Examiner*, for instance, made it clear that Theodore Parker’s “submissions were no longer welcome”; moreover, Harvard College ceased extending invitations to Parker to participate in examining committees and, perhaps most significantly, placed limits on his preaching

⁹ Miller, *The Transcendentalists*, 11.

¹⁰ Essentially, “the enemy should never be like us. Even minor differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are therefore exaggerated as unbridgeable chasms ... which evoke stronger hostility and hate than do wide disparities”; see Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 43. In J. Z. Smith’s words, “Rather than the remote ‘other’ being perceived as problematic and/or dangerous, it is the proximate ‘other,’ the near neighbor, who is most troublesome.... While difference or ‘otherness’ may be perceived as being either LIKE-US or NOT-LIKE-US, it becomes most problematic when it is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US or claims to BE-US. It is here that the real urgency of theories of the ‘other’ emerges, called forth not so much by a requirement to place differences, but rather by an effort to situate ourselves. This, then is not a matter of the ‘far’ but preeminently of the ‘near.’ The deepest intellectual issues are not based upon perceptions of alterity, but, rather, of similarity, at times, even, of identity,” see “Differential Equations: On Constructing the Other,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 245.

opportunities “by denying him pulpit exchanges.”¹¹ Thus opponents directed their intolerance at individuals as well as Transcendentalism as a whole. In addition, their actions signal more than mere theological difference. In these censures, then, were attempts to silence Transcendentalists and thereby render the group and their extant religious views all but nonexistent.

Intolerance against the Transcendentalists issued forth from evangelical Christian sources as well. For one minor but representative example, taken from the *New York Evangelist* on 19 September 1840, a writer lobbed an attack specifically at Ralph Waldo Emerson. After mentioning his “absurdities,” “infidelity,” “miserable subterfuges,” “crazed poetic inspiration,” and “sentimental namby-pambyism,” the writers asked, “What Christian can read without a shudder, the light and casual remarks, made concerning the Savior of mankind!” Furthermore, the writer added that whether or not Emerson is actually “deranged” mattered little since “multitudes . . . are ready to gather around him and receive the law of their belief from his mouth.” The author noted that Emerson’s message that we are emanations of the divine and should therefore follow our conscience was “no new doctrine—that it was taught as long ago as when man was in the garden of Eden: even the father of lies said to our first ancestors, eat the forbidden fruit, and ‘ye shall be as gods.’”¹²

The above excerpts are pregnant with serious implications. First, the author established a link between Emerson and the Edenic serpent/Satan, a line of attack that recurred throughout anti-Transcendentalist intolerance. For another illustration in the same vein, Parker frequently found hate mail waiting for him at the post office that accused him of alliance with Satan. One such letter began, “A True disciple of the D—I [Devil] & Tom Paine takes the liberty of sending you a line. . . . I am rejoiced to see you so vigilant & useful

¹¹ Dean Grodzins, “Theodore Parker and the 28th Congregational Society: The Reform Church and the Spirituality of Reformers in Boston, 1845-1859,” in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, eds. Charles Capper and Conrad E. Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), 78-79.

¹² *New York Evangelist*, 19 Sep 1840, 152, in *Proquest* [database online], America Periodical Series Online; accessed October 2008.

in the service of our Common Master. . . . Parker the magnificent once lived and was so zealous for the cause of truth as to remain in the service of a master who was such an imposture as to deceive and cheat the world for Eighteen Centuries and more. . . . Your Friend in Satan, a Layman.”¹³ This approach still occurs today in anti-cult movements. In *The Satanism Scare*, the editors write that accusations and rhetoric of Satanism are “forms of persuasion” that “attempt to shape perceptions” of religious groups to which one is already opposed.¹⁴ In addition, anti-Satanism constructions act as clear and undemanding referents for critics to employ without elaboration. Thus merely mentioning “Satan” evokes a stereotype and leads to an easy dismissal of the group on the receiving end of these attacks. As John Corrigan and Lynn Neal write in their forthcoming documentary history, these labels enable “observers to ‘know’ from the start that these groups . . . are ‘frauds’ . . . [and the stereotype] feeds religious intolerance.”¹⁵

A second feature in the above example of intolerance was the claim that Emerson, a charismatic though manipulative and ill-intentioned leader, was hoodwinking naïve and gullible persons. Again, this is a common aspect of intolerance that opponents aim at groups they deem to be sects, cults, and religious deviances. A number of writers in the last quarter-century have produced works with titles mentioning “destructive persuasion,” “spiritual abuse,” and confronting “the Mystical” mind that continue this specific form of religious intolerance.¹⁶ On the one hand, opponents depict members of these fringe movements as

¹³ “A Layman” to Theodore Parker, 21 August 1841, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass. Referenced in Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 300, 547 n. 16. Grodzins writes that “the letter evidently was written by a Unitarian, because the author facetiously expresses the fear that ‘that all accommodating sect would . . . manage to fasten upon the world for many long centuries to come the Religion of that illbegotten imposture,’ Christ,” 547-48, n. 16.

¹⁴ James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, *The Satanism Scare* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1991), 5.

¹⁵ John Corrigan and Lynn Neal, *Religious Intolerance in America: A Documentary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming), ch. 7, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ For a small but representative sample, see: Thomas W. Keiser and Jacqueline L. Keiser, *The Anatomy of Illusion: Religious Cults and Destructive Persuasion* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1987); David C. Lane, *Exposing Cults: When the Skeptical Mind Confronts the Mystical* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994); Michael D. Langone, *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

hapless, uneducated, and possibly disturbed. On the other hand, and similar to the later historiography, opponents often singled out figureheads such as Emerson and Parker to represent undesirable elements in Transcendentalism: Emerson for his nonsensical and comic components, Parker for his immoral and irreverent ones. Opponents even accused James Freeman Clarke, who “professed to disagree strongly with Parker’s understanding of the mission of Christ,” of luring “worshipers away from churches longer established (one Unitarian minister even referred to Clarke as ‘a thief and a robber’)”.¹⁷ Taking another cue from Corrigan and Neal, antagonists regularly attribute madness to principal members and “cultural opponents consistently attack ... leaders to unmask their supposedly evil intent and thereby discredit the group.”¹⁸

Ridicule and derision were a common response to Transcendentalists. Their existence perturbed opponents who wished the group was not so; yet the fact remains that much of this intolerance was overwhelmingly non-violent. Nevertheless, the non-violent characteristic of this intolerance makes it all the more relevant for, and aligns it even more closely with, modern-day intolerance of new religious movements and those who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Intolerance of new or alternative religions in America does not generally manifest in overt violence, with the obvious exceptions of the rare and extreme cases such as the incident with Branch Davidians at Waco. This does not mean, however, that anti-Transcendentalists always expressed their intolerance in non-violent terms. One case in point was an incident that occurred during the revivals of 1857-58, remembered by historians of evangelicalism as the "businessman's revival".¹⁹ The 27 February 1858 revival meeting at the Park Street Church where congregants offered prayers for Parker’s death, conversion, confusion, or downfall quickly became notorious. The press reported these

¹⁷ Grodzins, “Theodore Parker,” 81; Edward E. Hale (ed.), *James Freeman Clarke: Autobiography, Diary and Correspondence* (Boston, 1899), 145. Referenced in Grodzins, 88.

¹⁸ Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance*, ch. 7, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ The author would like to thank Dean Grodzins for his assistance in locating print sources for this incident. Additionally, the most useful history of this event is John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

prayers, with Parker and his friends doing much to publicize them.²⁰ Parker republished the press reports, for example, in a best-selling pamphlet edition of two sermons he delivered condemning the revivals, "A False and True Revival of Religion" (preached 4 April 1858)²¹ and "The Revival of Religion That We Need" (11 April 1858).²² Two versions of this incident are noteworthy: an "official" newspaper record and Parker's own recollections after the fact. *The Liberator* published the following account:

From thirty to forty persons were assembled at this meeting, and nine or ten of them spoke and prayed, all in relation to Mr. Parker, and all in the same strain. They prayed that God would destroy his life; or, if not his life, his reason; that confusion and distraction might be sent into his study, so that he should not be able to finish his sermon for the next Sunday: or, if he were allowed to finish it, that he might be miraculously prevented from delivering it; that he might be confounded and brought to shame before the people; and lastly, if God did not please to grant these petitions, that he would miraculously influence Mr. Parker's audience to 'leave that house, and come up to this!'²³

²⁰ For one press report, see Rosell and Depuis, *The Memoirs of Charles Finney*, 566-67; *The Liberator* 28 (September 24, 1858), 156. Referenced in Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 20-21, who adds that the prayers were "offered explicitly for Parker's destruction." For a published exchange on the matter between Parker and a friend, see Weiss, John. *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker: Minister of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society Boston* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1864), 366-67.

²¹ In this particular sermon we find the following: "Prayers are made for individual men, now designated by description, then by name. One obnoxious minister is singled out, and set up as a mark to be prayed at, and the petitioners riddle that target as they will. One minister asks God to convert him, and if he cannot do that, to remove him out of the way, and let his influence die with him. Another asks God to go into his study this very afternoon, and confound him, so that he shall not be able to finish the sermon—which had been writ five days before; or else meet him the next day in his pulpit, and confound him so that he shall not be able to speak. Another prays that God will put a hook into that man's jaws, so that he cannot preach. Yet another, with the spirit of commerce in him, asks God to dissuade the people from listening to this offender, and induce them to leave that house and come up and fill this. I ask a grave, decent-looking, educated minister, "What is all this?" The answer is, "Why, it is an act of religion. The Lord is in Boston; he inspires us miraculously. He has made us all of one heart and of one mind. He hears our prayers; he gives a hearing to our petitions, he will answer our prayers. . . ." see Theodore Parker, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity: Edited with Notes by George Willis Cooke* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1908), 375-76.

²² Similarly, here we find: "In one place God is variable, ill-natured, revengeful; he will go into a minister's study, and confound him; into a minister's pulpit, and put a hook into his jaws so that he cannot preach. That is the God of Park Street theology"; see Parker, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, 380.

²³ Rosell and Depuis, *The Memoirs of Charles Finney*, 566-67; *The Liberator* 28 (24 September 1858), 156; referenced in Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 20-21.

Parker, in a letter entitled “To Rev. Mr. Senkler, Canada. Boston, 6th March, 1858,” had this to say about the matter:

The little pamphlet on “False and True Theology” is only a newspaper report of a long sermon I preached—I have not read it, and don’t know how well it is done. The newspaper printed it without asking me. But it seems to have provoked the wrath (or zeal) of some of my ecclesiastical brothers, who held a prayer-meeting last Saturday afternoon; about 40 men were present. Here is one of the prayers:--“O Lord, if this man is a subject of grace, convert him, and bring him into the kingdom of thy dear Son: but if he is beyond the reach of the saving influence of the Gospel, remove him out of the way, and let his influence die with him,” &c., &c. The prayer-meeting was called on purpose to labor with the Lord “for the conversion of that notorious infidel, Theodore Parker.” So you see the tyranny of the old theology is about as strong in New England as in Old.²⁴

Once again, a shift occurred in the thought of these particular revivalists not unlike that found among conservative Unitarians. At first, “Parker had been under particular scrutiny since the winter of 1856-57, when [Charles Grandison] Finney publicly pronounced that he was seeking Parker’s conversion.” At this stage, then, revivalists still deemed Parker to be in the fold, however misguided he might have been. Thus participants considered the debate at this point, in spite of everything, to be an internal misunderstanding within the group. Still, after “congregations regularly offered up public prayers in service to that cause” and “as it became clear that Parker ... was not going to convert, the prayers turned sour.”²⁵ In other words, the revivalists gave up hoping for Parker’s return which made him, in effect, an outsider and enemy – hence the prayers for a hook to be put into his jaws, for God to enable his death, and thus for his ultimate silence.

The Liberator appeared to sympathize with Parker’s plight in the face of Finney’s revivalists. Yet persons with explicitly religious aims, such as Unitarian and evangelical

²⁴ Weiss, John. *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker: Minister of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society, Boston*. (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1864), 366-67.

²⁵ Corrigan, *Business*, 20-21.

Christians, were not the only ones engaged in intolerance of the Transcendentalists. Non-religious media and cultural observers repeatedly participated in acts of religious intolerance as well. Writers usually associated with fiction and literary essays composed another group that made the Transcendentalists an object of ridicule. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who resided with the Brook Farm community from April to November of 1841, belittled and disparaged the Transcendentalists, and especially their commune ventures, in such works as his *Love Letters*, which makes explicit his low regard for Emerson and Margaret Fuller, *The American Notebooks*, and his 1852 novel, *The Blithedale Romance*. Even at the end of his life, Emerson sounded civil but bitter in his “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England” when he penned the following: “Hawthorne drew some sketches, not happily, as I think; I should say, quite unworthy of his genius. No friend who knew Margaret Fuller could recognize her rich brilliant genius under the dismal mask which the public fancied was meant for her in that disagreeable story.”²⁶

Similarly, Charles Dickens, in his 1842 *American Notes for General Circulation*, wrote that “I was given to understand that whatever was unintelligible would be certainly transcendental” and that a great deal of Emerson’s essays was simply “dreamy and fanciful.”²⁷ Edgar Allan Poe’s 1845 satirical essay, “On ‘the tone transcendental,’” gave instructions on how to write as a Transcendentalist would, including advice to “hint every thing – assert nothing. If you feel inclined to say ‘bread and butter’ do not by any means say it outright. You may say anything and every thing approaching to ‘bread and butter.’ You may hint at buckwheat cake, or you may even go so far as to insinuate oat-meal porridge, but if bread and butter be your real meaning, be cautious ... not on any account to say ‘bread and butter!’”²⁸ Henry Adams, editor at the time of the *North American Review*, wrote in 1876 that “Transcendentalists ... renounced allegiance to the Constitution, continuing the practice

²⁶ Myerson, 63.

²⁷ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* Vol. 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), 133-34.

²⁸ Edgar A. Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” in *Broadway Journal*, 2 (12 July 1845), 1-7; referenced in Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson, *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 96.

of law; went through a process when they bought a piece of land which they called ‘releasing it from human ownership’; sought conspicuous solitudes; looked out of windows and said, ‘I am raining’; clad themselves in strange garments; courted oppression; and were, in short, unutterably funny.”²⁹ Even into the early-twentieth century critics such as Van Wyck Brooks argued that the Transcendentalists “were like high-minded weathercocks on a windless day.”³⁰

In short, religious intolerance does not always entail explicitly religious persons engaged in acts for purely religious reasons. As often as not, religious intolerance forgoes forced conversion to one’s own religion and subsists instead on denunciation and ridicule. That is to say, religious intolerance of the Transcendentalists existed at both theological and non-theological levels. What is more, these influential writers, by establishing a pattern of tactics and providing readily available tools such as stereotypes, shaped an American ethos and composed a collective cultural tradition. In this mode, secular intolerance of this religious group shifted from that enacted merely by individuals to an institutional level.

In response to this intolerance, increasing self-deprecation, feelings of inefficacy, and eventual disillusionment arose among many Transcendentalists themselves – evidence that even intolerance confined primarily to discourse and exclusion had very real effects. Though raillery, parody, and ridicule are typically preferable to physical violence – notwithstanding Parker’s self-referential claim that “modern martyrs, who face ostracism and poverty, suffer far worse than did the martyrs of old, who faced torture and death” – they are no less harmful to religious groups’ senses of identity.³¹ As Parker’s comment indicates, the effects of these kinds of intolerance often led to mounting self-criticism, disappointment, cynicism,

²⁹ Henry Adams, untitled review of *Transcendentalism in New England* by Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *North American Review* 123 (Oct. 1876): 470-71; referenced in Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: Transcendentalism in American History,” in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, eds. Charles Capper and Conrad E. Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), 6.

³⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, *America’s Coming of Age* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1915), 89; referenced in Capper, “A Little Beyond,” 10.

³¹“J. F. C.” [James Freeman Clarke], untitled review of *True Idea of a Christian Church* by Theodore Parker, *Christian World* (Feb. 1846); referenced in Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 491.

and even contempt among the Transcendentalists – a far cry from their initial, youthful optimism and confidence. Consider, for one example, the palpable excitement of Emerson writing in the premier issue of *The Dial* in 1840 about “the progress of revolution” and the promise of change and truth.³² Yet by his 1883 “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England,” a wizened Emerson was writing with “ironic detachment” and “bracketing Transcendentalism as an amusing episode in romantic silliness.”³³ Elsewhere, in his “New England Reformers,” Emerson concluded sardonically that “One apostle thought all men should go to farming; and another, that no man should buy or sell ... another, that the mischief was in our diet, that we eat and drink damnation.... Others attacked the system of agriculture, the use of animal manures in farming.... Even the insect world was to be defended, – that had too long been neglected, and a society for the protection of ground-worms, slugs, and mosquitoes was to be incorporated without delay.”³⁴ Clarke, to name another, wrote early on that he found “social life in a precious state of fermentation.... New ideas are flying, high and low ... [and, quoting Emerson,] every man carries a revolution in his waistcoat pocket.”³⁵ However, later in life, Clarke, with a hint of humor but undeniable sarcasm as well, wrote that “the group had called itself ‘the club of the like-minded; I suppose because no two of us thought alike’.”³⁶ On a darker and more serious note, Emerson recognized “a great deal of well-founded objection to be spoken or felt against the sayings and doings of this class.... [They had laid] themselves open to criticism and to lampoons [with their] cant and pretension ... subtilty [sic] and moonshine.”³⁷

³² Ralph W. Emerson, “The Editors to the Reader,” *Dial* 1 (July 1840), 2-3; referenced in Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), xii.

³³ Myerson, 9.

³⁴ Ralph W. Emerson, “New England Reformers,” in Joel Porte (ed.), *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 591.

³⁵ James F. Clarke, *Autobiography, Diary, and Correspondence* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), 133; referenced in Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, xii.

³⁶ James E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* Vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1887), 249; referenced in William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 42.

³⁷ Ralph W. Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” in Porte ed., *Essays and Lectures*, 207.

Thus it appears that at least one effect of this religious intolerance was the entrenchment of misgiving and self-doubt. Yet another, secondary consequence was the friction that cropped up among and between the Transcendentalists themselves. These divisions, however minor, began to slowly break the group apart. For just one example, most had rallied initially around the Brook Farm experiment. Still, before long Emerson spoke for many when he wrote that the Transcendentalists at Brook Farm “betake themselves to a certain solitary and critical way of living, from which no solid fruit has yet appeared to justify their separation.... [Philanthropists] inquire whether Transcendentalism does not mean sloth; they ... hear that their friend is dead, as that he is a Transcendentalist; for then he is paralyzed, and can never do anything for humanity.”³⁸

Non-Transcendentalists also singled out the Brook Farm experiment for criticism since it materialized the group and thus gave opponents an easy target for their attacks.³⁹ George and Sophia Ripley started Brook Farm on the banks of the Charles River in Massachusetts and, in its years of operation from 1841-47, it gained quite a bit of notoriety, especially with its eventual turn to Fourierism, named after Charles Fourier, the social reformer, who proposed a reorganization of society into manageable, self-sustaining communes. By the early to mid-nineteenth century, Americans had formed a number of communes and utopian societies. Communalist religions wanted ultimately to secede and separate from the rest of the country, as evidenced by the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists. In response, many Americans feared that non-Protestant religious groups wanted to appropriate and control increasingly large spaces. Other examples perpetuating this fear include Native Americans demanding land rights, Latter-day Saints moving west to claim Utah, and even the belief that Catholics were trying to control the Louisiana Territory and urban centers. With this in mind, Brook Farm, in its connection to other attempts at

³⁸ Ibid., 199, 203.

³⁹ Another collective attempt, Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands (1843-44), was less successful and came to be remembered as a “harebrained scheme” by both insiders and outsiders, Myerson 1984: 57.

separation, reaffirmed suspicions of the Transcendentalists' divisiveness and "otherness." Again, this particular intolerance holds special relevance for modern-day discrimination against new or alternative religious movements, and especially separatists and communalists such as the Branch Davidians. Yet internal schism was not limited to clashes over Brook Farm and Fruitlands. Sometimes Transcendentalists, showing the effects of the larger culture's negative sway, joined in the subtle derision of their fellow members' opinions and beliefs. For one instance, a number of cartoons drawn by Transcendentalist Christopher Pearce Cranch mock what he saw as some of the more outlandish utterances of Emerson: for example (from Emerson's essay, "Nature"), "I become a transparent eyeball" and "I expand and live in the warm day, like corn and melons."⁴⁰

Lastly, a phenomenon worth noting is expressions of religious intolerance by the Transcendentalists themselves. The individuals who composed the group were neither helpless victims nor above reproach. Transcendentalists, unsurprisingly, directed a fair share of intolerance at their most proximate "other," the Unitarians. For one example, Parker, in his 1860 "Experience as a Minister," wrote that Unitarianism had "become a sect, hide-bound, bridled with its creed, harnessed to an old, lumbering, crazy chariot, urged with sharp goads by near-sighted drivers along the dusty and broken pavement of tradition, noisy and shouting, but going nowhere."⁴¹ Parker, then, was accusing the Unitarians of the very thing the Transcendentalists themselves had rejected: classification as a sect. Elsewhere, in a public sermon, a particularly caustic Parker preached that "attempts at revivals are no new things – the experiment has often been tried. A few winters ago some Unitarians tried it in Boston, but they toiled all winter and caught nothing – enclosing nothing but a few sprats and minnows, who ran out through the broad meshes of their net before it could be hauled into

⁴⁰ *The American Transcendentalism Web* at <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/index.html> is a good place to begin. Accessed October 2008.

⁴¹ Referenced in Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (1888; New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1895), 638.

their boat.”⁴² In hindsight, the historical record has also been more sympathetic to the Transcendentalists than to the Unitarians:

Assessments of the Controversy have been based almost entirely upon analyses supplied by the Transcendentalists themselves or by their more ardent admirers. The opinions of most of the Unitarian conservatives have been reported at second hand, if at all.... As a result, the regular Unitarians of this period have had an extremely bad press, and we have taken the word of their opponents that they deserved nothing better. Begging the question, historians have failed to examine closely a religious position that was labeled by its detractors as ‘pale,’ ‘corpse-cold,’ bigoted, and socially reactionary.... [H]asty caricatures drawn in the heat of controversy have been taken quite seriously, and the typical Unitarian leader is usually pictured as an intolerant and hypocritical man, raging futilely against the serene Transcendental assertions.⁴³

This passage articulates two forms of intolerance. The first is the claim that the cause of one’s opponent is futile, stillborn and, interestingly, intolerant. The second is the historiographical intolerance mentioned – namely, and whether it is fair or not, that writers of history dictate validity, importance and, consequently, truth.

Perhaps this reverse intolerance was a defensive mechanism – an attempt to strengthen Transcendentalism by tearing their closest rival down as well as being further demonstration of the symbiotic or reciprocal nature of religious intolerance. Or perhaps this is evidence that religious intolerance is a key ingredient in both social life and individual cognition, inflicted upon majority and minority groups without discrimination. All told, violent and non-violent intolerance together had very real effects on the Transcendentalists.

Historiographical Intolerance

The writing of history is also capable of serving as a distinctive form or mode of intolerance – that is, of checking or subduing difference. Intolerance need not be restricted

⁴² Parker, 383.

⁴³ William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), ix.

to active or even contemporary bigotry; academics and historians are no less culpable in shaping public sentiment and perceptions of certain religious groups. More specifically, nineteenth-century religious historians and theologians constructed a unified and evangelical thesis that left no room for what they perceived as a divisive and therefore threatening movement.⁴⁴ In effect, their historical treatments or avoidance of certain religious groups sustained a process of negative construal and collective forgetting, key components of religious intolerance. In addition, a lasting influence of these discriminating narratives endures in twentieth-century American religious history.

Until recently, histories of religion in America commonly marginalized the Transcendentalists. Historians, that is to say, all but reduced American Transcendentalism to a group noteworthy for its literary, economic, and social – but not religious – concerns. In essence, these historians' exclusions, condemnations, and denials of legitimacy and religious status to the Transcendentalists are different but no less prejudiced expressions of intolerance than the ones examined heretofore. Thinking more broadly, this idea raises the possibility that people often secularize new, alternative, or innovative religious movements to legitimate intolerance. Phrased differently, if we define groups as fundamentally philosophical, literary, or even social rather than religious, then we can justify dismissal and favoritism without jeopardizing cherished notions of religious pluralism, freedom, and democracy.

A pattern begins to form when we examine the earlier historiographies in tandem. Transcendentalists, amidst other deviating strains, had little to no import in these triumphal narratives; no import, that is, except for substantiation of the impermanence and inefficacy

⁴⁴ See Leonard W. Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897); Robert Baird, *Religion in America; or An account of the origin, relation to the state, and present condition of the evangelical churches in the United States. With notices of the unevangelical denominations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856); Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1895); Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

of peripheral religious groups. The central argument and ethos in many of these texts is that American religion is an organic, dialectic, and ultimately progressive project of religious unification with Protestant Christianity at the vanguard. Thus the central agenda coursing throughout this religious history “canon” is a long process of marginalization carried out by the dominant group against what were taken to be religious fragmentations. This particular consensus model was concerned with fleshing out ideas of divine providence and manifest destiny. This historiographical schema therefore saw Protestantism to be the hinge and the adhesive that led to America’s distinctive and successful religious history and, moreover, it did not tolerate differences of belief and opinion. All told, specialists in theology and denominational history composed almost single-handedly the majority of writing on American religious history in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and, accordingly, the early record showed no interest in the religious dimensions of the Transcendentalists.

Though many of the later histories of American religion have, to some extent, recalled the movement, an uncertainty and even fumbling with the role and place of Transcendentalism persists. It appears a majority of American religious historians feel obligated to include the group in their story (perhaps feeling duty-bound to catalogue each and every movement in the name of pluralism) and yet they continue to portray the Transcendentalists as epiphenomenal in light of early nineteenth-century revivalism and evangelicalism. In the end, nearly relegating the Transcendentalists to footnote status in American religious history is not much of an improvement upon total avoidance. Each in its own way leads to the collective and purposeful forgetting of Transcendentalism as a religious demonstration. In effect, each is intolerant.

If we are to fully grasp the nature and history of religious intolerance, we will need to acknowledge the importance of outlying movements such as American Transcendentalism. We must also recognize that this intolerance can manifest in many forms and at many levels. If and when we do, we will have made at least some progress in uncovering the problematic

history of religious pluralism in America as well as the country's collective tendency to forget those troublesome episodes that undercut textbook accounts.