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Religious Inventions in America: New Religious Movements

Frederick Jackson Turner made the Census of 1890 famous when he used it to document the passing of the American frontier. Little noted is the fact that the same 1890 census produced a comprehensive survey of religion in America. Directed by H. K. Carroll, the survey “enumerated, classified, and described” the American religious community in all its diversity. In 1893 Carroll issued *The Religious Forces of the United States* that included an introduction about the “Condition and Character of American Christianity.” Carroll noted that Americans were proud that they had invented

more curious and useful things than any other nation. In matters of religion we have not been less liberal and enterprising. Our native genius for invention has exerted itself in this direction also, and worked out some curious results. The American patent covers no less than two original Bibles—the Mormon and Oasphe—and more brands of religion, so to speak, than are to be found, I believe, in any other country (1).

The Catholics were the largest church, and the sect of Adonai-Shomo in Massachusetts, with twenty members, the smallest. It is the “Adonai-Shomo’s” that provoke this essay because their influence goes

well beyond their numbers and has produced vitality and innovation. These new religious movements had their origins in the First Amendment that allowed them to flourish and in the conditions of American life that encouraged religious experimentation.

Such has been the nature of America ever since 1683, when the first experimenters from the religious sect known as Labadists settled at Cecil County, Maryland, under the leadership of Peter Sluyter, who had exhibited both morbid religious tendencies and strong mercenary tendencies. His one hundred followers turned over their possessions on entry, lived under a strict regime (a register of the pieces of bread and butter served at each meal was kept), and believed in the inward illumination of the spirit. The range of religious communities started during the post-revolutionary period was extraordinary.

The Shakers

The “United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing” (commonly called the Shakers) was founded at Bolton, England, in 1774 by Mother Ann Lee, a prophetic figure who had little education. In 1758, she joined a religious society formed by two dissenting Quakers, James and Jane Wardley. They were known derisively as “Shaking Quakers” because they sang, danced, and spoke in tongues in imitation of the practices of the French enthusiastic group, the Cevenoles, who had come to England in the early eighteenth century. In 1762, Lee married and bore four children. All of the children died in infancy, and Lee was deeply troubled by their deaths because she believed they were a punishment for her sins, particularly sins of the flesh.

Sin had entered the world, according to Lee, when Adam and Eve had sexual knowledge of each other. The “Shaking Quakers” took to the streets of Manchester preaching a gospel of repentance, regeneration and the celibate life; they attacked the worldliness of the churches and refused to take oaths or observe the Sabbath. They were persecuted for their beliefs, and in 1772-1773 Ann Lee was put in prison, where she later stated that Christ had appeared to her, revealing that she was Jesus Christ in the female form. In 1774 eight members left for America.

Shaker teachings emphasized a belief that Mother Ann Lee was the manifestation of Jesus Christ in the spiritual form, that salvation would come through the Shaker family, and that sexual intercourse was at the root of evil. After a brief stay in New York City, Lee and her small band went to Albany where they established their first congregation and began to attract other converts. Lee preached the Shaker gospel throughout New England and had occasional conflicts with local



Several rows of Shakers, separated by gender, performing a step dance in the meeting hall at New Lebanon, New York; a woman spectator is seated in left foreground, 1830. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-13659.)



South view of Oneida Mansion, Oneida, New York, 1870. (Image courtesy of Oneida Community Mansion House.)

authorities because the Shakers were pacifists and thought to be British spies. She died in 1784.

There were five separate periods within Shaker history. The first (1774-1783) was characterized by Lee's messianic style and premillennial beliefs. In the second (1784-1805), Shakers came under the leadership of Joseph Meachem and Lucy Wright, who organized new colonies, had the membership sign formal covenants, and regularized the sect's practices. A third period (1805-1837) saw the Shakers move westward, establishing colonies in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky under the guidance and direction of the central ministry at New Lebanon, New York. By 1826, nineteen communities had been established.

This growth and the passing of an older generation ushered in a fourth period (1837-1848) noted for intense spiritual and religious revivals known as "Mother Ann's Work." During this period séances were conducted, spirit drawings and paintings made, and songs and poems created to exalt Mother Ann Lee's mission. This "revitalization" movement sometimes proved to be disruptive.

The fifth period was a time of numerical decline. From 1848 to 1875 the Shaker societies began to lose members and experienced increased difficulty in recruiting new members, particularly males. At their height in the 1850s, there were about four thousand members. By 1880 the membership stood at 1,850, by 1900 at 850 and by the mid 1930s at less than a hundred as many of the communities closed their doors. Today a mere handful of Shakers remain in one village in

Maine (2).

The Oneida Community

During the early nineteenth century, the United States experienced a dramatic rise in popular support for reform movements that sought to improve life in the new republic. Frederick Douglass said it was a "period of faith, hope and charity; of millennial foreshadowing. The air was full of isms—Grahamism, mesmerism, Fourierism, transcendentalism, communism and abolitionism" (3). Growing industrialization and urbanization in the East and Midwest, new means of communication and transportation (the Erie Canal was completed in 1825), new marvels of invention and science, and advances in the mechanization of industry all contributed to a rise in social tensions. Old communities were being transformed and new values (urban and commercial) were much in evidence.

Religious inventors took their cues from Europe, from revelations on high, and from inner promptings that led them to challenge orthodox assumptions. The "Covert Enlightenment," for example, drew its inspiration from both religious and secular thinkers like Emmanuel Swedenborg and Franz Mesmer who published influential texts that promulgated ideas about the spiritual life, the occult, and the power of the spiritual world to guide and direct human affairs. Around these writers there swirled a constellation of acolytes, devotees, and practitioners.

It was an intellectual counter-Reformation that took place in reaction to the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and rationality. This “mystical” strand later blossomed into spiritualism and then “New Thought,” and it offered an alternative religious path for its believers (4).

A native-born religious radical, John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1883), tried to overthrow the marriage system by instituting a free love colony in 1843 in Putney, Vermont. In 1848, he was forced to leave and moved to Oneida in central New York. The colony was primarily a religious one that emphasized a radical form of Christian perfectionism Noyes called “Bible Communism.” The members practiced “male continence,” a birth control method wherein men withheld orgasm to protect women from unwanted pregnancies and to elevate the man’s spiritual side. Noyes issued a pamphlet that explained the reasoning behind the birth control technique. In *Male Continence* (1867), Noyes made a distinction between the “amative” and “procreative” phases of sexual contact. He likened the “amative” phase to chivalric and courtly love while “procreative” love was condemned because it led to exhaustion and unwanted children; he also condemned abortion as a system of birth control.

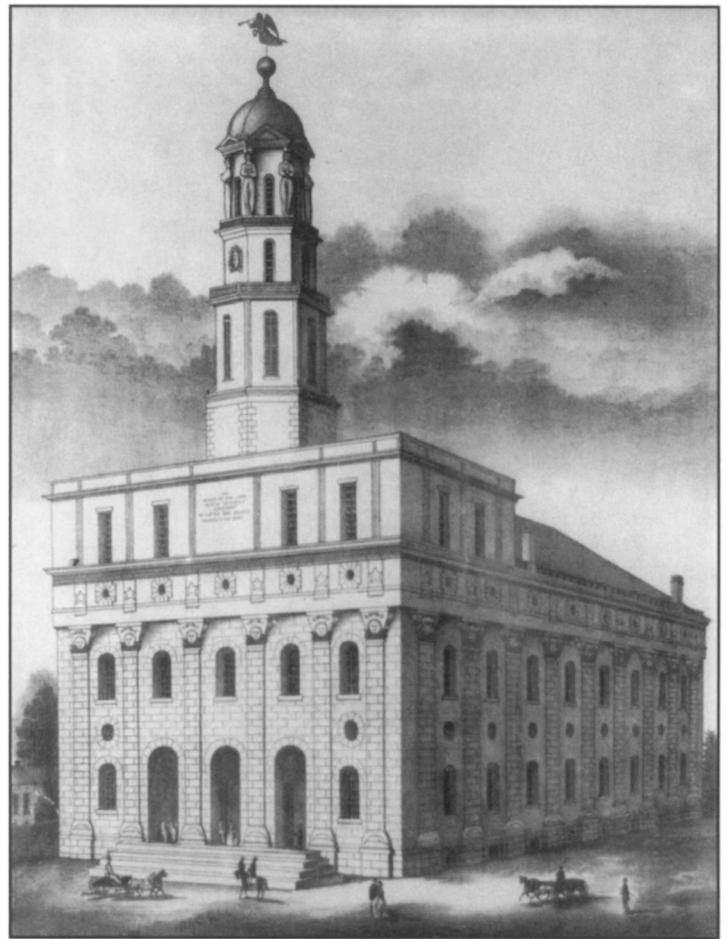
Noyes used the central metaphor of the “heart” to suggest how the political and social revivals in nineteenth-century America had “*changed the heart of the nation* [italics mine]; and that a yearning toward social reconstruction has become a part of the continuous permanent, inner experience of the American people.” He believed that socialism and revivalism were working toward the same end and that the forces of religious enthusiasms moved along the same path as the “infidels and liberals” with the secularists gaining the upper hand for a time, and then the spirit-filled moving ahead of them for a time.

Noyes believed that these European (socialism) and American (revivalism) elements must come together in the next phase of national history, working together for the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Clearly he believed that the Oneida Community had brought the two together in a “unitary home” that emphasized work and faith. In 1868, the colony began having children in a controlled scientific experiment they called “stirpiculture” that led to the birth of nearly sixty children. The couples selected to have these children were chosen on the basis of religious and scientific characteristics. Because of internal disputes and external pressures, however, the community abandoned their unusual sexual practices and socialistic features in 1880. The economic success of the community helped the remaining families thrive, and in 1881 it formed a joint stock company that continues to this day as Oneida Ltd., the world’s largest manufacturer of silverware. Their main dwelling, the “Mansion House,” now operates as an inn and a living museum (5).

The Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

As Oneida went from sect to corporation, “Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints” went from religious obscurity in central New York to a worldwide religion with a membership of twelve million. There are now more Mormons in the United States than Presbyterians or Episcopalians. They have become mainstream, though their origins are clearly part of the “invented” tradition. The Shakers, Oneida and the Mormons all confronted key questions about marriage, family and economic development.

The origins of Mormonism were in the Northeast where its founder, Joseph Smith, was born in Sharon, Vermont, in 1805. His family migrated to western New York where in 1823 he had a vision of buried plates later “translated” into the Book of Mormon. A non-Mormon scholar, John L. Brooke, “asserts that before they were Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith himself and many of his followers were prepared for Mormonism by their involvement with hermeticism, magic, alchemy, and other radical forms of religion” (6). Scholars—who are members of the church and believe that the Book of Mormon is an in-



“Joseph Smith’s Original Temple, Nauvoo, Illinois.” Print showing exterior view of Mormon temple building. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-03332.)

spired, God-given, foundational text—reject this thesis. It was Smith’s intention to establish a community based on Christian communism as found in the New Testament’s “Acts of the Apostles” and to prepare the way for the coming millennium. The group led by Smith moved to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831, then later to Jackson County, Missouri. They suffered persecution and moved again before settling in Commerce, Illinois, which they renamed Nauvoo.

The pivotal event in early Mormon history is the murder of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum at Carthage, Illinois. Smith’s martyrdom at the hands of his enemies while in jail, the ascendancy of Brigham Young to a leadership position in 1844 when there were 20,000 members, and the Latter-day Saints’ heroic communal trek westward are key elements that mark the Mormons as nineteenth-century Israelites in search of a promised land. They arrived in Utah in 1847 and established an efficient economic order.

Plural marriage was a distinctive feature of the sect in its early history until it was prohibited in 1890. There were three phases of plural marriage. The first ran from 1831 to 1839 when Smith laid the intellectual foundations for the practice. The second occurred when the Mormons moved to Nauvoo (1839-1844) and Smith introduced polygamous practices to some of his closest followers. The third came after his death in 1844 when it became a general practice. According to



"Christian Science Healing," 1893, showing Mary Baker Eddy standing over a bed on which an elderly man is sitting up. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-72720.)

some estimates, nearly twenty-five percent of Mormon households in nineteenth-century Utah were polygamous.

Smith's successor, Brigham Young, became the president of the "Council of the Twelve Apostles," and he took on Smith's mantle as "Prophet, Seer and Revelator." Young was a charismatic leader who had a large family that consisted of twenty-four wives and at least fifty-seven children living in a large compound. Since 1890 the Latter-day Saints have operated within the law although there are schismatic polygamous, Mormon families today who live together in the rural West and Mexico.

Christian Science and Other Groups

The period from 1865 to the turn of the century saw a large number of alternative religious groups emerge. No single figure dominated the scene until the dramatic appearance of Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health* in 1875. It is hard to overestimate the impact Christian Science had on the religious climate of the day.

Mary Baker Eddy was born into a Congregational family in rural New Hampshire in 1821 and into a religious culture that nurtured popular religions (spiritualism and mesmerism) and folk practices (healing and hydropathy). She suffered from poor health and two disappointing marriages (her first husband died shortly after their union) before coming into contact with Phineas Quimby whose "science of health" gave Eddy the foundation for what would become Christian Science.

Eddy's own conversion/cure came in 1866 when, following a fall on the ice, she was cured after reading Matthew 9:2 wherein Jesus cures a paralytic. In *Science and Health* she laid out the proposition that physical matter is both illusory and unreal. "All that is real is Spirit, and salvation—or healing—lies in the realization of this truth and the working out of implications and applications. Disease, sin, and death are ultimately illusory and will vanish once the individual has assimilated this truth completely" (7). Healing is a key component of the faith, and instead of seeking help from regular physicians, Christian Scientists turn to Christian Science practitioners who pray with their clients.

Eddy taught her newfound faith to students and in 1879 organized the Church of Christ, Scientist, and in 1881 established the Massachusetts Metaphysical College. Over the next ten years she cultivated a loyal body of followers (predominantly women) and attracted an equally

large band of detractors. Quarrels within the group and lawsuits directed at practitioners were commonplace, yet Eddy remained firmly in charge of her church. The First Church, Boston (known as the "Mother Church"), was an impressive Romanesque building, and it was from there that Eddy ruled, often autocratically. Christian Science was an urban-based sect and had a particularly strong following in California (8).

After 1900, Asian thought became increasingly influential in American religion, and meditative practices became a growing part of many religious communities. One notable example of this influence was the Ananda ashram established north of Los Angeles by Swami Paramananda. He first opened an ashram at Cohasset, Massachusetts, attracting a group of dedicated upper-class men and women to his retreat where they followed the Vedanta regimen of meditation, prayer, and service. In 1923 they moved to California where new members, primarily women, accepted his leadership and devoted their lives to perfecting their spiritual capacities through simple work and meditation. He was an itinerant swami who traveled, lectured, and spread his message. These ashrams were religious communities that followed an Eastern way of life (9).

Contemporary Mystical Alternatives

Rajneeshpuram, the human potential, mystical, cooperative colony begun in 1981 at Antelope, Oregon, was an archetypal alternative religion in the Eastern tradition. Most Americans first heard about the group when the television program, *Sixty Minutes*, did a segment featuring the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's daily "drive-by" in a Rolls Royce through a corridor of believers clad in red leisure togas and pink down jackets. As a group they were highly educated. Their guru was no ordinary leader, but a transcendental joker and punster who kept his believers merry and open to new influences. This was no geodesic hippie palace, but a communal new town with its own water supply, transportation system, and big plans for the future. However, there were stories about secret Swiss banks accounts containing embezzled funds.

Not since the Mormons had taken over Nauvoo had there been such a controversy with battles over zoning regulations, town elections, and religion. Initially the "sanyassins" were enthusiastic and eager to get along with their neighbors. Charges of voting fraud, arson, and intimidation, however, were rampant by 1983. All this came to a head when Ma Ananda Sheela (the colony manager) fled to Europe amidst rumors that she had tried to poison her enemies within the colony and local officials and was stock-piling arms, engaging in wiretapping, and preparing the community for a scourge (AIDS) that was to engulf the world. Some of the charges proved to be true. By 1985 the sanyassins had left, and their leader was deported and traveling in search of another "Buddhahfield." He died in India in 1990, having adopted a new name, "Osho," shortly before his death (10).

Other Eastern inspired groups included the "Unification Church" that under the leadership of the Korean mystic Sun Myung Moon attracted thousands to a new spiritual life. The "Hare Krishna Society" established itself publicly on street corners, singing and chanting, while building an impressive palace for leaders and followers in the mountains of West Virginia. Esalen, founded in 1962 as part of the "human potential" movement in California, has been called a "religion of no religion" because of its emphasis on creedal choice and change. It

represented the spiritual and seeking side of the 1960s counter culture where therapy became a form of religion and self-fulfillment the highest religious state (11).

Conclusion: Marketplace of Choice

The ongoing influence of ideas from Asia demonstrates that the experimentation of the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth century and beyond. As Wade Clark Roof suggests in *A Generation of Seekers* (1993), the “baby boomers” (born between 1946 and 1964) have come to view religion as part of a marketplace of choices and have reacted accordingly by shifting their religious allegiances over the course of a lifetime as their circumstances have changed.

Roof sketched the trajectory of one such boomer’s search. After leaving her Jewish family at age fifteen, she immersed herself in the counterculture and since then tried a number of groups and approaches.

She has explored many of the spiritual and human potential alternatives of the post-sixties period: holistic health, macrobiotics, Zen Buddhism, Native American rituals, New Age in its many versions. She has read a lot about reincarnation and world religions. She has read a lot about reincarnation and world religions. She once lived for a while in a commune. She became heavily involved in EST in an attempt to ‘find herself.’”

Wherever she is, she learns from the people around her. When she lived with her sister she discovered organic foods. Her first husband was Protestant, so, as she says, ‘We did Christmas.’ She was heavily ‘into’ Jesus for a while because she found his teachings and writings very nondenominational, very spiritual. She is an explorer down many paths (12).

This boomer, like many of her generation, was looking for a stable anchor to her life. Some returned to their early church roots while others have forged new religious bonds based on marriage and family needs. All are in transition. The key question is, of course, transition toward what? Fortunately, similar to the nineteenth century, there are plenty of options, and religious alternatives being invented every day. □

Endnotes

1. Henry King Carroll, *The Religious Forces of the United States* (New York: Scribners, 1893), xv. There are numerous surveys of the “outsider” tradition including Christopher Partridge, ed., *New Religions: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
2. The number of books on the Shakers is enormous. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) is now the standard history supplanting Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: Anchor, 1953).
3. Frerick Douglass, “What I Found at the Northampton Association,” in Alice Eaton McBee, *From Utopia to Florence: The Story of the Transcendentalist Community in Northampton, Mass., 1830-1852* (1947; repr., Porcupine Press, Philadelphia, 1975), 136.
4. See Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), and Alfred J. Gabay, *The Covert Enlightenment: Eighteenth Century Counterculture and Its Aftermath* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborgian Press, 2005).
5. See Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane, 1993) for a general history, and Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), and Louis Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian*

Utopias—The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), for material about theology and sexuality at Oneida.

6. Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 210. Brooke’s volume is *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
7. Peter W. Williams, *American Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 313.
8. The best modern biography of Eddy is Gillian Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy* (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1998).
9. See Laurence Veyssey, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-Cultures in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); and E. G. Alderfer, *The Ephrata Commune: An Early German Counterculture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).
10. Frances Fitzgerald’s *Cities on the Hill: A Journey through Contemporary American Cultures* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986) astutely catches the mood of four communities that emerged in the 1980s including Bhagwan’s group in Oregon.
11. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and E. Burke Rochford, Jr., *Hare Krishna in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985).
12. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1993).

Robert S. Fogarty is John Dewey Professor in the Humanities Emeritus and Editor of *The Antioch Review*. He is the author of *The Righteous Remnant: The House of David* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989); *Special Love/Special Sex: An Oneida Diary* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994); and *Duty and Desire at Oneida: Tirzah Miller’s Intimate Memoir* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000). His latest project is a study of Anglo-American faith healing, 1870-1930.

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