

Preface, Table of Contents, and Prologue from Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

PREFACE

IN THE FORTY YEARS before the Civil War, Americans developed a peculiar variety of political and social action we have come to call "reform." Abolitionists stormed against the cruelties of slavery. Temperance zealots hounded producers and consumers of strong drink. Sabbatarians fought to make Sunday an officially recognized sacred day. Woman's rights activists proclaimed the case for sexual equality. Others offered programs of physiological and spiritual self-reform: phrenology, vegetarianism, the water cure, spiritualism, and miscellaneous others. "Even the insect world was to be defended," Emerson mused, "and a society for the protection of ground-worms, slugs, and mosquitoes was to be incorporated without delay.!"

Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination explores the religious roots of reform and argues for the crucial importance of cosmological thinking to its creation. The choice of religion *per se* as the central theme of reform history is hardly surprising. Scholars who have chronicled these movements have usually and quite properly noted the "religious" tone or substance of reform, whether in the identification of antebellum movements with revivalism, changes in Calvinist theology, the histories of particular sects, or doctrines of millennial mission. I move beyond these approaches, however, in at least three distinctive ways.

First, I find importance in the cosmologies of reformers, especially those that encompass a wider gyre than formal theology. Second, I analyze the religious aspects of reform ritual, especially in the movements that hoped to reorder the details of everyday life. Third, I am concerned with the relation between sacred and profane elements in reform, treating religious dimensions of social and personal life as equal in importance to those of the so-called secular realm.

This last point is crucial. All too often, scholars have been guided by the assumption that "religion" exists largely as a conscious or unconscious cover for something else: status anxiety, the quest for control of one class by another, personal or collective neuroses, a reaction to the shocks and realities of new social and economic environments, or some other psychological or material concern. Recent socioeconomic and psychological interpretations of reform have mostly given a perfunctory nod to "religion" and then interpreted it for its "real" social, psychological, or political significance. Reform studies have thus shared in the modern trend toward psychological and materialist reductionism.

I do not reject the importance of social, psychological, or political aspects of reform, nor do I underestimate the impact of economic change in nineteenth-century America. Yet we can only understand reformers if we try to comprehend the sacred significance they bestowed upon these worldly arenas. For even as some of today's scholars glean mostly, "secular" significance from religion, the antebellum reformer saw mainly transcendent meanings in politics, society, and the

economy. We must concentrate on the religious imaginations of reformers in order to grasp the essential nature of reform. As a result, my stress on the originators of reform cosmologies rather than the details of social movements has dictated a certain progression of topics. I have created, in fact, a kind of genealogy of reform cosmology that begins with the American Revolution and ends with "the woman question" and its shattering of reform unity.

Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination addresses by implication certain enduring themes in American culture. Not only are most of the issues reformers grappled with before the Civil War still with us in one form or another; so are various dilemmas concerning the place of religion in a free society and the difficulties of social advocacy where direct political solutions seem unavailable. The role of the reformer itself, though it has evolved in some very interesting ways and even become a significant part of the established social order, remains in many ways a radical religious calling. Indeed, when viewed as a special kind of religious impulse nurtured within our culture, the reformer's search for sacred connection takes on a significance far more profound than any single advocacy or the particular denominational roots of reform. Antebellum reformers defined a rugged style of modern piety peculiarly suited to the amorphous spiritual crises experienced by individuals in modern pluralistic societies. By the twentieth century, reformers began to emerge from Jewish, Catholic, and liberal Protestant cultures, in addition to their traditional evangelical sources. Modern varieties of feminism, utopianism, and dietary reform, as well as civil rights, environmental, and anti-war advocacies have all been shaped in important ways but such religious types. By lending sacred significance to issues of political and social life, antebellum and modern reformers have exerted an influence on politics and society far greater than one might expect from any quantifiable measure of their popularity or resources. They have made what began as a peculiarly Protestant, largely New England, style of social action into one truly American in reach and sensibility.

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PROLOGUE: Ultraists, Seekers, and the Soldiery of Dissent

Reformers have held an especially ambiguous place in our national consciousness. Even sympathetic observers have sometimes felt, with Ralph Waldo Emerson: "When we see an eager assailant of one of these wrongs ... we feel like asking him, what right have you, sir, to your one virtue?" Yet Americans have been deeply moved by the reformer's dedication, finding in the steadfast will of a William Lloyd Garrison, an Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or a Martin Luther King Jr. the very essence of heroism. They court our fascination, whether we focus on their virtues or their odd and often abrasive fervor. Gadflies on the periphery of society yet deeply rooted in it, reformers remain essential but enigmatic characters on the American scene.

The ambivalence that antebellum reformers inspired, when not related directly to the issues they agitated, mostly derived from a trait central to their character: the tendency to apply religious imagination and passion to issues that most Americans considered worldly. In accounting for the rise of antebellum reform, Emerson noted "that the Church, or religious party, [was] falling from the Church nominal" and reappearing "in temperance and non-resistance societies; in movements of abolitionists and socialists; and in very significant assemblies called Sabbath and Bible Conventions; composed of ultraists, of seekers, of all the soul of the soldiery of dissent, and meeting to call in question the authority of the Sabbath, of the priesthood, and of the Church." They were saints in the process of abandoning their own "Church nominal," whose zeal the world found by turns inspiring and menacing.

The lives of reformers confirmed Emerson's description of reformers as between church and society. Some, like the abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld and the phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler, entered early adulthood assuming the ministry would be their fate. Other future reformers became ministers, only to find their spiritual quests moving beyond the limits of the church. The vegetarian Sylvester Graham, the abolitionist Henry C. Wright, and the communitarian John Humphrey Noyes all tried traditional ministries before turning to reform. Sarah Grimke's exclusion from the Quaker ministry epitomized a special frustration with the church that led to forthright advocacy for woman's rights. Others, who had never considered a career in the church, reached revelatory moments concerning their reform vocations in unchurched moments of sacred transcendence. For example, health reformer William Andrus Alcott received his calling on a mountaintop in Connecticut. These anomalous men and women did not abandon the realm of the sacred in championing "social" causes. Rather, they made religious sense of society, economy, race, politics, gender, and physiology.

Such characters defy much of what passes for scientific sociological, psychological, or political analysis, this despite the fact that reformers have deeply affected the conduct of politics and the shape of society. Only Max Weber's term "religious virtuoso" comes close to describing the reformer as a social type. Weber had in mind individuals whose consciousness in most cases seemed tuned to heavenly rather than earthly matters, and who in most societies lived as monks, holy men, mystics, and the like. In Protestant societies, however, which focused on the earthly

and frowned upon formal holy orders, such types, as one scholar put it, "find their honor and their struggle everywhere on God's earth."

In fact, reformers comprised something of an informal religious order, mostly voluntary orphans from a society whose everyday workings aroused deep misgivings. At odds with the world in its "natural" state and bent upon sacralizing all the world's order in accordance with their vision of God's plan, they made it their business to clarify the ways in which the most personal and most cosmic issues interconnected. Their *mentalité* grew not only from their intimate knowledge of an everyday material world but also as a function of their estrangement from it. A felt commonality of spirit and ultimate purpose transcended the varieties of reform endeavor and the sometimes heated squabbles over strategies and issues.

Reform took its particular American shape as a result of the historical circumstances attendant to its birth, especially the profound spiritual upheaval caused by three major forces that significantly altered the possibilities of sacred life in the new nation. The first was the Constitution's endorsement of separation of church and state and religious toleration, norms that eventually spread from the federal level to the individual states and created a new social and institutional framework for religion. The second was a battle over the definition of America itself, as nation and as idea, in the years following the Revolution. Finally, the transformation of the economic life of the nation from a pre-or proto-industrial state to that of a maturing commercial-industrial marketplace reset many of the terms of everyday discourse and provided much of the symbolic repertoire for the reformers' envisioned order.

Together these developments created in the minds of many a sense that their era was what, in the twentieth century, the theologian Paul Tillich has called a *kairos*. A *kairos* is a moment in history marked by entry of the Kingdom of God into human affairs. The historian David Brion Davis, applying Tillich's idea of a *kairos* to reform, has described it as a period in which an "eschatological leap" becomes possible, one "that overcomes a 'demonic power' and then transcends the limits of previous political, racial, and economic history." Reformers emerged as technicians of just such an American *kairos*, responding to a religious crisis endemic to the "modern" condition and exacerbated in the United States by disestablishment and religious pluralism. They shaped their agenda from the social, political, and economic turmoil of the day, but within a millennial and sometimes apocalyptic sense of America's role in the cosmic drama. Reform sects arose largely in New England, a region particularly hard hit by each of these historical forces. Before the Revolution, New England's religious establishments helped spin a web of daily ritual and belief that connected individuals, society, and Heaven into a comprehensible cosmos. Dissenters and heretics there might be, both in organized sects and as practitioners of less formal religious arts; yet they themselves understood their acts as dissent or heresy and often gloried in that fact. Despite the tensions created by wayward religious spirits, the very existence of such dissent reinforced the established view of the cosmos by vivifying the contrast between Truth and Error.

The American Revolution changed all that. It challenged the legitimacy if not always the actual position of religious elites and, more important, made religious toleration and disestablishment social norms. In the first years of the nineteenth century, many New Englanders had the sense that a spiritual free-for-all had replaced cosmic order. All might claim to possess religious Truth under the protection of the Constitution, but such claims concealed a brewing crisis. How could one serve authentic religious needs for Truth and validate religious experiences in Truth when religious freedom had made the world an arena of competing truths? No scholar has yet attempted to gauge comprehensively the profound personal, spiritual, and historical implications of this nova: a society with no official religion and with officially protected religious liberty.

The search for sacred connection in such a world produced a variety of responses. The majority of Americans welcomed the right to choose their church, create a new one, or be free of organized religion entirely. They participated in an explosion of religious creativity and conflict: Baptist and Methodist "Dissenters" soon became the dominant American churches. Individual preference in ritual or belief spawned scores of Christian sects. Freethinkers launched attacks on organized religion and "priestcraft." Prophets founded faiths based on new dispensations and discoveries, most notably Joseph Smith's creation of Mormonism.

Even those who benefited most from religious freedom had serious doubts about the doctrine, for they had created or expanded churches as an expression of Truth. However, the new freedom seemed most disturbing to members of the established churches of New England. While they endorsed religious freedom, they harbored uneasy feelings that it had left a void of spiritual order. In other regions, and especially in the states of New York and Pennsylvania, pluralism had been an established fact since the seventeenth century. Thus the revolution only served to emphasize well-established community norms. In New England, where the intermeshing of social, political, and ecclesiastical power remained strong, anxiety so pervaded the social and religious landscape in the first decade of the nineteenth century that it often found bitter expression in the pulpits of Congregational and Presbyterian churches and in the political culture of the Federalist party. This dark strain was no simple expression of lost power and status. It reflected a keen sense of faith dislocated and of a spiritual order destroyed.

The spectacular growth of the nation's economy and territory provided additional sources of real and imagined disorder, and new measures of virtue or vice. Already spiritually shaken, New England was one of the first regions to feel significant tremors from the revolution in manufacturing and commerce. All the ambivalence traditionally associated with pietistic Protestantism's grappling with individual material success became resymbolized for an era in which the marketplace, the factory, the city, and the competition of individuals for wealth and advantage became keynotes of American culture. To reformers as to their Puritan forebears, industriousness meant virtue. However, worldly competition unbridled by a sense of the sacred spelled spiritual doom. Individualism was intrinsic to the Protestant tradition but, unchecked by a sense of community, it foretold disaster.

The post-Revolutionary generation in New England largely embraced the Republic's possibilities, which for most meant accepting pluralism, recreating church life as an adjunct to a new middle-class existence, and profiting from the new economy. Yet the religious virtuosos among met the same situation by seeking paths to the sacred built upon new ideals and symbols. Indeed, they revived the covenant tradition of their ancestors, transferring a sense of chosenness from New England to the United States (though sometimes confusing their region for the nation). The Revolutionary image of an America bathed in millennial splendor, one already a self-congratulatory cliché in popular discourse, became for reformers the basis of a self-scrutinizing national piety. The sweep of such a religious vision was apparent not only in the lives and words of reformers but also in the reactions of their audiences.

Consider the case of Mrs. Sturges, who in 1835 heard Theodore Dwight Weld preach against slavery. She returned home deeply agitated, collapsed in a chair, and dreamed a dream. She found herself transported to the far reaches of the universe, her eyes scanning the Earth's wonders and horrors. Finally she fixed upon an America aglow in its riches and freedom, where the humble claimed equality with the wealthy. She gazed in admiration and declared: "It is my country." At that moment a mysterious presence tapped her shoulder and begged her to look again. She still saw only a happy, industrious people and a land filled with schools, churches, and "emporiums of commerce." The stranger then directed her eyes southward. There, the white population was "thinly scattered and enervated," while black multitudes gleaned a "scanty harvest from the luxuriant soil, and impoverished rather than enriched their oppressors." The slaves themselves labored "beneath the scorching sun-their backs lacerated by the whip-scourged, maimed, loaded with irons-subject to every insult-and exposed to every gust of unbridled passions." Even as groans and lamentations filled her ears, Mrs. Sturges wept in shame to think that the laws of her nation sanctified slavery. She heard a voice from Heaven: "Vengeance is mine I will repay saith the Lord." The stranger then pointed out the abolitionists, with only Bibles for weapons, hounded and vilified by other citizens, including fellow Christians, simply because they sought freedom for the slave. "It was, as if a viper stung me," she recalled, "-and covering my face with both my city, hands, and laying my mouth in the dust,- I cried, 'Unclean, unclean! O Church of the living God! come out of thine abominations, and wash their hands of this sin.'" Mrs. Sturges then watched as God removed the slaves' chains and "a mighty army of blacks" rose in bloody rebellion. The shrieks of the dying in her ears, she awoke fearing that what had been a dream might soon become a reality.

Mrs. Sturges's vision demonstrates the ways in which social, economic, and personal issues came alive within the reform cosmology. It constituted a broad sacralization of the world, where sacred and profane were of a piece. Weld preached to her about slavery, but within a sacred drama of American identity. Mrs. Sturges's identification of "emporiums of commerce," schools, and churches reflected values blossoming in an increasingly market-dominated America, as did her identification of slavery as an inefficient and cruel use of labor. But she framed these observations within a literally cosmic setting of divine judgment. Each level of understanding made sense in terms of the other, and both merged in a seamless eschatological script.

That was the essence of reform, the radical joining of Heaven and earth that attracted thousands of passionate adherents and just as surely scandalized many more. Reformers positioned themselves both within the culture and just outside, taking as their mission a kind of alienated engagement in the discourse of society. They sought to sacralize the world in its own language and in spite of itself. Judged by the standard of complete and direct victories, they mostly failed. Abolitionists alone did not free the slaves. Feminists did not immediately win equality for women. Temperance advocates did not end drinking. Grahamites did not convert the nation to vegetarianism. Neither phrenologists nor hydropathists made permanent inroads into the health professions.

Nonetheless, the reformer's influence passed into society-at-large. By reformulating sacred understandings of society in a mixture of three tongues-the common political language of Republicanism, the religious language of Christianity, and the ever more persuasive vocabulary of the natural sciences-reformers did succeed in creating alternative vocabularies for understanding American society. They provided a sacred structure of meaning that, while hardly incorporated as the code of daily life by most Americans, helped redefine the nature and limits of civic virtue.