

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue of Religions—“Transcendentalism and the Religious Experience”

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In his 1837 oration “The American Scholar,” Emerson demanded that, above all, the thinking individual needs “to read God directly” (Emerson 1971, p. 57). By this proclamation, Emerson inextricably linked Transcendentalism to the religious experience. But precisely what kind of religious experience? In 1940, Perry Miller published an essential article, “From Edwards to Emerson” (Miller 1940), later following with his great collection of texts, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Miller 1950), in which he refocused scholarly consideration of Transcendentalism from essentially a literary to a religious phenomenon. But in arguing that Transcendentalism drew on Puritan beliefs in reaction to Unitarianism, Miller mainly highlighted doctrinal issues. Subsequently, with the pathbreaking work of Len Gougeon (Gougeon 1990), the emphasis in Transcendentalist studies largely shifted from study of religious antecedents to a focus on Transcendentalist participation in the social questions of abolition and feminism. Most recently, however, there has been a renewed appreciation of its spiritual struggles, as exemplified by K. P. Van Anglen’s important review essay (Van Anglen 2008). David M. Robinson and Alan D. Hodder, contributors to the current collection, have also played essential roles in returning religious and spiritual thought to the center of the Transcendentalist experience.¹ Further expanding the boundaries of scholarship have been the successful exploration of the influence of Eastern religions² and the similarities of the religious and spiritual “experience” (a term emphasized by William James) between Transcendentalists and American Pragmatists. As David Robinson makes clear (Robinson 2000), Emerson and other Transcendentalists drew on Neoplatonic, Eastern, and Romantic senses of the spirit, as well as on Christian mysticism.

In homage to Stanley Cavell, a recently deceased giant in the field whose short book, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Cavell 1989), exerted such vast influence, it is felicitous here to conjure the original statement that encompasses so much of Transcendentalism’s openness to new ideas: “I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West,” declared Emerson (in “Experience”: Emerson 1983, p. 41) Three quarters of a century after Perry Miller discovered the religious and doctrinal affinities between Puritanism and Transcendentalism, scholars are now viewing those connections largely as one of spiritual kinship. The current collection both enforces and enlarges the scope of that investigation, reflecting the breadth of the Transcendental religious experience, spanning most of the Nineteenth Century and extending beyond the United States.

Four papers in this collection address the essential origins of the Transcendental spiritual journey. David M. Robinson explores George Ripley’s essential religiosity through William Ellery Channing’s 1828 sermon “Likeness to God,” which created the bridge between formalist theology and an inner

¹ (Robinson 2000; Hodder 2001).

² Fundamental still is (Versluis 1993).

spiritualism. Robinson harkens back to Perry Miller's essential recognition of the links between Transcendentalism and aspects of Puritanism. *Jonathan Koefoed* examines the seminal work of James Marsh, president of the University of Vermont, whose "Preliminary Essay" to Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (Coleridge 1829) was the gateway by which young American Transcendentalists could appreciate Kant's epistemological binary. Koefoed complicates the connection between Marsh and the Transcendentalists by arguing that Marsh attempted to preserve through reinterpretation Trinitarian belief, to be anchored in a personal spirituality. *Alan D. Hodder* returns to the connection between Transcendentalism and Puritanism by emphasizing the inlaying of Christian rhetoric and dramatic imagery in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller. This is a contribution to the study of language and thought, and there are conversion scenes aplenty in these authors apparently inspired by the rhetorical heights of Puritan sermonizing. *Barry M. Andrews* focuses on the ecstatic as well, asking whether Emerson could, by definition, be considered a mystic. Much of posterity—including, importantly, William James—considered him such. Andrews refines Emerson's type of mysticism: not as a relationship with an internalized notion of a deity but rather in a broader relationship with the divine within nature.

Other contributions explore the relationship of the self within the spiritual experience. *Nicholas Aaron Friesner* applies knowledge of environmental ethics to interpreting Emerson's relationship to nature and nature religion. In comparing Emerson to Thoreau, Emerson's more formalist idealism that might seem to separate him from a nature religion becomes evident. And yet, it is precisely that tension between idealism and nature which allows Emerson greater moral agency within a nature religion. *John Gatta* emphasizes the ecstatic in Emerson and Thoreau, celebrated especially through food. This "communion with the earth" is fully evident in Thoreau, who relocates humans within the animal world that, depending on nature's offerings, forages for food. Although Emerson's relationship to nature through food is less obvious, his decision to forsake the ministry in 1832 was based on his refusal to impart theology to the Last Supper. How did Transcendentalists view the sacred covenant of marriage? That is the question *Gregory Garvey* asks, examining texts by Lydia Maria Child, Sarah Grimké, and Margaret Fuller. These early feminists intended to move the institution of marriage away from the idea of a social contract to one of social equality. This aligns ideas of marriage with the contemporaneous movement of abolition and women's rights. *David LaRocca* provides a trans-Atlantic perspective. The influence of Thomas Carlyle on Emerson and other Transcendentalists is well-established, and early Carlyle (distinguishable from the reactionary Carlyle that emerged in the 1840s) played an important role in anchoring his American followers to Romanticism and a more naturalist posture. LaRocca demonstrates how Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* suggested to Emerson new possibilities in written expression and thus of exploring his own intellectual and spiritual world.

Other chapters of this work address later Transcendentalism and its connection to subsequent philosophical thought in both the United States and abroad. Over two articles, *the present author* examines the reception of Auguste Comte on American shores, especially among Transcendentalists and liberal Unitarians. Although eventually eclipsed by Marx, Comte was at the time perhaps the most influential social thinker of the mid-Nineteenth Century. How he viewed the relationship between science and theology both provoked and threatened American thinkers already challenged by Darwinism and modernity. *Stephen S. Bush* addresses the important link between Emersonian Transcendentalism and Jamesian Pragmatism. Bush argues for a tight relationship between the two philosophies based on the notion of individualism and political commitment. It is through this lens that similarities in their religious outlooks are also explored. *Sikong Zhao and Ionut Untea* note that Confucianism and Daoism appear to be in essential conflict with many Western notions of individualism. Transcendentalism is useful here, providing a way of viewing within Western individualism a greater social commitment. Zhao and Untea explore how the Chinese perception of the individual might be refined through that interpretation.

Although broad as it is deep, this collection merely touches on some of the complex of religious and spiritual questions arising during a period of astounding social, political, and scientific change in America. If this volume stimulates increased activity in the field, it will have well-served its purpose.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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