HERESEY AND HUMBUG: MORMONS, MILLERITES, AND THE PROTESTANT EVANGELICAL DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE BURNED OVER DISTRICT, 1830-1845

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<u>Abstract</u>

The idea of religious freedom was one of the hallmarks of early nineteenth-century America, but it was not truly universal. Despite denominational differences, mainstream white evangelical Protestants formed a body of unified believers that defined "true" American religion. The Burned Over District of central New York would give birth to two religious movements, Mormonism and Millerism, that challenged the position of evangelical religion in the spiritual consciousness of the nation. The Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the followers of William Miller's end time prophecy were inspired by, but moved outside the boundaries of, established evangelical theology and practice. In reacting to these movements, evangelical denominations went beyond cooperation to try to forge a unified congregation of believers. In the face of religious movements that posed real challenges to their prominent position, mainstream evangelical denominations like Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians responded in strikingly similar ways, belying the notion of religious plurality.

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Introduction

In an 1838 examination of the importance of Christianity to the structure of American society, an anonymous author wrote of the special place of religion in the identity of United States. He extolled the virtues of politicians who acknowledged and promoted true religion declaring, "No land of earth partakes equally with ours in the civil and political meliorations effected[sic] by the gospel. We have not only no preference of Christian sects, but none of ranks in the state, and none of individual pretender." He went on, "Christianity is the popular religion of the country, though without establishments and with equal liberty to men's consciences, the religion of the laws and government."[1] In the early decades of nineteenth-century America, religion was a deeply personal choice that helped defined a person's place in the fabric of the nation. White men and women enjoyed a religious landscape that featured a wide variety of choices because the First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and freedom from governmental interference in religious matters.[2] This provision created what some historians have called a pluralistic and democratic religious life for white men and women, making the American religious experience unlike anything in the contemporary world.[3]

By the 1830s, the expansion of evangelical movements and denominations ensured a position of prominence for those who adhered to some version of an

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[1] *An Inquiry into the Moral and Religious Character of the American Government* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1838), 138, 140.

[2] For the most part freedom of religion was for white men and women. Indigenous peoples, African-Americans both free and enslaved could worship in private or in ancillary congregations of mainstream churches, but that did not necessarily translate into the same access as white men and women.

[3] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, London: Princeton University Press, 1989), 4.

evangelical faith.[4] In central New York, religious fervor was fanned by revival meetings

that swept over congregations and through counties, creating what is known as the

Burned Over District.[5] Some evangelical denominations were part of a widespread

rejection of clerical authority, encouraging people to look for personal relationships with

their Protestant Christian faith that helped the growth of evangelical religion. Presbyterian

denominations, led by passionate and influential preachers like Charles G. Finney, helped

expand the reach of revival religion to a more mainstream audience. Baptists and

Methodists, denominations that had struggled under state sponsored churches in Europe

and North America in the eighteenth century, experienced a massive surge in membership

and influence in America in the early 1800s, making them the largest denominational

groups in the country by the 1830s.[6] According to an 1836 accounting of denominations

in the United States, a large number of the over 10 million white Americans identified

with evangelical traditions: over 566,000 white Methodists or 652,528 including non-

whites; 249,084 Presbyterians with over 81,000 in Presbyterian sects; 452,000 Baptists

and close to 75,000 adherents to independent Baptists sects.[7] Other denominations also

embraced the ideals of evangelical religion; Congregationalists, the United Brethren, and

Campbellite Christians are a few examples of the dozens of evangelical offshoots.

Americans found many ways express themselves spiritually within the boundaries of

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[4] Evangelical refers to any denominations dedicated to actively spreading the Christian gospel through a variety of voluntary, missionary means. A more complete definition appears on page 20.
[5] The Burned Over District covers the counties of central and western New York state. A more complete description is on page 23.
[6] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1973), 437, 442-443, Mark A. Noll *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 167.
[7] John Hayward, *The Religious Creeds and Statistics of Every Christian Denomination in the United States* (Boston: Johnathan Howe, 1836), 119, 129, 143, 146. Hayward stated that the total number of Methodists in all their sects would be over 3,000,000. The number of white Americans is estimated from the 1830 U.S. Federal Census numbers

Protestant evangelicalism. On the surface, there was a wealth of denominational choice, reinforcing the belief that all white men's religious choices were of equal value.

This idea of religious freedom was one of the hallmarks of early nineteenth-century America, but it was not truly universal. Despite denominational differences, mainstream white evangelical Protestants formed a body of unified believers who were convinced that they defined "true" American religion. The revival religion of the 1820s and 1830s led directly to voluntary societies based on the goals of spreading a socially inspired gospel as far and wide as possible, thereby converting Americans into a homogeneous group of Christian believers. The idea that all white men could practice whatever religion they wanted was acknowledged, but within certain limits. The unification of evangelical believers was an important factor in promoting a vision of correct and true religion. According to the annual report of the American Home Missionary Society in the June 5, 1830 *Religious Intelligencer*, denominational cooperation was key to the success of American evangelical religion because, "the union of different denominations…is most happily adapted to meet the want of our country. These wants have been found to be so extended that separate efforts of any single denomination of Christians in the land are inadequate to supply them. The object demands the sympathies of all hearts and efforts of all hands; and these sympathies and efforts to be effected must be concentrated."[8] Three years later, *The Religious Intelligencer* published a report from the American Sunday School Union that acknowledged denominational unity as part of their success, stating that, "among the members of our association are Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and

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[8] *The Religious Intelligencer,* Vol. XV, June 5, 1830, 11.

others…by this co-operation nothing is relinquished, nothing is even modified which pertains to the denominational peculiarities."[9] Protestant evangelical denominations were reminded to put aside their differences in these joint efforts for the good of the people of the United States and to advance the cause of Christianity in North America and the world.

Despite this vision of unified Protestant denominations, the Burned Over District of central New York would give birth to new religious movements that consistently challenged the position of evangelical religion in the spiritual consciousness of the nation. Two of these new movements, Mormonism and Millerism, capitalized on the free expression of religion and personal interpretations of scripture and theology. The Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the followers of William Miller's end time prophecy (Millerites) were inspired by, but moved outside the boundaries of, established evangelical theology and practice. In reacting to these two movements, evangelical denominations went beyond cooperation on voluntary societies to try and forge a unified congregation of believers. In the face of religious movements that posed real challenges to their prominent position, mainstream evangelical denominations like Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians in their various forms responded in strikingly similar ways, belying the notion of religious plurality. In the introduction to an 1843 pamphlet on Millerism, evangelist C.S. Bailey noted how false prophets had appeared and faded many times before but, in the Burned Over District, the expansion of new religious movements was different:

> It is more singular, and indeed deeply regretted by the sincere Christian, that in this age of enlightened understanding, expanded intellect, and increase of all that can benefit the human mind, there should be found

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[9] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vol. XVIII, June 8, 1833, 18.

those who are devoid of good sense--so devoid of every principle that can elevate the character of man as to engage in delusions which have been proved in former ages foolish and vain. Thus, we have noticed a few of those delusions which have brought with them misery and distress. In this age we have 'Mormonism' and 'Millerism' before us.[10]

The American people needed to be protected from the kind of humbugs that turned into dangerous heresy, religious expressions that threatened the hegemony of a white, Protestant evangelical world view.

Religious attacks on Mormons and Millerites were mirrored in secular persecutions, which separated the new religious movements from many aspects of mainstream American society. Religious identity was a major factor in the shaping of American culture because of the interconnection of faith and community in the early nineteenth century. This was a time of religious expansion and experimentation, but there was also a move towards a more settled, steady form of expression by the middle of the century that focused on solving broader societal issues and maintaining a secure position for the evangelical definition of true religion in American society.[11] The emotional conversion experiences of the 1830s had developed into voluntary movements, like the American Home Missionary Society, aimed at reforming perceived social ills through the power of evangelical Christianity.[12] The messages of Mormons and Millerites conflicted with mainstream evangelical goals for a better society. The rapid expansion of both movements taught mainstream denominations valuable lessons about how to shape responses to new religious movements that were beyond the boundaries of orthodox

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[10] Abel C. Thomas, *A Complete Refutation of Miller's Theory of the End of the World in 1843* (Philadelphia:1843), 3,4.
[11] Hatch, *Democratization,* 204-205
[12] William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 10.

evangelical expressions. A memorial in the July 20, 1833 *Religious Intelligencer* called for mainstream denominations to come together so "they will catch like fire in the woods…and in a few years we do not doubt of seeing delegates interchanging Christian fellowship and counsel among all evangelical denominations, affording a pledge that the peculiarities of each are held subordinate to the common faith of all."[13] Mainstream evangelical Christianity moved to assert control of their practices as they began to recognize the aberrations they were fighting against were coming from democratic revival meetings and movements. By identifying Mormons and Millerites as being dangerous to community and societal structures, evangelical denominations implied that the new religious movements were also un-American and therefore outside the Constitutional freedom of religion protections. In this way, white Protestant evangelicals formed a homogeneous body of believers that, despite their theological differences, could be described as the only true American religion and the default church of the United States.

Understanding the history of religion in antebellum America requires an examination of several different aspects of American society. Religion is deeply woven into the fabric of American history and the historiography of religion is often coupled with other topics, such as politics and class formation.[14] Given the pervasiveness of religion in the lives of nineteenth-century Americans, it would seem obvious that religion as a stand alone subject would have a huge body of work for historians to draw on.

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[13] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vol. XVIII, July 20, 1833, 119.

[14] For example, Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008)*,* or Sean McLoud And William A. Mirola editors, *Religion and Class in America: Culture, History, and Politics* (Boston: Brill, 2009).

However, as religious historians Kevin Schultz and Paul Harvey wrote in 2010, "historians of American religion repeatedly have shown that religion figured in vital ways to the central events of American history. Yet the paradox remains that these events often appear in texts and classrooms without regard for religion. In short, religion is everywhere and nowhere."[15] Religion does not seem to occupy a place as a discrete subject of historical inquiry outside of the awakenings in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is seen as a factor in discussions around major events or movements, but sometimes the importance of religious expression and experience is secondary to the results of the event. Religious historians often get bogged down in theology, leaving the narrative of religion to be written as embellishment. In an era of rapid societal change in the nineteenth century, religion was central, shaping and defining political culture, gender, and class, yet its position in the historiography does not always reflect this importance.

That all free, white, citizens could worship at whatever altar they wanted was part of the mythology of America as a place where all white men could succeed and thrive. In the earliest written history of the United States, George Bancroft wrote of a nation whose government relied on the good will of the people and where, "Every man may enjoy the fruits of his industry; every mind is free to publish its convictions."[16] Part of America's unique place in the world was, according to Bancroft, that "Religion, neither persecuted, nor paid for by the state, is sustained by the regard for public morals and the earnestness

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[15] Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Recent Trends in American Religious History and Historiography," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 78, No. 1 (March 2010): 151.
[16] George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1842), 2-3.

of an enlightened faith."[17] Later historians of nineteenth-century America wrote of a population that carved a nation out of the wilderness; the frontier brought out the kind of rugged individualism that became an integral part of the American identity. Historian Derek H. Davis described these as "stirring narratives" that portrayed America "as great, noble, chosen, and mighty" and most nineteenth-century Americans would have identified with this assessment of a special people with "a special heritage and place in history."[18] An major theme of that special heritage was an enlightened faith, typified by tolerance and openness to different interpretations of the Scriptures and a sense of belonging no matter the shape of a man or woman's spirituality.

Historians who have written about the first half of the nineteenth century tend to see it as an era of unprecedented social and cultural change that challenged the structures of American society from the bottom to the top. Rapidly changing societal norms created what William McLoughlin, in his 1978 monograph *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, called a "profound cultural transformation affecting all Americans and extending over a generation or more."[19] Men and women seeking an anchor in such turbulent times turned to religion and a revival strengthened the ties between religion and the daily lives of most Americans. From the 1830s to the 1850s Protestant evangelicalism grew to be the dominant force in society, driving the reform movements of the nineteenth century and defining American identity across gender and class boundaries. The experiences of the people swept up in the Second Great Awakening were intensely personal and individual, leading to a religious landscape that, according to historian Nathan Hatch in 1987's *The*

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[17] Bancroft, *History*, 2.
[18] Derek H. Davis, "God and the Pursuit of America's Self-Understanding: Toward a Synthesis of American Historiography," *Journal of Church and State* Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 2004): 462, 464.
[19] McLoughlin, *Revivals*, 2.

Democratization of American Christianity, indicated a highly diverse culture with a loose

societal structure and no central authority.[20] Mark Noll's 2002 book *America's God*

argued that American identity is constructed from a unique blend of societal trends unlike

anywhere else, arguing that "by the early nineteenth century, a surprising intellectual

synthesis, distinctly different from the reigning intellectual constructs in comparable

Western societies, had come to prevail throughout the United States."[21] The supposed

uniqueness of the American experience, drawn from a multitude of subjects and filters,

drives the arguments of Noll and other historians of early nineteenth-century religion.

Examining how historians have treated the individual parts of the synthesis can track how

historiography influences modern narratives of nineteenth-century American identity.

For many nineteenth-century Americans their political and religious affiliation

could be identified by the social reform causes they supported. In 1978's *A Shopkeeper's*

Millennium, Paul Johnson describes how religion helped define political positions on

temperance and the anti-Freemason movement in 1830s Rochester. Johnson makes it

clear that certain churches supported certain causes, and Rochester's elite defined their

position on matters of social and moral importance by the stance of the church they

attended.[22] Most of the historiography of antebellum America agrees that a person's

religion or reform cause dictated their politics, social circles and business success.

Somewhat paradoxically, the personal freedoms expressed in religious revival evolved

into a more rigid structure designed to maintain a status quo of established middle-class,

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[20] Hatch, *Democratization,* 208.
[21] Mark. A. Noll, *America's God: From Johnathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 9. See also Davis, "God and the Pursuit of America's Self-Understanding," 463.
[22] Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 185-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978)*, 89-94.

evangelical Protestants. The relatively malleable nature of church membership, moving

from one denomination to another depending on the strength of the revival leader or

movement, did not lessen the impact of religion on American identity. This embedded an

American, Protestant Christianity, deeply in the consciousness of the nation as something

undefinable if ever present.[23] The plurality that is consistently acknowledged in the

historiography by historians such as Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll, and Gary Willis as part of

the exceptional nature of American identity. Nevertheless, despite the wealth of

denominational choices available, there were select affiliations in most central New York

communities that could ensure economic and social success.[24]

In the early twentieth century, Progressive American historiography also used

religious and reform tensions to explain the development of the United States. As

described by historian John Higham in 1959 and 1962 and synthesized by Lawrence

Levine in 1989, this school of thought pitted "class against class, section against section,

ideology against ideology and viewed the American past as jagged and discontinuous,

filled with cataclysms and sudden change."[25] Historian Whitney Cross argued for

economic class being the spark for change, but also for class a calming and unifying force

in places where revival burned too hot.[26] During the 1950s, the Consensus school

highlighted an American society that triumphed in difficult times to create a peaceful and

unified nation. Despite evidence to the contrary, Consensus historian Timothy L. Smith

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[23] Whitney L. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 41, 159.

[24] See Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* or Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004) for examples.

[25] Lawrence W. Levine, "The Unpredictable Past: Reflections on Recent American Historiography," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 94, No. 3 (June, 1989): 672.

[26] Cross, *The Burned-over*, 124-125, 136.

put the educated minister at the head of nineteenth-century social and religious

communities, claiming that "Clergymen inspired the dominant social movement of the

period, the crusade for humanitarian reform, at every stage. They were the principal

arbiters of manners and morals and the most venerated citizens of every community."[27]

The perceived importance of class in the structure of nineteenth-century American society

shifted again when, in 1978, historian Paul Johnson examined how the rising

industrialization of Rochester, New York created fundamental changes in the

community's social structure. Johnson argued that the working class and the newly

empowered middle-class were at odds over morality and power, as evidenced in the

temperance movements of the late 1820s and early 1830s. Rejection of authority based on

class as well as individual choice, was key in his analysis.[28] Class struggle defined

American history for revisionist historians like Johnson, much like the progressive

historians of the 1930s had argued. Johnson even applied class struggle to his definition

of religion and revival, theorizing it was the upper classes that drove revival and reform,

agreeing with Timothy Smith's 1958 assertion of a top down organization of power.[29]

In 1987's *Cradle of the Middle Class*, Mary Ryan examined the rise of the middle

class in another part of New York state, but took a very different approach to the impact

of economic class on society at large. Ryan argued that the history of class, social reform,

and religion were "hopelessly entangled with questions of family and gender," and "the

pressure for moral regeneration was exerted within and around families as much as across

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[27] Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 36.

[28] Johnson, *Shopkeeper*, 84-85, 112-113.

[29] Despite the title of Johnson's work, the study of religious revival and the impact on society is quite minimal. It is an interesting and valuable study of the economic impact of revival and reform movements, but it is not until his afterword he places religion in the framework of his argument.

classes."[30] Women's historians observed a change in the domestic economy that

generated something other than marketable goods, and the historiography reflected how

that change affected ideas of moral and social capital in the nineteenth-century family and

community. The study of antebellum Americans and their construction of both class and

domesticity now included an entire segment of the population that had been under-studied

in the first half of the twentieth century.[31] In 2004's *Market Sentiments*, Elizabeth White

Nelson analyzed the interconnection of gender and family in defining nineteenth-century

American identity. She concluded that, "Women were central to the definitions of both

domestic virtue and national economic virtue." [32] Religious revival and social reform

were driven by this new middle class looking to maintain their place of influence and

power in nineteenth-century American society. Both Ryan and Nelson argue that leisure

time and the acquisition of material things challenged the middle-class family by

encouraging dissolute behaviour or living beyond a family's means, and therefore the

community's morals must be controlled.[33] The religious revivals of the 1830s energized

the middle class and gave them the potential to impose their will on American political

culture and as a result maintain their hard-won, middle-class virtue.

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[30] Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 12.

[31] For a few examples on women and American religion see Mark Davis Hall, "Beyond Self-Interest: The Political Theory and Practice of Evangelical Women in Antebellum America," *Journal of Church and State,* Vol. 44, No.3 (Summer, 2002): 477-499, Catherine A. Berkus, "Searching for Women in Narratives of American Religious History," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, edited Catherine A. Berkus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 1-51, Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, edited Thomas A. Tweed (Berkley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997) 87-107, Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," in *Feminism and History*, edited Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 152-180.

[32] Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 29.

[33] Nelson, *Market Sentiments*, 24, Ryan, *Cradle*, 184-185.

The two new religious movements that drew the most attention from nineteenth-century Americans were Mormonism and Millerism. The historiography of the early nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints focuses mainly on their troubles and struggles in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois in the years leading to the death of Joseph Smith Jr and their subsequent migration to Utah. The Millerites were the antecedent of the modern Seventh Day Adventists, and much of the history of Millerism is traced through histories of the latter denomination. The historiography of new religious movements on the fringe of early American society the narrative tends to ignore their relationships with other, dominant denominations. In most cases the scope is limited to events of conflict and confrontation such as Dr. Brownlee's sermon against Millerism in 1842, or the residents of Jackson County, Missouri publishing their manifesto declaring their antipathy towards their Mormons neighbours in 1833.[34] As such there is very little basis or understanding of how new religious movements challenged the established religious and secular structures of the communities in which they appeared.

The historiography of religion in the early nineteenth-century focuses on a particular view of the relationship between American society and faith. The prevailing argument about American religious history, put forward by historians like Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, is for an extremely democratic, plural landscape. For example, historian of evangelical religion Barry Hankins argued for a unifying foundational theology for evangelical but does not step too far away from the prevailing idea of freedom of religion

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[34] In most histories of Mormonism and Millerism, the analysis of mainstream responses is limited to these specific flare ups without looking at how new religious movements developed into a threat that created a perceived need for response.

in nineteenth-century America[35] According to many historians, Americans were free to experiment with theology and spirituality in many forms, and this resulted in a uniquely American religious experience that could only be described as multi-faceted. From this sprang the historical argument that, while influential, no one religion could ever gain a position of active dominance. Hatch wrote of this idea as an organic separation of church and state; with so many choices, and the democratic nature of those choices, it was simply impossible for one church to become supreme and affect the governance of the nation.[36] For civic authorities in the nineteenth century it was important to maintain the perception of a separation of religious and secular spheres. It was not acceptable to tie religion directly to the legislative bodies or their decision as it would be in direct violation of the Constitution, and never when it would appear to favour a particular denomination. When the Methodist minsters in Rochester asked for a day of prayer, it was rejected initially because the request came from only one of the town's recognizable denominations.[37] Hatch's argument is built on this kind of evidence and has been the benchmark definition for American religious plurality in nineteenth-century America for thirty years.

The underlying issue with this argument lies in the documentary evidence from the areas most dramatically affected by religious revival and evangelical growth. In central and western New York, the flame of revival swept across what became known as the Burned Over District from the late 1820s into the early 1840s. In that time and in that place, new religious movements were opposed by more established denominations who

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[35] See Hankins, *American Evangelicals* 29 52-53, 106-107, 134, 183 for examples of the united but separate argument in many works of religious history.

[36] Hatch, *Democratization*, 6.

[37] "Proceeding of the Common Council of the City of Rochester, June 20, 1832," accessed April 12, 2016, http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589943012.

sponsored revivals and reform while using their influence and agency to prevent these new religious movements to thrive. The argument by Hatch, Noll and other historians for nineteenth-century freedom of religion relies on the idea that every free white man could worship as they chose, but this is simply not the case. Historians of the Burned Over District focus on religious plurality as defined by denominational identification while missing the underlying uniformity of evangelical belief.

Freedom of religion was not as egalitarian and democratic as the dominant historiography suggests. There was a right and wrong choice of religious practice, as demonstrated by the active opposition by evangelical denominations in the Burned Over District to the rise and successes of Mormonism and Millerism. These new religious movements came out of evangelical doctrine and practice, but with interpretations that were different enough to be beyond what was considered acceptable. As both movements gained in popularity and strength through the 1830s and 1840s, Protestant evangelical denominations formulated similar responses, aimed at ensuring anyone who was part of these movements were denied the right participate in mainstream American community life. Evangelicals used Mormonism and Millerism as examples of what was not "true" religion and how both movements were dangerous to the structure of American society. Freedom of religion, historically celebrated as uniquely American, was denied Mormons and Millerites who found it difficult, if not impossible, to practice their faith without interference from Protestant evangelical hegemony. By examining mainstream Protestant evangelical reactions to Mormons and Millerites, it is possible to see what religious freedom really meant to nineteenth-century Americans and how the roots of modern religious intolerance were put down in the Burned Over District in 1830s and 1840s.

Chapter 1
Revival Religion, Evangelicals, and Nineteenth-century America

When the New York State Board of Education met on January 8, 1838, they discussed a report regarding a petition asking for "a law to prohibit the practice of praying, singing, reading the Bible and other religious exercises" in any publicly funded educational institution in Oneida County.[1] The lengthy report examined the basis for the petition, and addressed how the perception of Biblical education was a dangerous intersection between church and state. It concluded however that:

> The practice of teaching morals according to the Christian Code and using the Bible for that purpose, that majority adopting it, is [not] any infringement whatever on the religious rights and liberty of any individual. To teach Christian morals, referring to the bible for both the principles and for their illustrations, is a widely different thing from teaching what is understood to be a Christian religion. Religion is a matter between man and his God…religious freedom is in no degree invaded when the morals of the bible are taught in public schools.[2]

The petition was rejected, and the Bible continued to be taught in Oneida County Schools. This report is an example of how deeply Christian thought, philosophy, and belief were woven into the fabric of nineteenth-century America. The belief that the Bible could be taught as strictly as a moral guide, without teaching Christianity, speaks to an absolute conviction that Christianity was a better way of life, not just a set of religious doctrines. Antebellum American society, in the wake of revival fervour and the resulting reform movements in the 1830s and 1840s, was so closely linked to religious practice and thought that it was nearly impossible to separate the influence and agency of Protestant Christianity from the secular lives of nineteenth-century white Americans. As oft-cited

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[1] *Oneida Whig*, February 6, 1838.
[2] *Oneida Whig*, February 6, 1838.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about the importance of religion in the civil operations of the United States, "Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic which they set forth in glowing colors than in the monarchy which they attack; and it is more needed in democratic republics than in any others"[3] Revival ecstasy in the 1830s would give way to religious restraint and control in the 1840s and 1850s, characterized by the reform movements and their aim of building a better, moral, and stable society.[4] In the opinion of Protestant evangelicals in upstate New York, a better and stable society depended on maintaining a religious landscape that allowed for the free practice of religion, but only within the boundaries of a particular form of Protestant evangelical expression.

Religion in the early decades of the nineteenth century experienced a paradigm shift as the result of the Second Great Awakening. This massive movement towards a new expression of Protestant faith began in 1801 at a revival meeting in Cane Ridge, Kentucky. The meeting was led by a group of Presbyterian ministers, but over the course of several weeks Methodist and Baptist preachers joined in to help promote the revival. Thousands of men and women from different racial and religious backgrounds came to Cane Ridge and experienced an emotional and ecstatic spiritual awakening.[5] The resulting wave of religious feeling would spread from the borders of American territory back into the more established communities of New England and, when combined with the rising sense of republican values among average Americans, created a new place for religion in

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[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America Vol. I and II*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Bantam Classics, 2004), originally published 1835, 357.
[4] Mark A. Noll *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 169.
[5] For an excellent summation of the impact and influence of the Cane Ridge revival and the effect on American religion see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1973), 432-435.

the consciousness of the nation.[6] Historian Mark Noll argues that religious thought moved from traditional, structured forms of Christianity in the eighteenth century to more adaptive and malleable expressions in the nineteenth century, driven by individual understanding of Scripture and belief that brought new meaning to old concepts and that created a space for new or marginal practices and faith.[7]

Revival religion in the early days of the Second Great Awakening was marked by ecstatic and emotional practices that would become hallmarks of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century.[8] Spiritual awakening could be marked by calling out, shouting, falling, and some even experienced the phenomena of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. These "gifts of the spirit" were believed to be extensions of the personal relationship most Americans had with their religion. In the older, traditional Protestant denominations, like the Episcopalian Church, congregants were provided with spiritual guidance and personal, public declarations of faith were not necessary. In contrast, the goal of the revival religion practiced by Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians was to bring about a personal, public declaration of faith or conversion. The process gave the converted a new relationship with their God and their religion because of an intensely personal, individual choice made by the believer. In the 1820s and 1830s, individual choice was a building block of American republican ideals and was, in part, marked by the rejection of traditional authority. Established denominations had strict and rigid church structures and doctrine which revival religion rejected.[9] Without a formal

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[6] Republican values were centred around being a virtuous citizen, working towards a better a nation, avoiding corruption and willingness to stand for the rights of man for the good of all.
[7] Mark. A. Noll, *America's God: From Johnathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 4.
[8] Noll, *History*, 167, Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 435.
[9] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, London: Princeton University Press, 1989), 173.

church structure to define doctrine, Protestant denominations struggled internally with membership as Americans moved from church to church, following new preachers and new messages while adhering to basic evangelical religious ideals. Revival religion was used to great effect by men like Presbyterian Charles G. Finney who, in the 1830s, turned conversion into a public event, witnessed by members of a community that had gone through the same experience. Such public, open, and directed conversion was different from the undirected, organic conversion of early revivals, and indicated a shift in practice towards authoritative religious activism for the good of the nation.[10]

Religious activism was one of the evangelical goals that sprang from revival religion. To prevent the converted from sliding back into un-Christian or wicked ways, it was important to keep them engaged in the promotion of the faith. Historian of evangelical religion Barry Hankins defines an evangelical as someone who believes in the authority of the Bible, the crucifixion as a divine sacrifice, and conversion as a life changing experience. From there the person is empowered to engage in spreading the word of God and providing service to humankind.[11] Methodists and Baptists in the 1830s and 1840s were defined by their nearly constant travelling and preaching, and Methodist circuit riders were one of the main reason for Methodism's rapid growth. Evangelical denominations defined their faith not just through Scripture, but through the work of the converted and their impact on society. The desire to improve the world through white, Protestant Christianity, was one of the driving forces behind the establishment of voluntary reform societies. Active and ongoing, evangelicals took their faith into the

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[10] Noll, *History*, 176.

[11] Barry Hankins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement* (Lanham, Boulder, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 2.

secular world to bring about change to better the nation and the world. There was an assumption among revival preachers that after conversion, no matter what denomination, the convert would pursue a life of social and moral reform.[12] The growth of evangelical denominations building on the emotion and power of revival religion created a deep connection between the religious and secular lives of nineteenth-century Americans.

Besides the conversion of the faithful, the revival meeting defined the boundaries of orthodoxy. The ecstatic and emotional examples of the typical revival at the turn of the century gave way to a more controlled form of expression in the mid-1800s. In a revival meeting, it was normal to be taken up with the passion for the Holy Spirit and sometimes that could result in some forms of wild expression.[13] Those expressions were to be acknowledged, but controlled; as the revivalist Charles G. Finney wrote of the physical manifestations of prayer, "These effects of the spirit of prayer upon the body are themselves no part of religion. It is only that the body is so weak that the feelings of the soul overpower it."[14] Confusion and chaos could only lead to a revival getting out of control which would open the door to evil influences. According to New England revivalist Simeon Harkey in 1842, "Persons often complain that the excitement has become so powerful that they cannot control it! This may be very true; but it is their *own fault*! When a revival has so far degenerated that it can longer be controlled, *it ought to stop*, and the sooner the better. It is no longer the work of the [Holy] Spirit, but a spurious

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[12] Hankins, *Evangelicals*, 15.

[13] The Pentecostal "gifts of the spirit" would not manifest until later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the chief complaints about revivals was the unadulterated emotional displays that often occurred. These were considered to not necessarily be the work of God, but emotional or physical distress.

[14] Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on the Revival of Religion* (New York, Chicago, Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1868), originally published 1832, 62-63.

wild fire, which will do incalculable injury."[15] As evangelical religion expanded

membership and influence, the emotional aspects of conversion were channeled into

practical goals to reform the nation and the world.

Methodists and Baptists had attained prominent positions through their work in

the expanding edges of American territory, especially Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri, in

the early days of the republic. Their personal conversion message and their exhortation to

take that conversion experience into the world made evangelicalism supremely attractive

to many men and women in the borderlands of the United States. In the age of revival,

denominational boundaries were flexible, and it was not uncommon for people to change

loyalties depending on the church sponsoring the revival. In the record of an 1826 revival

season, the reports from different churches noted how evangelical religion affected men

and women from all denominations. In Mount Vernon, New York for example, "The

number of hopeful converts is about one hundred and forty. Fifty-nine have united with

the Presbyterian church; about thirty with the Baptist Church and some with the

Methodists."[16] In Verona, New York the situation was similar, "There was a remarkable

quickening of professors. They would give up their hopes, and obtain new ones, and

engage in the work with zeal and fidelity. The number of converts in the town is about

one hundred. Some of these are without the bounds of my society, and some belong to the

Methodist and Baptists families and have united with those denominations."[17] The intent

behind revival religion and the resulting evangelical movement was to bring people

together into a unified body of believers who could affect real change on the world. That

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[15] Simeon W. Harkey, *The Church's Best State or Constant Revivals of Religion* (Baltimore: Publication Rooms, 1842), 147. Italics original.
[16] *A Narrative of the Revival of Religion in the County of Oneida* (Utica: Hastings and Tracy, 1826), 4.
[17] *A Narrative of the Revival*, 14.

unified body of evangelical believers belied the separateness of denominations and a pluralistic religious landscape. While the evangelical denominations would routinely find things to disagree about amongst themselves, in their opinion there was no other form of religious expression that could be considered true and right in the progress of American society.

Beginning in the first decades of the 1800s, some religious movements and new theologies found themselves in the position of not quite fitting with the growing influence of the new evangelical, enlightened faith of America. Movements like Universalism were viewed with suspicion and garnered direct attention from across denominational boundaries. Universalism's theology was only slightly removed from orthodox teachings, but as itinerant Universalist minister George Rogers recounted in 1845, it drew extreme reactions from established congregations. While holding Universalist meetings in a sympathetic Lutheran Church a mob broke in:

> [They]rushed into the house as the people were assembling, and shutting the doors, threatened vengeance to any who should enter. They attacked one of the vestrymen with clubs and brickbats, and cut and bruised him seriously. They also attempted to strangle the sexton with his own neck-handkerchief. On Sunday, authorized by the vestry, I [Rogers] sent notices through the city that I would occupy the church in the evening. The Mayor, however, attempted to prevent my doing so--he told me he could not be answerable for the consequences if I did, to myself personally as well as to the church.[18]

Rogers recounted another instance where the clergy of a small town in New York come together to block his ability to use public spaces, claiming they made a direct request to prevent his preaching precisely because of his successes, "very large congregations were attracted to my meetings by motives of curiosity and opposition, and this continuing with

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[18] George Rogers, *Memoranda of the Experience, Labors, and Travels of a Universalist Preacher* (Cincinnati: John A. Gurley, 1845), 144-145.

an increase rather than abatement, the clergy of the city took alarm, and actually went in a body, some half dozen of them and persuaded the Commissioners to exclude me from the Court-house," and to his dismay one of those clergymen was to refute his preaching in the same court-house.[19] Rogers' experiences are indicative of a society that valued a homogeneous version of Protestant Christianity or at least had some certainty of where the boundaries of diversity needed to be set and maintained. The hegemony of evangelical determination in response to what was considered heretical interpretations of practice and theology was bolstered by the revival meetings that were a fixture in central New York.

There was perhaps nowhere that the impact of revivals and evangelical religion was felt more than in the Burned Over District in upstate New York. This area of seventeen counties, broadly situated between the Finger Lakes and Lake Erie, was home to some of the most powerful religious revivals and gave birth to many new religious movements.[20] Oneida, Wayne, Monroe, and Genesee counties embraced with considerable fervour revival religion and the resulting evangelical movements.[21] Throughout the counties of upstate New York, evangelical missionaries brought their message of revival and reform inciting fresh waves of religious emotion and passion. Drawing on the letters of Charles Finney, historian Whitney Cross described how revival passion and emotion often left deflated religious feelings behind and Sydney Ahlstrom wrote how "Wave after wave of diverse religious excitement made New York notoriously

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[19] Rogers, *Memoranda*, 151.
[20] The boundaries of the Burned-over District are notoriously hard to define. Some authors place it as west of the Erie Canal. Whitney Cross says anything west of the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains qualify where revivals held sway through the upper part of New York. This project uses Cross' definition, as it encompasses a wider and broader area that sometimes gets overlooked in the historical record.
[21] Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 185-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 98, Ryan, *Cradle*, 40.

'burned-over'."[22] Outside of urban centres like Rochester, the counties of central New York were dotted with small hamlets, villages, and townships that would often have distinct church buildings or gathering places for Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. These areas had small populations that raised money, erected buildings, and maintained distinct and separate congregational fellowships indicating a deep connection between evangelical religion and the culture of these small communities.
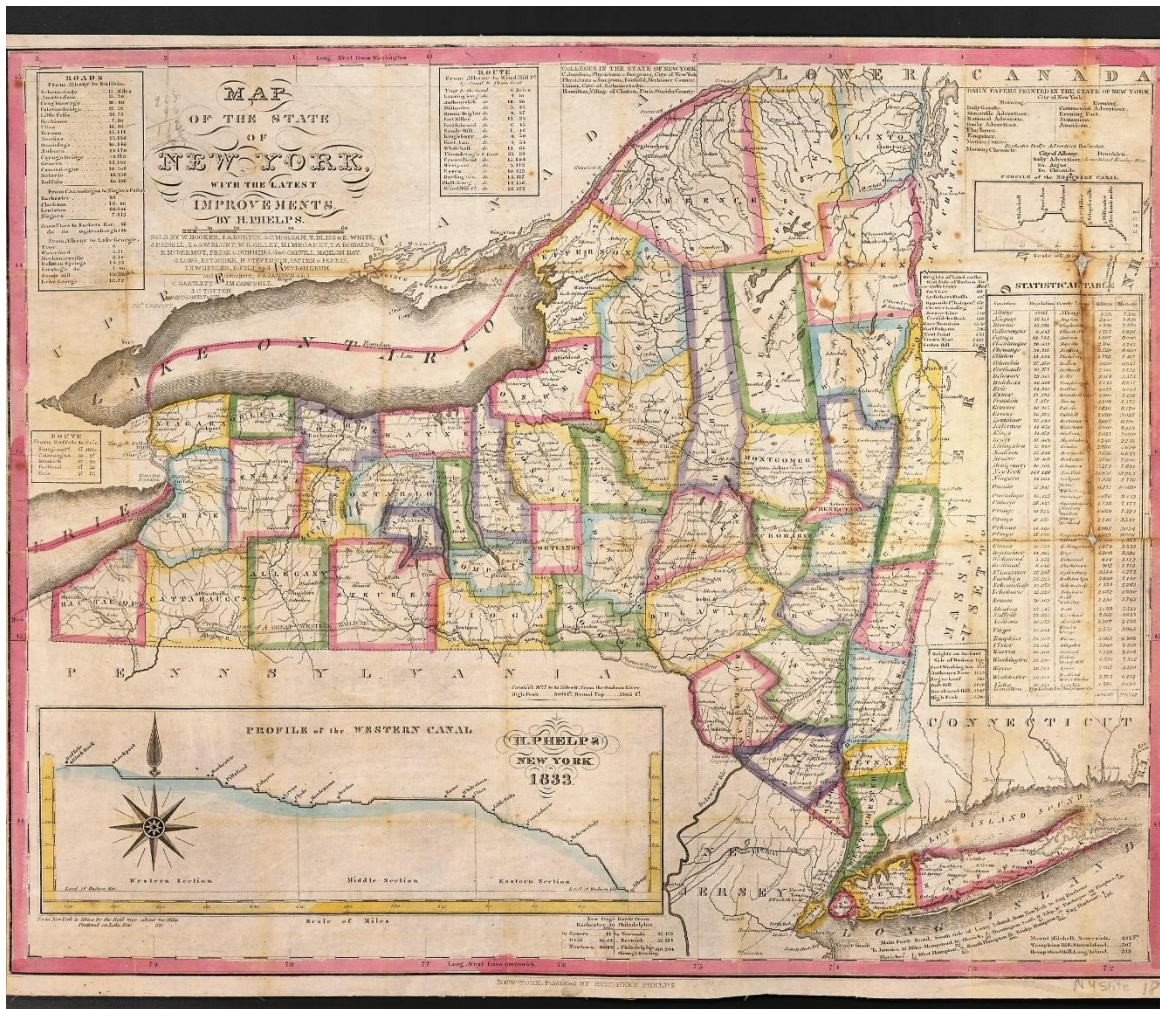
Figure 1. New York State-1833. Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collections. Used with no restrictions.

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[22] Whitney L. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 257, Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 477n.

Recurring revivals and the cacophony of voices exhorting the faithful to continual

conversion and rededication to evangelical values also made the Burned Over District a

perfect spot for new religious movements to take root. Upstate New York was a place

where the boundaries of religious practice were pushed to the limits of established norms.

Jemima Wilkinson and her Society of Universal Friends found a home in Seneca County,

while Mother Ann Lee and the Shakers established communes in several northern New

York communities. Historian Whitney Cross lists several other communal societies that

set up in in the Burned Over District, separating themselves from society to practice what

they believed was their version of God's work.[23] These movements operated outside the

boundaries of mainstream religion, and were not part of the evangelical push to convert

the world. Movements like the Shakers were acknowledged as being different but, as

Robert Baird wrote in 1844, as long as they did not cause a disturbance "the government

suffers them to gratify their fancies undisturbed. We prefer letting them alone, under the

conviction that, all things considered it is better to do so, and with the hope that the light

that surrounds them, and with which they must come in contact in their intercourse with

the world, will, in God's own time, reach their minds."[24] The key to surviving or

succeeding as a new religious movement was to keep to yourself and not disrupt the

structures of the evangelized communities of nineteenth-century America.

Mormons and Millerites drew attention and ire from many corners because they

did not confine their activities to the fringes of religious or secular society. Their religious

practices created issues in the secular world by disrupting local businesses, breaking up

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[23] Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 30-38. Cross notes that communal religion spread throughout western and central New York in the early 1800s, perhaps as a withdrawal from the excesses of revivalism.
[24] Robert Baird, *Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 284.

families, and creating disturbances on city streets and country fields. These two new

religious movements were perceived as damaging to the fabric of American society, but

since they were religious and specifically protected under the Constitution there was little

that could be done in an official, legal capacity. The plurality of religious expression

combined with individualism and republicanism in the 1830s and 1840s, created an open

society that nominally separated the religious and the secular.[25] In almost every part of

central New York state however, that was simply not the case. The interconnection

between nineteenth-century society and religion meant one could not be separated from

the other. That lack of separation allowed white Protestant evangelical denominations to

provide a religious denunciation of these new movements on the grounds of their

perceived threat to secular society. Evangelical preaching and attacks against Millerites

and Mormons in public and in print were redistributed by secular publications.

Evangelical clergy and laypeople provided careful and thoughtful dissections of Mormon

and Millerite doctrine, providing the kind of religious response that would define what

was acceptable practice both in the church and in the community. Civil authorities then

took theological claims of potential societal damage and ongoing disturbances of the

peace and acted against these new religious movements for the good of the community.

Through the 1830s and 1840s orthodox Protestant evangelical denominations

strengthened their position as the dominant form of Christian expression, while new

religious movements began to challenge for spiritual space and recognition. As the

nineteenth century progressed the successes of Mormonism and Millerism made them

targets of ridicule, vilification, and persecution by denominations like Baptists and

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[25] Hatch, *Democratization*, 6.

Methodists that had themselves been marginalized in the not so distant past. For many evangelical denominations the threat from Mormonism and Millerism was not just to the hegemony of white Protestant evangelicalism in America, but to the very fabric of American society. With the rise of Mormonism in the 1830s, what had appeared to be an easily dismissed delusion and humbug became a significant religious movement that in some areas, threatened the dominant position of evangelical religion. Before the Mormons moved from their homes in Wayne and Ontario counties to Ohio and Missouri, the local evangelical churches viewed the Mormons with incredulity and derision.[26] As their numbers grew in the 1830s, more structured and focused attacks on the Mormon theology came from the evangelical clergy of New York state in response to the return of sometimes familiar faces as missionaries, and the active attempts of the Mormons to have white men and women leave their old congregations to join the Saints. As the Mormons moved west, another new religious movement rose to prominence in the 1840s, threatening the break-up of evangelical congregations in the Burned Over District from the inside. Reaction to Millerite preaching and evangelizing was swift and unbending. The popularity of William Miller's prophetic vision and the growth the movement created yet another challenge to the prominence of evangelicalism in New York. One of the main centres of Millerism was Rochester, Monroe County in the heart of the Burned Over District. Here, the Millerite message was combated by forces that pushed second advent believers to the fringes of secular and religious society.

The reactions of mainstream evangelical denominations to these new religious movements demonstrate a uniformity in belief and practice when faced with external

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[26] *Honeoye Falls Times,* Feb. 22, 1922.

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challenges for membership, influence, and prestige. It is through the persecution of the

Mormons and Millerites that white Protestant evangelicals can be identified as a single,

homogeneous group dedicated to protecting the place of their definition of true religions

and American ideals.

<u>**Chapter 2-**</u>
<u>**The Golden Bible: Evangelicals and the Saints**</u>

In 1829 the editors of the Rochester society periodical *The Gem, Of Literature and Science* made note of a wealthy local farmer named Martin Harris who was looking for someone to publish a newly discovered sacred text called the Book of Mormon. As the editors of *The Gem* commented, "The subject attracts much attention among a certain class, and as it will be ere long before the public, we shall endeavor to meet it with the comment it may deserve."[1] The publication of what purported to be a new testament of a living God drew a strong initial response. For example, in May 1830 a contributor to the *Albany Argus* wrote "A viler imposition has never been practiced. It is an evidence of fraud, blasphemy, and credulity shocking to the Christian and moralist."[2] What was most distressing to observers however, was that trustworthy and respectable people were joining the new movement. So, when the well-respected Martin Harris mortgaged his farm to publish the Book of Mormon, the *Albany Argus* noted with concern that, "Mr. Harris has ever borne the character of an honorable and upright man, and an obliging and benevolent neighbor. He had secured to himself by honest industry a respectable fortune-- and he has left a large circle of acquaintances and friends to pity his delusion."[3] The same reports described Joseph Smith Jr., the founder the new religion, as an "ignorant and nearly unlettered man" who "by some hocus pocus, acquired such influence over a wealthy farmer [Harris] of Wayne County."[4] It was easy to dismiss the foundations of the new religious movement as spurious and possibly sinister.

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[1] *The Gem, Of Literature and Science*, September 5, 1829.
[2] *Albany Argus*, May 5, 1830.
[3] *Albany Argus*, June 21, 1830.
[4] *Albany Argus*, May 25, June 21, 1830.

Figure 2. Frontispiece *Mormonism Unvailed*, E.D. Howe, 1834. Used without restriction.

Mormonism needed to be monitored to see if the hysteria would spread. By 1831 the new religion had swelled, prompting one observer to note that, "In character or practical operations, it has no redeeming feature. It is with regret however, that we are obliged to add, that it has not proved unsuccessful. There are now, probably, 1000 disciples of the Mormon creed."[5] In Monroe County, the *Rochester Republican* reported on a Mormon preacher holding a meeting north of Rochester, "What number of hearers he had we are not informed, but for the honor of *intelligent* men we hope and trust his followers are and will be 'few and far between.' This matter must be the *ne plus ultra* [most extreme] of fanaticism and delusion. If men will go beyond this in belief, verily there can be no end to their credulity."[6] While provocative and interesting, evangelicals

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[5] *Delaware Gazette,* June 29, 1831.
[6] *Rochester Republican*, Dec. 27, 1831. Italics original

believed the Mormon message could not provide any spiritual fulfillment and therefore must be opposed.

Mormonism sprang from a series of prophetic visions and angelic visitations to a young man in Wayne County, New York in the 1820s. Joseph Smith Jr. was the son of a struggling farmer, and well known for being a so-called "treasure hunter."[7] He claimed that in 1823 he was visited by an angel named Moroni, who told him of a book made of golden plates buried under a hill near Palmyra, New York that would provide answers to his spiritual yearning. The angel directed him to the place and then told him to wait until 1827, when he was allowed to retrieve the plates along with two stones called Urim and Thummim that allowed him to understand and translate the unknown language on the plates. These plates contained the story of the original inhabitants of North America, who they were and how they got there and, more importantly, "the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants."[8] Smith, who had been telling his neighbours and friends of the visitations of the angel and the new testimony of God, went to the home of local farmer Martin Harris who willingly provided food, shelter, and space to translate the plates. Over the course of two years and with the help of several scribes, since Smith was illiterate, the Book of Mormon came into existence and the Latter-day Saints became the newest religion in central New York.

Joseph Smith later described how interdenominational disputes affected his search for spiritual enlightenment. Smith was looking for something that could unravel the twists

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[7] The Smith family had moved from Vermont to New York in the early 1800s and, when their farm began to fail, the entire family were well-known for their services as mystical locators of gold or buried treasure.
[8] "Testimony of Joseph Smith," in *The Book or Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1990), introduction.

and turns of an evangelical doctrine that seemed the same regardless of denomination, but

that had jealously guarded and delineated boundaries:

> When the converts began to file off, some to one party and some to
> another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests
> and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great
> confusion and bad feeling ensued; priest contending against priest, and
> convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if
> they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest
> about opinions. In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I
> often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right;
> or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it,
> and how shall I know it?[9]

Smith's yearning for a unified religion helped define some of the practices of his new

faith and helped attract others looking for answers to the theological issues of the day.

The Book of Mormon tapped into the uniqueness of the American experience by

providing a chronicle of North America that tied it to the Old Testament and the first

century, primitive church. Evangelical sects like Alexander Campbell's Disciples of

Christ, popularly known as Christians, were attracting followers based on a call to restore

the tenets of the same first century church, and Smith's new testament was originally seen

another way to connect those ancient traditions to this new place. [10]

Several features of Joseph Smith's theology drew intense criticism from

evangelical laity, scholars, and clergy. Evangelicals criticized the co-opting of their

liturgical practices, claims of the exclusive divine election of their followers, their

avowed goal of establishing a temporal Kingdom of God, and claiming to have the final,

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[9] Joseph Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* in *Journal History of the Church 1830-1839, 1830.* Church History Library. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

[10] Alexander Campbell's Disciples of Christ was an evangelical denomination that was dedicated to the purpose of restoring the church to its primitive, first century roots. The Christians were one of the first of the nineteenth century evangelical restoration movements, but still operated within the boundaries of evangelical practice. The primitive church and its traditions refers to the activities of the original Apostles after receiving the Holy Spirit, as chronicled in the book of Acts, and their dedication to spreading their message across the ancient world.

and therefore truest testament of God to man supplanting the Bible. First, the Mormons

gained converts from mainstream denominations by using some of the features of

evangelical liturgy to promote their interpretation of Christianity. In one of the earliest

clerical refutations of Mormonism in 1831, Rev. Diedrich Willers wrote of how the

Mormons attracted converts from several denominations including Presbyterians,

Lutherans and Methodists. The Mormons were especially attractive to Baptists, Willers

wrote, "because of their teachings about the universal grace of God and lastly because of

their agreement in attitude toward the proper subject of holy baptism."[11] Joseph Smith

took pieces of the dominant religious and political themes of the day and wove them into

a new foundational document that satisfied many evangelical adherents' needs. It

provided historical stability like the Old Testament and provided answers to some

Biblical riddles.[12] Willers scornfully recorded that the supposed new testament of God

brought nothing new to the spiritual table, "there are teachings which we have in the true

Bible and we need no New Bible in addition. Such superfluous revelations conflict with

the wisdom of God which has done nothing unnecessary."[13] In 1834 the *Liberal*

Advocate, an interdenominational periodical in Rochester, New York, published a pointed

description of what was not true religion aimed at Mormon theological claims:

> True religion is sincere, and is founded in a just sense of virtue and
> wisdom. It is generally slow and steady of growth; and is known by its
> consistency and good works. But false religion is a cheat, founded in folly
> and wickedness-generally the artifice of base men, calculated to disguise
> fraudulent intentions, and to impose on the ignorant and credulous. Don't
> trust that teacher who preaches up mysteries he cannot unravel or

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[11] D. Michael Quinn, "The First Months of Mormonism: A Contemporary View by Rev. Diedrich Willers," *New York History* Vol. 54 no. 3 (July 1973): 331.
[12] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1973), 508.
[13] Quinn, "The First Months," 331.

comprehend himself, lest through ignorance or design, he leads you on to destruction.[14]

To contemporary critics, one of the most dangerous things about Mormonism was how it disguised itself as an extension of the true religious expressions that were creating so much dynamic change across New York state. According to mainstream opinion, the Mormons were co-opting the traditions of mainstream denominations and turning them in to a perverse version of true religion. By using baptism, acknowledgements of the divine trinity, and proclaiming the restoration of the miracles, the Mormon faith was not just a foible, it was heresy threatening the nation. Their rapid growth, the questionable provenance of the sacred book, and the claims of miracles without proof all pointed to a corruption of true religion as defined by the white orthodox Protestant denominations.

The Mormon use of evangelical terminology and liturgical practices in their new doctrine challenged, on a personal level, the faith of evangelicals. As religious historian Douglas Davies wrote, "the shared use of common terms only confuses and sometimes frustrates relations between them in a way that is not simply theoretical or abstractly theological but emotional."[15] The personal attachment to evangelical practice generated emotional responses when confronted with Mormonism. After itinerant evangelist Nancy Towle visited with the Saints in 1832 and observed their religious services she wrote, "I viewed the whole, with the utmost indignation and disgust: and as a mere profanation and sacrilege of all religious things."[16] In a conversation with zealous Mormon convert W.W. Phelps, Towle indicated in no uncertain terms what she thought of their religion, and how she believed its eventual collapse would damage American society:

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[14] *Liberal Advocate,* Vol. III, April 6, 1834, 121.
[15] Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 241.
[16] Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated* (Charleston: James L. Burges, 1832), 142.

> If I had your book, Sir I would burn it! And permit me, in return to prophecy respecting yourself. You will go away into your Zion and you will very shortly find your faith fail you. Then you will reel and stagger as a drunken man; and as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke; you will run to and fro; your substance, at length is wasted; your System of Doctrine has come to the ground, your family is in wretchedness, and your children around you crying for bread.[17]

The emotion expressed by Towle was not uncommon, but clerics who saw the sympathy garnered by the Mormons after persecutions in Ohio and Missouri believed in more measured and reasoned responses.[18] As a writer for the *Religious Intelligencer* noted in 1833 "When we assail any heresy with slander, we place a powerful weapon in the hands of its propagators. With much show of truth, they can cry 'persecution' and will excite a suspicion that other denominations misrepresent them because they fear to have the truth known."[19] Education and information was believed to be the key; once people understood how damaging the Mormon doctrine was they would make an informed choice. The nominally plural religious landscape allowed for individual choice in form and practice, but evangelicals hoped that by educating, informing, and encouraging a critical population, that new forms of expression would not survive, let alone thrive.

A second feature of Mormon theology and practice that set them apart and drew criticism was belief in the apostasy of all other forms of religious expression and the exclusive election of the Latter-day Saints.[20] New revelations from the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1835 generated a second volume of sacred work, *Doctrine and Covenants*,

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[17] Towle, *Vicissitudes*, 144, 146.

[18] The Mormons clashed violently with non-Mormons their settlements in Kirtland, Ohio and Jackson County, Missouri in the mid 1830s. The so-called Mormon War was fought in Missouri after Governor Lilburn Boggs issued a proclamation calling for the extermination of all the Mormons in Missouri.

[19] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vo. XVIII, Sept. 14, 1833, 247.

[20] Election refers to Protestant believers being the favoured of God, guaranteeing them a place in coming millennial kingdom. Mormons believed that only those baptised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were truly the elect. This meant that, to a Mormon, all other Christian believers were apostates and had no place in the eventual Kingdom of God.

which took established denominational aspects and added things that were completely

new and different as an indication of the Mormons' exclusive place. As historian Jan

Shipps noted, Mormonism "drew on so many elements other than the Judeo-Christian

tradition that its adherents were not reintegrated into traditional Christianity but quite the

reverse."[21] The *Ogdensburg Gazette* in 1833 noted a change in the practices of the

Mormons that affected their relationship with evangelical denominations, "Originally

members of almost every sect, [now] they cordially unite in detesting all save

Mormons."[22]

The Book of Mormon's connection to the lost tribes of Israel as the ancestors of

the indigenous people of North America and the claim of restoring the primitive church,

bringing the world out of the dark and into the light, made Mormon claims to exclusive

election more immediate and tangible to converts. Protestant evangelical election was

contingent on salvation, it was secondary to accepting Jesus and being baptised into one

of the many evangelical denominations. In Mormonism, however, conversion to the faith

automatically and immediately meant becoming part of God's newly restored nation. As

Shipps states, "for nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants being part of the chosen

people was a theological construct with less immediacy than the salvation experience,"

while for Mormons, they were called to gather and, "the claim to chosenness became the

principle around which they ordered their existence."[23] Mormons believed they were

restoring the original, pure church doctrines directly through the text of the Book of

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[21] Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 35.
[22] *Ogdensburg Gazette*, February 7, 1833.
[23] Shipps, *Mormonism*, 119.

Mormon, and only those who were part of their gathering would be part of that exclusive community.

The Mormon shift towards belief in their own theological and social supremacy drew direct attention, even in a religious landscape that was nominally pluralistic. Mormonism cast itself as the final divine revelation to humanity and claimed to be the only true voice of a living God who communicated directly with their Prophet. Evangelicals believed the Saints were using familiar doctrine to devalue the work of revival Christianity and, by establishing something new and different with that doctrinal base, damaging the potential progress and good works of evangelical Christianity.[24] Part of accepted evangelical doctrine was preparing for the *eventual* establishment of the Kingdom of God, a spiritual place where the principles of true religion would reign supreme. In contrast, Joseph Smith explicitly stated that God's Kingdom would not be a spiritual or allegorical one. In an 1844 statement of doctrine Smith wrote, "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel, and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes. That Zion will be built upon this continent. That Christ will reign personally upon the earth, and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisal glory."[25] The freedom from state interference that allowed the expansion and success of evangelical denominations appeared to be threatened by Smith's visions of a literal Kingdom of God. In the counties of upstate New York, guarding against the unification of the secular and the spiritual was a supposedly key tenet for evangelicals who did not want to be seen as interfering in the civil or secular affairs, despite their clear influence on civil government. The Mormon

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[24] Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical American and Early Mormonism," *New York History* Vol. 61, No. 4 (October 1980): 379-380.

[25] Joseph Smith, "Latter Day Saints," in *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* ed. I Daniel Rupp (Philadelphia: J.Y. Humphreys, 1844), 410.

openness about the future unification of their spiritual and secular governments was another example of the danger of the doctrine that evangelical used to justify their responses.

According to mainstream opinion, Mormon rejection of traditional, established societal structures had social ramifications, highlighted by the destruction of traditional families. The *Delaware Gazette* reported in 1831, "The infatuation of these people is astonishing beyond measure. Husbands tearing themselves from their wives and such if their families refuse to go, and wives deserting their husbands to join the infatuated clan."[26] Evangelical Protestants also believed that Mormonism was damaging to the building blocks of American society by subverting a family structure that was tied to church membership. In 1983's *Cradle of the Middle Class,* historian Mary Ryan wrote that, "the family was not only on par with the church but also analogous in organization and function. The meetinghouse and the private hearth were judged to be essential to the practice of religion."[27] In smaller centres, the family unit was the building block of thriving and successful communities; by causing such familial disruption Mormonism was tearing at the roots of American society.

The belief in the societal danger of Mormonism meant that when Mormon missionaries appeared in towns or villages, the first wave of resistance often did not come from the pulpit but from secular newspapers that were the voice of the community. The December 25, 1830 issue of *The Gem* from Rochester, New York reported on Mormon missionaries, "There are preachers travelling about…who pretend that it is the only

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[26] *Delaware Gazette*, December 28, 1831.
[27] Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 22-23.

revelation which men can safely live and die by" and "when the work spoke of came

before the world, it proved to be such a spawn of wickedness, that the press aimed a blow

at it and it fell ere it had scarce seen the light."[28] The regular press may have been an

independent entity, but in the towns and villages of central New York there can be little

doubt as to the influence of evangelical religion on the local publications. Editors and

writers took the lead in criticism because in 1830 Mormonism appeared to be simply a

delusional fantasy. Laypeople considered the indulgence of the clergy of central New

York and their focus on their own evangelical agenda as one of the failings that allowed

the movement to gain a foothold. A writer in the September 1, 1831 *New York Courier*

laid the blame for the rise of Mormonism on the preachers of central New York who were

too blinded by their own revival fervor to recognize the heresy:

> People laughed at the first intimation of the story…they [Mormons] began
> to talk very seriously, to quote scripture, to read the bible, to be
> contemplative, and to assume that grave studied character, which so easily
> imposes on ignorant and superstitious people. They treated their own
> invention with the utmost religious respect. [It] is one of the strangest
> pieces of fanaticism to which the ill-advised and the worst regulated
> ambition and folly of certain portions of the clergy in Western New York
> ever gave birth. What a lesson it ought to teach us.[29]

A piece in the Delhi, New York, *Delaware Gazette* declared that "Mormonism is the fruit

of religious excitement in this quarter [western New York] combined with roguery,

ingenuity, and ignorance frequently operating successfully on those who ought to know

better."[30] Revival fervor brought on an openness to religious experience that, combined

with freedom of choice and rejection of clerical authority, created the perfect ground for

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[28] *The Gem*, *of Literature and Science* Dec. 25, 1830.
[29] *New York Morning Courier,* September 1, 1831.
[30] *Delaware Gazette*, Dec. 28, 1831.

Mormonism. The secular and the religious came together, and defining truth became an individual choice with the lines between superstition and true religion blurred.[31]

Democratic religious expression and the continual sweep of revival created a situation that allowed for the unchecked spread of Mormonism. Rev. B.B. Drake reported to the American Home Missionary Society in 1832 that Mormonism was present in Borodino, New York because people had been "wafted and bemused by every wind of doctrine, til they neither know or care what is truth or what is error."[32] Despite the appearance of being an easily identifiable delusion, Mormonism's spread brought direct responses from mainstream clergy and denominations because it did not wither and die like so many religious innovations before. There was no safe assumption that the American people would understand how Mormonism was damaging the structure of the nation without proper spiritual and clerical guidance. It now became the province of religion to show the difference between true and false religions and how false practice was dangerous to the nation that so dearly valued freedom of religion.

Many evangelicals believed that religious expression that was uncontrolled and undirected, even nominally, by a true religionist was directly responsible for the rise of new religious movements like Mormonism. One issue of the religious periodical the *Liberal Advocate* recorded that "scenes took place which would disgrace a moral and religious people" at a Methodist meeting in Palmyra, New York. The editors asked, "when will fanatics discover that by such conduct they are sapping the very foundation of

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[31] Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* Vol. 61, No. 4 (October 1980): 369.

[32] B.B. Drake correspondence to the AHMS, quoted in Whitney L. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 148.

vital piety and true religion?"[33] Twenty miles to the south in Mendon, New York

fanaticism had taken hold of the Baptist church, reporting on the wave of 1832 baptisms,

the *Liberal Advocate* noted, "When we see the degradation to which weak human nature

has been reduced of late, we cannot wonder at such fanatical extravagance."[34] The

competition for believers and communicants that created longer and more spiritually

draining meetings, especially for the Methodists and Baptists, led to a desire to find

middle ground to promote true religious expression. In an editorial about the failing of

contemporary religion to control the outbreak of heresy, the *Liberal Advocate* again

called out the fractious, competitive nature of revival religion and the damage it was

causing, "What better is *orthodoxy* as at present managed than *Mormonism*? It manifests

itself in the same disorderly absurdity--proceeds from the same fanaticism, and tends to

the same result. Reason and common sense are prostrated before it--and error and

delusions follow in its train. It has nothing of the meek spirit of Christianity about it."[35]

What mainstream Protestants saw as the baffling attraction of Mormon belief

challenged the social structure and hierarchy of communities that had managed to strike a

delicate balance between religious denominations. Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians

frequently clashed over memberships and influence, but they were united in their

condemnation of the Mormon incursion. By the early 1830s, the Mormons had made the

rapid transition from a harmless delusion to a dangerous heresy. In a letter to *The*

Religious Intelligencer in 1833, an anonymous author warned of the perils of dismissing

Mormonism noting "it is time that Mormonism was met; not as hitherto, with sneer and

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[33] *Liberal Advocate,* Vol. II, April 14, 1832, 61.
[34] *Liberal Advocate*, Vol. II, April 14, 1832, 60.
[35] *Liberal Advocate*, Vol. II, February 23, 1832, 2. Italics original.

misrepresentation, but *fairly, candidly,* and in the spirit of *charity* and *truth*. Let no one imagine it is so fraught with absurdity as to be harmless."[36] The spread of Mormon doctrine and faith was directly measurable by the missionaries who made their way back east into New England to preach the word and convert those who were ready to accept new interpretations in the wake of revival fervor. The Mormon message was attractive to what historian Jan Shipps called "the community of seekers, who either stood apart from existing churches or moved to and fro among them."[37] Mormonism grew because believers became apostles, preaching everywhere they went, spreading the word of the new testament of God among those primed for the next wave of revival.

In 1832, while the Mormons were moving west to the promised Zion in Ohio, the gathering of new Saints continued unabated in Wayne County. Missionaries who came home to spread the word of their new gospel did not receive a warm welcome. While those who had converted to Mormonism and moved away were pitied, those who brought it back and tried to get others to leave were something else. As the movement grew from its small beginnings, missionaries returned to the fertile ground of the Burned Over District recruiting and converting from all the evangelical denominations. One of the most famous examples came in Monroe County in Mendon Township. Samuel Smith, brother of the Prophet Joseph Smith, left a copy of the Book of Mormon at a local inn. It was read by Phineas Young who then passed it on to his brother Brigham. This key event in Mormon history led to the baptising of Brigham Young in 1833 and he would go on to

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[36] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vo. XVIII Sept. 14, 1833, 247. Italics original.
[37] Shipps, *Mormonism*, 78.

guide the Latter-day Saints from the hostile borders of Missouri to Utah in 1847.[38] The

baptism of Young and other early Mendon Saints came after a struggle with the local

evangelical churches in the small township, as members of the Methodist and Baptist

churches came together to try and stop Samuel Smith from preaching. The Mendon

Baptist Church's 1832 records noted that gathering was "under the painful necessity of

excluding several members for imbibing the heresy of Mormonism," and that Mormon

meetings in the township were "attacked by the town people and stoned until they

dispersed."[39]

Mormon missionaries managed to draw negative attention in almost every

community they went to. The small gathering of Mormons who had been baptised into

the faith by Brigham Young and his neighbour Heber C. Kimball in Mendon packed up

and moved to Ohio in 1834. The Mormons continued to send missionaries into Monroe

County and central New York, but they were met with stiff resistance. The troubles

experienced by the Mormons in Missouri in the 1830s generated some sympathy, but

mostly from a distance. There was some indication that Mormon missionary Benjamin

Sweat, who was tarred and feathered in 1838, was daring his tormentors when he said tar

would not stick; the local paper quoted an observer saying, "We presume they found a

different sort of tar from what he was acquainted with, for those who were present when

he returned, said it stuck well." The outrage over the violent actions of the mob was

mitigated by the editors of the reporting newspaper acknowledging, "We know not what

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[38] The story of Brigham Young's conversion and elevation to Apostle in the Mormon Church is commonly held to be accurate. For the LDS version of Young's conversion and missions see the *Journal of Church History, 1833.*

[39] *The Honeoye Falls Times*, Feb. 22, 1922. This account is drawn from now lost church records. According to Dian Hamm, Mendon Township historian, the author of this piece was the previous town historian and Hamm felt confident enough to use this as a record in her work.

aggravating circumstances attended the conduct of Mr. Sweat which led to this outrage upon his person."[40] The indication from the newspaper is that extra-legal action was an outrage, but it could be provoked by the missionary claims of those who were disturbing the peace by preaching a gospel that was outside the boundaries of proper religion.

Evangelicals believed the Mormons were wrong, and the lack of correct religion in the lives of believers was at the root of their error. The December 14, 1833 edition of *The Religious Intelligencer* announced, "The devotees of this superstition seem to cling to it as with the grasp of death. It has been well remarked that man is naturally a *religious animal* the desires of his nature are not satisfied without religion: and if the true belief is not embraced, a false one, however gross, will be substituted for it."[41] The depth of devotion shown by the Mormons was mirrored in the dedication shown by mainstream evangelical denominations who asserted that the Mormon faith was twisted and dangerous. By 1832 believers had moved from being objects of pity to being targets of fear because of their zeal; the *Morrisville Republican Monitor* warned, "the believers in the new Mormon revelation are now considered as the most egregious fanatics, and their pretended revelation a work of the arch enemy of souls."[42] In the presence of this religious "delusion" the revival meetings that continued to roll over the Monroe County added a new focus beyond the conversion of the willing. The protection of the body of believers from heresy became part of the spiritual work of evangelical revival religion as well.

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[40] *Livingstone Republican*, June 5, 1838.
[41] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vol. XVIII Dec. 14, 1833, 454. Italics original.
[42] *Morrisville Republican Monitor*, May 22, 1832.

The unbridled emotion of early Mormonism contrasted with the move towards

more controlled, less vocal and ecstatic practice in more mainstream evangelical revival

meetings. An 1833 description in the *Ogdensburg Northern Lights* by an observer of a

Mormon service, described how the adherents of the new religion were different in part

for *how* they practiced their faith:

> Wherever Mormonism obtained a footing, it spread like wild fire. Scores
> were awakened, converted, baptised, and endowed with the Holy Sprit in a
> few hours at a single meeting, in the midst of shoutings, wailing, fallings,
> contortions, trances, visions, speaking in unknown tongues and
> prophesying. The timid were frightened, the credulous believed; and we
> were frequently eye-witnesses to scenes of [the] strange and unnatural
> conduct of the Mormons, professed under the influence of the spirit, that
> staggered the disbelief of the most stable and credulous. As a curiosity, we
> have carefully examined the Golden Bible [Book of Mormon] …it is an
> absurd collection of dull, stupid, and foolishly improbable stories, which
> no person, unless under the influence of powerfully excited feelings, can
> mistake for truth and inspiration.[43]

The language describing Mormon meetings is strikingly similar to the warnings of

mainstream revivalist preachers about the dangers of unchecked emotion that led to

runaway revivals.[44] As Mormon historian J. Spencer Fluhman noted, "Mormonism was

thus portrayed as both symptomatic of and partly to blame for popular gullibility,

infidelity, and superstition."[45] Accusations of the danger of overly emotional practices

would be a standard of evangelical reaction to new religious movements including the

Millerites a decade later.

Evangelicals used the old fear of dangerous irreligious practices as another way to

set the Mormons apart. The charge of promoting superstition was used to particular effect

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[43] *Ogdensburg Northern Lights*, February 7, 1833.
[44] See pg. 19.
[45] J. Spencer Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People" Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 51.

against Mormonism by the mainstream denominations. Joseph Smith's history as a

"treasure seeker," and the mystical aspect of his story of discovering the Golden Plates,

led to charges of charlatanism and fraud. The open market of religious expression in the

1830s created some movements, such as Mesmerism, that relied also directly on the

supernatural to draw or gain adherents. One of the earliest Mormon practices that touched

on the supernatural was belief in direct communication with celestial spirits. Historian J.

Spencer Fluhman notes that while claims of communicating with divine spirits was a

feature of revivals in the 1810s and 1820s, "Mormon claims in the 1830s and 1840s

struck most critics as ready for the trash heap of antiquated superstition."[46] A newspaper

article from 1835 tells the story of a Mormon rite where Joseph Smith promised an angel

would appear each time a new convert was baptised in a river. Smith did not do the

baptising, but as his apostles dipped believers, a figure in white would appear on the

opposite bank and "the faith of the faithful was thereby greatly increased." Some locals

took it upon themselves to check on the validity of the story and waited on the opposite

bank, and when the figure appeared, "succeeded in forcing it into the stream." When the

spirit was brought to the opposite bank it was discovered that "this supposed inhabitant of

the upper world [was] the Mormon Prophet himself."[47] These types of incidents were

pounced on by preachers across the denominational boundaries as examples of the

complete lack of true religious expression and Christian faith in the Mormon practices

and belief.

The unyielding conviction of the men and women who converted to Mormonism

were part of why the Saints were considered dangerous to mainstream evangelical

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[46] Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People,"* 57.
[47] *Poughkeepsie Eagle,* July 1, 1835.

denominations. In a widely quoted critique of Mormon doctrine published in 1834, evangelical layman E.D. Howe understood how deeply attached Mormon converts could be to their new faith. He wrote, "our object, in the present undertaking, will be not so much to break the spell which has already seized and taken possession of great numbers of people in our enlightened country, as to raise a warning voice, to those who are yet liable, through a want of correct knowledge of the imposition to be enclosed within its fetters."[48] Believers moved easily between evangelical denominations at the height of the revival period, but Mormonism required strict loyalty to the Latter-day Saint creed. That loyalty translated into a congregation with two peculiar strengths, identified by sociologist W. Seward Salisbury in 1964 as, "lay leadership within a hierarchical setting and the widespread participation of the communicant in the work as well as the worship of his church."[49] Methodist circuit riders were proud of their lack of formal education and in the communities they visited they were recognized as divinely inspired clerics. Mormons missionaries traveled and asked to speak in meeting houses much like other traveling evangelists. They could not be identified as Mormons until they began to speak to congregations and were so dedicated that no alternative discourse could dissuade them. A report from Rochester described a dedicated missionary who was willing to do whatever it took, including public exhortation, to get his message to the people of Rochester, "There is a book of Mormon preacher, who is attempting to push his way forward despite all opposition. The getters-up therefore, seeing all their hope blasted, and their names coupled with infamy, have determined to 'make a raise' on the public by

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[48] E.D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville: E.D. Howe, 1834), ix.
[49] W. Seward Salisbury, *Religion in American Culture: A Sociological Interpretation* (Homewood: The Dorsey Press: 1964), 178.

some means."[50] The writer added that the Mormon preacher's dogged determination, much like the unfortunate Mr. Sweat, was at first met with benevolent amusement, "We do not anticipate a very great turning of this heresy. The public are too much enlightened."[51] That benevolence turned into a stiffer response as the Mormons continued to expand into the traditional religious marketplace.

In central New York in the 1830s, the freedom of an individual to make their own choices and decisions about their religion created a problem for mainstream evangelicals when those decisions put men and women beyond the reach of orthodox denominations. The attraction of Mormonism in its infancy had more to do with the type of person who was joining the sect rather than the validity of the movement. David Whitmer and his family were among the original converts to the new Mormon faith in Wayne County, New York. Local preacher Diedrich Willers knew the family well and described their character, "They were followers of the Methodists, Reformers, Presbyterians, Mennonites, and Baptists, and are unstable, spineless men; moreover, they are gullible to the highest degree."[52] Willers believed that the ease of shifting denominational loyalty was leading to heretical forms of expressions when denominations worked against each other for converts and membership. The *Albany Argus* in 1831 placed Mormonism in the category of irreligion, a religious fraud perpetrated by an illiterate con man on those who had been untethered by the waves of religious revival.[53] However, as the movement grew, evangelical rejection of the evils of Mormonism increasingly centred on how their

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[50] *The Gem*, *of Literature and Science,* December 25, 1830.
[51] *The Gem*, *of Literature and Science,* December 25, 1830.
[52] Quinn, "The First Months of Mormonism," 333.
[53] *Albany Argus*, Dec. 10, 1831.

religion was not truly a religion and therefore not subject to the same protections and freedoms as other religious practice.

Protestant evangelical ministers from many denominations came out forcefully to combat the spread of the Mormon heresy by attempting to demonstrate that it was not really a religion. For example, Alexander Campbell, whose mission to reform the church led to the establishment of the staunchly evangelical Disciples of Christ, and evangelical minister Joshua V. Himes were united in opposition to Mormonism. Campbell turned his attention to Mormonism in 1831 and addressed how conveniently Mormonism answered many of the contemporary theological questions, "The prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote…in his book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in N[ew] York for the last ten years. He decides all the great controversies. He prophesied of all these topics, and of the apostasy and infallibly decides, by his authority, every question."[54] The claim to have the ultimate answer to contemporary theological questions was a key part of the appeal of Mormonism for many in central New York. The rejection of authority in the Burned Over District and lack of pastoral direction on matters of theology left a vacuum that Smith and his followers filled with his "final" testament of God.

Mainstream evangelical clerics believed spread of the Mormon doctrine was dangerous to the well-being of American society. Baptist minster James McHensey claimed it cost $60000 state and municipal dollars to control the religion, "and in addition rivers of blood to subdue the dark phrenzy such plans may produce…there is among them

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[54] Alexander Campbell, *Delusions. An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832), 13. As an interesting side note, Himes would go on to become the leading publicist and chief spokesperson for the Millerite movement that would cause so much disruption a decade later.

all a union and determination of spirit for one purpose, namely to oppose the Government of Him who was once a babe of Bethlehem."[55] According to its critics, Mormon theology was a danger to the stability of the nation, defying the founding principles of the country. If they were to continue on, McHensey warned, "think of the consequences; carnage, murder, and destruction must ensue," and "there would be no more room for reason and mercy than with a wild cat."[56] Clerics from many denominations warned of the Mormon desire to establish a Kingdom of God in the real world that linked church and state. Evangelical religion also prepared for a kingdom of God, but a spiritual one that would influence and guide a healthy and vibrant republic, not replace it; the September 7, 1833 *Religious Intelligencer* reported, "that should this population continue to increase, they will probably have all the offices in their hands; and that the lives and property of the other citizens would be insecure."[57] It was of the utmost importance that the strong link between evangelical religion and American values be used to show how Mormonism would be dangerous to the constitutional rights of freedom of expression if left unchecked.

Mainstream denominations in the heart of the Burned Over District used Mormonism to solidify their position as the moral base and conscience of the nation by publicly and actively opposing the Saints. While mainstream newspapers condemned the new practice as humbug, evangelical clergy started to take a more active role in opposing the encroaching Mormon doctrine. In his journals, Mormon apostle William McLellin recorded several occasions where clergy came to his meetings to challenge Mormon

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[55] James McHensey, *An Antidote to Mormonism* (New York: Burnett & Pollard, 1838), 20.
[56] McHensey, *Antidote*, 20.
[57] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vol. XVIII, September 7, 1833, 233.

missionaries and their message. In one incident a Methodist clergyman demanded that

McLellin drink poison to prove he was a man of God, in another the local Methodist

minister "took notes of my discourse. We closed our meeting. He then arose with all the

rage & fury which it seemed the evil one could invent. I sometimes thought that he would

break the stand."[58] Mormon missionaries were often invited to speak by congregations

looking to fulfill the promises of the revival message that called for social reform. When

the Mormon missionaries presented their doctrine as a return or purification of the

Christian church, it played to the sensibilities of people who were looking for new ways

to fulfill their evangelical goals. The open, pluralistic nature of American religion in the

Burned Over District meant new practices and expressions were common in

congregations that had experienced multiple revivals; in many cases the invitation to

speak was based on genuine support for in an ecumenical, evangelical spirit. The

successes of Mormon missionaries in converting men and women to something that had

some recognizable evangelical theology but was, in reality, a completely new religion,

changed the open and welcoming nature of most mainstream denominations and

congregations.

The fact that Mormonism thrived despite the efforts to educate and inform the

American people is perhaps what most alarmed clerics. The recurring confrontation and

violence in Missouri and later Illinois seemed to bolster Mormon resilience, and their

growing membership shocked evangelicals in central New York. Mormonism threatened

the power and influence of Protestant evangelical denominations because it tended to

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[58] *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831-1836*, ed. Jan Shipps, John W. Welch (Provo, Chicago: BYU Press, University of Illinois Press, 1994), 38, 41.

dominate areas in which it gained a foothold. Missionaries that brought the Mormon

message back to central New York from Missouri and Ohio had to be counteracted.

William McLellin's description of his 1835 mission included actions by evangelicals who

felt it was their duty to protect the citizens of their community from Mormon theology.

The Presbyterian minister in Richmond, New York "got the key to the schoolhouse and

would not let us in, consequently we did not preach."[59] Sidney Rigdon, considered second

only to Joseph Smith in the early Latter-day Saint hierarchy, was confronted by numerous

ministers, pastors, and preachers in his missionary efforts. One minister recorded his

interaction in a letter to the *Christian Palladium* in 1836. He listened to the discourse and

then asked pointed questions, "I need say that the Mormon gentleman was confounded,

though he attempted to extricate himself by his sophistry, in which he abounds, yet it only

made a bad matter worse. He, however, did not make many disciples on this occasion."

Challenging these alleged heretics who were trying to undermine American religion was

the duty of all men of the faith according to the minister, "If the heralds of the cross

would only meet these deceivers promptly, they would save their flocks from the

disastrous influences of this delusion."[60] Mormonism had moved beyond a harmless

delusion; the humbug that many evangelicals were sure was going to dissipate was

becoming entrenched and inescapable part of the new religious landscape.

In the face of Mormon success, evangelical clergy and laypeople redoubled their

efforts to combat its spread. From 1836 to 1838 dozens of pamphlets and monographs,

whose sole aim was to refute the Book of Mormon and the doctrine of the Latter-day

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[59] McLellin, *Journals*, 149.
[60] H, "Joe Smith-ism, alias Mormonism," in *Christian Palladium, Vol. 5* (Union Mills, N.Y.: 1838), 243-244.

Saints, flooded the eastern states. With titles like *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted, Mormonism Unvailed*, and *An Exposure of Mormonism*, both articulate and plain-spoken members of the clergy set about to dismantle the Mormon faith. These writers did not try to break down the theological questions that may have been beyond the average readers' understanding but challenged the authenticity of the new holy book. Origen Bacheler, a New York evangelical preacher, writer, and publisher declared in 1838 that his purpose in opposing Mormonism was, "to dissipate the mists of delusion, to draw the demarcation between imposture and truth, and to hold up to merited indignation, before the eyes of an insulted community, perhaps the most vile, the most impudent, the most impious knot of charlatans and cheats which any community was ever disgraced and cursed."[61] Evangelical preachers believed one of the keys to stopping Mormonism's spread was public refutation, item by item, piece by piece, of the foundation of Mormon belief.

In sermons and exhortations on new religious movements, education of the evangelical faithful featured prominently. Warnings against the dangers of Mormonism were often structured around Biblical plagiarism, factual inaccuracies, and the lack of scriptural evidence in the Book of Mormon. The credibility of the witnesses to the writing of the Book was consistently called into question. For the evangelical opponents of Mormonism, the reliability of the men who chose to stand outside the boundaries of acceptable religious practice rendered the faith meaningless. Origen Bachler wrote, "One might as well believe the stories of a strolling band of gypsies, as the statements of theses creatures. Indeed, they are ten thousand times worse than gypsies…they add the sacrilegious crime of polluting things sacred, and holding up the character of the Eternal

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[61] Origen Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed, Internally and Externally* (New York: Nassau Street, 1838), 1-2.

to ridicule and contempt."[62] With the witnesses discredited, the book itself was held up to scrutiny. Commentator after commentator went over the pages of the Book of Mormon and pointed out anachronisms, contemporary language, and inconsistencies in the construction of the work. As Methodist minister Richard Livesey wrote in his 1838 comparison of the Bible and the Book of Mormon "we have the evidence of prophecy, of miracles, of purity of doctrine, and of holy examples, pious lives, and disinterested conduct of those who have been chosen instruments of the Almighty, to convey to man the records of his will. Before we receive another book of revelation [Book of Mormon], it is but just that we ask for evidence of its divinity."[63] Multiple accusations in 1832-33 that Joseph Smith had plagiarised the Book of Mormon from an unpublished romance novel by Congregationalist minister Solomon Spaulding were frequently used as proof that the Book was a fraud.[64]

If, as evangelicals believed, the followers of Mormonism had been tricked and the religion was based on a fraud, then it fell outside the boundaries of religious freedom and was potentially criminal. With this step, evangelical preachers across denominations tried to give secular authorities a civil weapon to use against Mormonism. In *Mormonism Unvailed*, E.D. Howe presents a legal argument for the Book of Mormon being a fraud, arguing "the testimony carries strong suspicions in the face of it; and were it disconnected from all other circumstances of fraud and deceptions, it would not be believed, however solemnly declared, in a court of justice."[65] Howe dedicates an entire chapter to affidavits

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[62] Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed Internally*, 48.
[63] Richard Livesey, *An Exposure of Mormonism* (Preston: J. Livesey, 1838), 2.
[64] After hearing Mormon missionary Orson Hyde preach in Ohio in 1832, one of Spaulding's brothers along with seven others, signed affidavits in 1833 claiming the Book of Mormon was taken from an unpublished Solomon Spaulding story. The accusations were first widely publicized in E.D. Howe's 1834 book *Mormonism Unvailed*. There has been no formal or satisfactory resolution to the claims.
[65] Howe. *Mormonism Unvailed*, 98.

accusing the Mormon founders and witnesses of deceiving the public, of inconsistent stories, and tales of magic and devil worship that speak to the potentially criminal underpinnings of the new faith. Origen Bacheler argued in 1838 that the Mormon prophets and founders were knowingly perpetrating a fraud and as such deserved no consideration under the guise of freedom of religion, "I respect the rights of conscience; I am opposed to persecution for opinion's sake. But as for the lying knaves who dupe them [Mormons]…they are entirely out of the pale of charity. For *their* conduct there is *no* excuse, *no* palliation. Mormonism is with them a matter of faith. They *know* better. They *know* it to be an imposition."[66] The anonymous author of *Mormonism Exposed* made it very clear that Mormonism was a front for violent criminal activity, "It is a system of *ignorance, blasphemy, falsehood, theft,* and MURDER."[67] Origen Bacheler also wrote, "By their deception and lies, they swindle them [converts] out of their property, disturb social order and public peace, excite a spirit of ferocity and murder, and lead multitudes astray on the subject, of all others, they have the deepest interest."[68] Mormonism was not just a theoretical danger to society, but posed an actionable threat that could be countered by secular authorities and power.

This campaign against Mormons yielded some results in the central New York counties of the Burned Over District. In a widely republished story, Mormon missionaries were bested by an "honest hearted Methodist" Genesee farmer when he is faced with two of them claiming to raise the dead. The farmer welcomed a traveller into his home, fed and prayed with him and then gave him a bed. In the night, the stranger became "ill" and

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[66] Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed Internally*, 48. Italics original.
[67] *Mormonism Exposed* (New York: New York Watchman, 1842), iv. Italics original.
[68] Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed*, 48.

"showed all the signs of death." Miraculously a Mormon missionary showed up at the door after hours of the strangers suffering and claimed he could bring him back to life. The farmer considered the proposition, asked the missionary to wait for a moment as "it crept into the head of the farmer that a trick was about to played of a most blasphemous character," left the room and returned with an axe. He declared the body could be raised without a head just as easily as with, at which point the "dead" man leapt up and the pair ran away "before the proper authorities could be reached." The evangelical message against the imposition of Mormonism took strong root in central New York, "since such time no Mormon finds his way into that region remain long."[69] Proper religion was key in this story; the farmer recognized something that did not fit into his evangelical tradition, and since it was a fraud the local authorities were alerted. The success of the evangelical campaign is evident in the farmer's reaction to the Mormon's presence in his community.

In the mid-1830s newspapers in central New York took notice and commented on the difficulties that appeared to follow the Mormons wherever they went. In 1838, the *Livingstone Republican* reported that a Mormon War was brewing in Missouri, "The people comprising this sect seem to get into trouble wherever they go. Experience…long demonstrated the impracticability of their dwelling together in unity with their benefactors."[70] The violence and confrontations between Mormons and non-Mormons in Missouri in the late 1830s were further indications of the importance of true religion to American society. Ecumenical clerical response stiffened in New York after the troubles in Missouri, as Mormonism made converts from every denomination, removed them from their homes, and moved them west. Methodist LaRoy Sunderland wrote in 1838, "Many

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[69] *Livingstone Republican*, Sept. 4, 1844.
[70] *Livingston Republican,* Sept. 25, 1838.

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innocent and well-meaning people are frequently embarrassed by attacks from Mormonite's, merely because they do not know what the principles advocated by this sect are, and least of all do they know the sandy foundation upon which their claims to infallibility are so confidently rested."[71] It was too late to stop Mormonism in Ohio and Missouri, but it was still possible to prevent Mormonism growing any more in New York. It was imperative for evangelicals to provide support to those who had been exposed to the perceived heresy and show them the errors of Mormon doctrine and expose what they believed to be the Mormon fraud. As Origen Bacheler wrote of the Mormon threat, "They can be viewed in no other light than that of monstrous public nuisances, that ought to forthwith be abated. Every member of the community is under certain social obligations, one of which is, that he shall not knowingly deceive and impose on that community. These vagabonds violate this obligation."[72] By 1840 however, it was clear that no matter what kind of trouble the Mormons got in to, they managed to survive as they moved farther and farther west.

As the centre of Mormonism became more remote and removed from central New York, social and moral reform, rather than troublesome heresy, gained more evangelical attention. By the 1840s Mormonism was not as pressing an issue for the evangelical denominations of central New York. While never forgotten, Mormonism was replaced by another movement that attracted followers from within the evangelical denominations. Like Mormonism, the millennial message of William Miller disrupted congregations and directly challenged the foundations of Protestant evangelical hegemony. The experiences

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[71] LaRoy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted* (New York: Piercy & Reed, 1838), iii.
[72] Bachler, *Mormonism Exposed*, 48.

of evangelicals in combating Mormonism in the 1830s helped inform evangelical response to Millerism in the 1840s.

Chapter 3-
The End is Nigh: Millerism and the Mainstream

Figure 3. From "A Vision to End All Things." Broadside, 1844. Courtesy Adventist Digital Library. Used with no restrictions

Where the Latter-day Saints set themselves apart by the nature of their unique

theology and immediate removal of new members from established denominations, the

teachings of William Miller challenged the structure of those same denominations from

within. Miller's basic millennial doctrine was not new, but his interpretation of Biblical

prophecy and the immanence of the second coming was. William Miller's long spiritual

journey began after he bought a farm and tried to settle down in his home state of

Vermont after the War of 1812. He had been an avowed Deist during his youth, but later

began to study the Bible carefully as well as published skeptical criticisms of

contemporary Biblical interpretations.[1] Through intense study of Old Testament

prophecy, especially the book of Daniel, in 1818 Miller concluded that "in about twenty-

five years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up;

wickedness and oppression would come to an end; and in that place of the kingdoms of

this world, the peaceful and long desired kingdom of the Messiah would be established

under the whole heaven."[2] Miller believed that in or around 1843, the world was going to

end and be replaced with a new millennial Kingdom of God.

Miller was reluctant at first to share his conclusion but beginning in 1823 in

Vermont he slowly began to gather followers. When Joshua V. Himes became one of

Miller's devotees, he turned his considerable public relations abilities to promoting

Miller's message through over five million pieces of adventist literature.[3] The movement

attracted thousands of followers in the United States but had its greatest number of

converts in the Burned Over District, especially in Rochester and the surrounding areas.

Millerites began sharing their calculations of the imminent second coming with their

fellow evangelical congregants and, when that was rebuffed, increased the intensity of

their preaching. The message was familiar; in fact, the only doctrinal difference between

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[1] Mark A. Noll *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 193. Deism is the belief that God does not interfere in the affairs of humanity or the world. Deists reject divine revelation as a way of knowing encourage the use of inquiry and reason to navigate spiritual matters.

[2] *The Advent Herald and Morning Watch* Aug. 13, 1845.

[3] Noll, *A History,* 193. Joshua V. Himes was an evangelical preacher from Boston who became a convinced of the coming advent after hearing Miller preach in 1839. He was a master publicist, organized many of the major camp meetings and William Miller's speaking tours. He was also the main publisher and author for the two main Millerite publications, *The Signs of the Times* and *The Midnight Cry.* After the collapse of the Millerite movement in 1844, he became a leader in the new Adventist church.

the Millerite concept of a kingdom of God and most evangelical interpretations was the timing of the Messiah's arrival.[4] Millerites believed they were bringing their evangelical co-religionists a message that would save them from the coming conflagration. It was originally a message of both warning and hope to the evangelical denominations of central New York.

Millerites did not want to set up a new religion; they wanted to bring people to an understanding of the closeness of the second advent. Historian David T. Arthur wrote they did not think of themselves as a new sect which meant that "in the beginning the Millerites, in proclaiming their message of Christ's return, worked among existing churches."[5] While this was the initial goal, when Miller and his followers began preaching their message in earnest in 1840, it did not take long for the spirit of co-operation to fall by the wayside. It was difficult to overlook that while William Miller's call for ecumenical cooperation included a desire to "avoid sectarian questions which divide Christians…and that minor points of faith and the peculiarities in the belief of any, should not be made prominent," his original statement of belief contained the exhortation that, "before Christ comes in his glory, all sectarian principles will be shaken and the votaries of the several sects scattered to the four winds."[6] There was an implicit threat that if evangelical congregations could not agree with Miller's predictions, they would be destroyed. As the adventist message spread in established denominations, suspicion grew that that the Millerites were not looking to save souls within existing congregations. In his

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[4] George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing, 1993), 54.

[5] David T. Arthur, "Millerism," in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mod-Nineteenth Century America* ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York, Evanston: Harper & Row: 1974), 154, 170.

[6] Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 231, 79.

criticism of Millerism, minister of First Methodist Church in Rochester Samuel Luckey wrote in 1843 that the way Millerite preachers spoke to congregations about evangelical pastors was not designed to promote harmony but, "to alienate people from their pastors and churches, and thus prepare them for a sect of their own."[7] Unlike the Mormons, who took their converts and went away, Millerites were threatening to tear down the evangelical foundations of established American communities. There was no revival conversion experience and there was no re-baptism into the movement. Part of what made them so alarming to evangelical preachers was that they seemed to be speaking the same theological language: evangelicals had been preaching a millennial doctrine for decades. The doctrine of the second advent was a pillar of most evangelical movements, but the purported immanence drew criticism.[8] In upstate New York, a Baptist preacher's 1843 response to a Millerite who asked him to disprove the immediacy of the end of the world, declined because it was a belief that "is a drunkard, its life has been a life of excitement-- it is raving horribly on its deathbed."[9] The preacher felt Millerism would burn out and fade away, and he did not want to give it any attention for fear of helping to spread the false doctrine. As historian Benjamin McArthur wrote, "That a loving God would destroy the world by fire seemed repugnant to evangelicals who stressed God's immanence in the world and the gradual transformation of society."[10] Since gradual was not in the Millerites' spiritual vocabulary, this became a point of friction.

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[7] Samuel Luckey, *Strictures on Millerism or the Second Advent Doctrines* (Rochester, N.Y.: R. M. Colton Printer, 1843), 15.

[8] In this work, adventist refers to a believer in the immanent second coming, or advent, of Christ. This is different from the denominational Adventist that would arise from the framework of Millerism in the latter half on the nineteenth century

[9] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, June 17, 1843.

[10] Benjamin McArthur, "Millennial Fevers," *Reviews in American History* Vol. 24, No.3 (Sept. 1996): 376.

Millerism's literal interpretation of the Bible was another major area of contention, as the adventists questioned the spiritual and scriptural basis of the orthodox denominations' work. William Miller came from a Baptist congregation; Sylvester Bliss, Miller's biographer and editor of the journal *The Signs of the Times* was a Congregationalist; Joshua V. Hines, Miller's promoter and publicist was a Campbellite Christian. Other Millerites came from across evangelical denominational boundaries but especially Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. This range of doctrinal experience gave second advent believers a focus in their quarrel with mainstream denominations as historian David L. Rowe described, "the central problem of the [orthodox] churches were not so much a quest for authority as a quest for power," and ambition "blinded the clergy to their responsibilities in regard to human salvation."[11] To the Millerites, evangelicals wanted more than the ability to define orthodoxy, they wanted the power to enforce it as well. Mainstream evangelical denominations did not take kindly to the interlopers challenging the supremacy of their doctrines. What was first considered a simple mistake of arithmetic and misguided Biblical interpretation of millennial prophecy turned into something that threatened the very fabric of society.

According to most clerical writers and church associations, Millerites must be wrong because there was no way the world was going to end in a matter of months. By 1842, Miller's message was gaining ground and attention but for many it was only a matter of time before his theory would be proved wrong. An examination of Millerism in the *Plattsburg Republican* in 1842 noted, "There is one thing characteristic of this humbug that is consoling…it is not likely to last a great while. April next will see the

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[11] David L. Rowe, "A New Perspective on the Burned-over District: The Millerites in Upstate New York," *Church History* Vol. 47, No. 4 (December 1978): 419.

explosion of the bubble and the deluded followers of this chimera will then have their eyes opened."[12] For the most part, local clergy and community leaders did not speak too viciously about Millerism in 1840-1842. But by 1843, as the date for the second coming neared, there was a sense of disbelief that anyone could follow a doctrine that kept moving the date of the end of the world, as the *Geneva Courier* wrote "At first the year 1842 was fixed upon, then 1843. Yet Millerism is said to be gaining ground! Verily we are a people who love humbugs and after them we will go."[13] Laypeople and clerics believed that Millerism was another in long line of new religious sentiments that blazed brightly for a period, only to fade away into obscurity after being exposed to critical and public examination.

When the original date for the millennium set by Miller passed in April 1843, mainstream religious leaders expected the Millerite movement to naturally disintegrate. The *Steuben Democrat* reported in December 1843 on a man in Rochester who had given up everything in anticipation of the second coming and discovered, "that world is longer than his purse, and now requests those who induced him to give away his property, telling him he would have no use for it after the 4th of April last, to help him buy bread for his family."[14] However, a repositioning of the date to 1844 kept many in the fold and the movement's preachers moved from a message of salvation, to the end of all unbelievers. This shift was partially a response to the negative reactions of mainstream denominations

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[12] *Plattsburgh Republican*, Sept. 10, 1842.
[13] *Geneva Courier* April 18, 1843.
[14] *Steuben Democrat*, December 8, 1843. This was a common theme following all advental disappointments. Advertisements and request for aid appear in almost very newspaper from those asking for help after selling off all their goods in anticipation of the end of the world.

and their clergy. Samuel Luckey wrote in 1843 that he felt it was his duty to oppose the

Second Advent doctrine, because:

> After the period which I had supposed would finally settle the question and quiet all minds respecting it, again it appeared in a more formidable aspect than before…As the Millerites were increasing their exertions in the city, and drawing many, out of curiosity or otherwise, to hear them, and some were leaving their own churches to join them; and particularly as they were using the silence of some of the ministers in the city to induce an opinion that they secretly acquiesced in their doctrine and measures; I could no longer feel justified to indulge my cherished love of peace, and refrain from openly expressing my views.[15]

There was a feeling that the alleged delusion had entered a new and troubling phase by

rejecting the reasonable response to the failed end of the world. As historian George R.

Knight wrote in 1993, the change of deadline to sometime between 1843 and 1844

generated an upswing in Millerite preaching about the end of times and that conversely

increased intensity of evangelical opposition, "Entrenched ideologies and established

churches would bring increasing rejection and Millerite seperationism[sic]."[16] Unlike the

Latter-day Saints, Shakers, or Perfectionists, the Millerites were not removing themselves

from society. They were demanding to be heard and for their doctrine to be taken

seriously by those with whom they had sat and worshiped. They were still setting up

tents, still holding revival meetings, and still trying to communicate with other churches

and people and so could not be ignored by mainstream evangelicals.

As millennial fever exploded across the Burned-over district in 1843-44,

Millerites were blamed for every possible affliction in American society. In 1843, the

editors of the *Western Argus*, a small paper in Ontario County, New York, called on

citizens to oppose the spread of Millerism, "and thus save his fellows from madness,

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[15] Luckey, *Strictures*, 1.
[16] Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 141.

murder, suicide, crime, wretchedness, and poverty, which are the legitimate offsprings of Millerism."[17] According to opponents of Millerism, social and criminal degradation sprang from a delusion that had now become full blown insanity. The *Long Island Framer and Advertiser* reported in January 1843 that "weak men and women have been so terrified at the near approach of the day of judgement, that suicide or derangement has been the consequence."[18] The *New York Mirror* reported in 1844 on a son who came home to find his shoemaker father giving away all the stock, "and caused him [the father] to be sent to an insane asylum till the excitement of his mind abated."[19] In 1843 and 1844 as the dates for the rapture approached, passed, and approached again, the mental effects of Millerism became a threat to the community. A widely circulated account that appeared in many newspapers including the *Courtland Democrat* in October 1844 about the effects of Millerism on the community reported, "such crowds are continually about the doors of the Millerite meetings, that it is almost dangerous to life and limb to affect an entrance."[20] At that same place when a gang of local youth set off fireworks outside the meeting hall:

> The effect on the highly excited congregation was terrible. Some fainted, some screamed. Several serious accidents happened amid the general rush; one man it is said, was so deranged with nervous terror, that he went home and attempted to cut his throat. The Mayor and a strong array of constables now attend the meeting to prevent a repetition of these tricks.[21]

Second advent believers disrupted the spiritual and secular structure of the communities in which they lived. In the 1840s communities that had experienced waves of revival

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[17] *Western Argus*, March 22, 1843.
[18] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, January 17, 1843.
[19] *New York Evening Mirror*, October 18, 1844.
[20] *Cortland Democrat*, October 30, 1844.
[21] *Cortland Democrat*, October 30, 1844. This account of a Millerite gathering appears in verbatim in many other, unconnected stories of Millerite gatherings. It is like it was copied for the shock value and to add intensity to other less interesting stories.

were developing a new definition of true American religion based partially on excluding religious practices, like Mormonism and Millerism, that did not conform to evangelical doctrine.

Millerites were not as readily identifiable as Mormons, but as the date of the supposed second advent neared there were some distinct activities that set them apart. One of the consequences of Millerism was the tendency of followers to give everything away in preparation for the end of the world. The *Poughkeepsie Eagle* quoted one woman in February 1843 who, "cut up a rich and costly silk dress for kitchen window curtains. She says--'It's no use to keep anything to be burnt up; might as well enjoy this world while it lasts,'"[22] The giving up of material things spread through communities and created havoc. The sudden lack of services resulted in situations that disturbed the peace and harmony of communities when businesses were abandoned.[23] The way Millerism pushed men and women to suspend involvement in regular society, but still preach their message, superseding all other concerns was another aspect of how the doctrine was perceived as dangerous to the structure of a community. The Millerites did not receive revelation and go away like the Mormons; their continued presence in the community drew attention to their proclivities and placed a strain on the local populations and their social networks.

A major concern about people abandoning all their worldly possessions was a sense that giving up on the world was not only un-Christian, but also un-American. The evangelical and republican ideal of Americans as a forward-thinking people who were

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[22] *Poughkeepsie Eagle*, February 11, 1843.
[23] There are multiple newspaper reports like the Oct. 18, 1844 *New York Mirror* that described the public chaos caused by men walking away from their businesses.

building an exceptional nation was not borne out in the actions of the men and women who were giving everything up with a sense of resignation and defeat in preparation for the end of the world. It was part of the unique American experiment to work towards a society that was not subject to the same ills as in other parts of the world. Reform societies sprang up across central New York driven by evangelical ethics and revival religion, working in an ecumenical fashion to bring about real change in America and therefore to the world. William McLoughlin characterized these societies as fitting "perfectly into the republican ideals of a virtuous citizenry sacrificing itself for the greater good of the community."[24] Self-sacrifice for the good of the community was not evident in the second advent community however; their belief was strongly in the end of the world which would naturally be the solution to all moral and social ills. The abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* published a letter from a second advent believer in 1843 who was removing himself from the struggle for an end to slavery because, in his belief, "I have long been laboring, expecting that moral truth is rectify the wickedness of the land; but now I believe that it is to be destroyed by the brightness of Christ's coming."[25] Biblical literalism and belief in an impending conflagration led men and women to give up their roles in voluntary societies for the same reasons they gave up their property; as a result Millerism undercut the social and moral reform movements.[26] America was a nation working on what historian Sydney Ahlstrom labelled "moral renewal, missionary advance, and humanitarian reform…to make America the world's greatest example of a

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24 William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reforms* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press: 1978), 113.
25 *The Liberator*, May 5, 1843.
26 Gary Scharnhost, "Images of Millerites in American Literature," *American Quarterly* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1980): 25-26.

truly Protestant republic."[27] The active abandonment of voluntary causes by Millerites

worked directly against the fulfillment of that goal.

The rejection of familial duties to prepare for the second coming also perturbed

many nineteenth-century Americans who could not understand the abandonment of

family members to the Millerite doctrine. Evangelical preachers, laypeople, and

publications listed numerous examples of men and women leaving families to rely on the

kindness of the long-suffering members of the community. According to the

Poughkeepsie Eagle in February, 1843, a local man gave away all his possessions and

planned on living on what he had to the end of time; a friend asked about a relative who

was existing on social aid, "and that her condition might be bettered by the earnings he

might receive for a few days labor…his reply was: All mankind are my brothers and

sisters; my relatives have no more claim upon me than others."[28] This disconnect from

family drove many of the critics of Millerism into fits of righteous indignation; the

rejection of worldly goods, the preaching of a blasphemous gospel, and the constant

reminders of the second coming could be tolerated if the men and women would only do

their social and moral duty. In an 1844 *Schenectady Cabinet* editorial, the decline of the

community was laid at the feet of the indiscriminate Millerite doctrine:

> The delusion seems to be confined to no particular class of society, wholly.
> Several families of wealth and influence are arranging their business,
> putting property out of their hands and disposing of their household goods.
> But it is mostly among the lower classes that the ill effects of these
> doctrines are to be seen, where they have caused many separations in
> families and the greatest distress among those of short means, who subsist
> only on the contribution of the benevolent and the few friends they may
> have.[29]

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[27] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1973), 387.

[28] *Poughkeepsie Eagle*, February 11, 1843.

[29] *Schenectady Cabinet*, October 22, 1844.

Among the evangelical denominations a hardening of feeling developed as Millerite men and women abandoned families in favour of spreading the second advent message. Evangelical Protestants in west and central New York held family bonds as sacred parts of the special American, republican covenant with God.[30] The rejection of those bonds was one more factor that moved the Millerite doctrine from humbug to heresy.

Unlike the Mormons who said they had a new testament, Miller and his followers argued that mainstream evangelicals were using human interpretations of scripture to establish positions of theological supremacy that had nothing do with the actual meaning of the scripture. Miller spoke of the literal truth of the Bible, "we must believe that God will never forfeit his word; and we can have confidence that He…will guard the translation of his own word, and throw a barrier around it, and prevent those who sincerely trust in God, and put implicit confidence in his word, from erring far from the truth."[31] Historian Ernest Sandeen argued that literal interpretation of the Bible was part of the attraction of Millerism because it "demonstrated their fidelity to the authority of the Bible while those who, in opposing them, had recourse to allegorical or metaphorical interpretations were not taking the Bible seriously."[32] The challenge for clergy who opposed the Millerite second advent message came down to what was often an interpretation of similar doctrine. As Baptist minster J. Henson wrote in a post script to an 1843 letter denouncing Millerism, "Let no one think I am opposed to the second advent of Christ…[I] preach his coming as a thief in the night--as the scriptures do. [I] have

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[30] Noll, *America's God*, 227, Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1981)*,* 67-68.
[31] Bliss, *Memoirs*, 72.
[32] Ernest R. Sandeen, "Millennialism," in *The Rise of Adventism*, 114.

defended this doctrine against those who deny it. Let no one charge me with being an opposer of this doctrine. I am only an opposer of the distorted view in which Millerites preach it."[33] Millerites studied the scriptures exhaustively; they made complicated calculations using Biblical prophecies to make their point and they refused a doctrine that could not be directly tied to piece of scripture.

Millerism encouraged all believers to speak about the coming second advent, and they were encouraged to ask mainstream clergy about their interpretations of biblical prophecy. There was no way for a learned evangelical theologian to refute a Millerite who claimed to be using the word of God against the theologian's human interpretation. Historian Nathan Hatch succinctly described how Millerite literalism was used in arguments with evangelical clergy noting "all the weight of church history could not begin to tip the scale against a simple declaration that the New Testament did not contain such phrases as *total depravity* and *perseverance of the saints*. For the early republic's gentlemen theologians, the ingenious argument was both perverse and frustrating."[34] Millerites had taken the Methodist and Baptist rejection of educated, clerical authority to the utmost extreme. Their interpretation of the Word of God required an understanding of how the New and Old Testaments linked together, and Millerite authors and speakers provided proof of their doctrine with dozens of scriptures from both. In his guide to Biblical interpretation William Miller explained why allegory was not an applicable factor when he wrote "Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to

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[33] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, June 24, 1843.
[34] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, London: Princeton University Press, 1989), 136. Italics original.

have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible."[35] An anonymous Baptist cleric wrote in 1843 that to counteract Millerite preaching it was important for those trained in scriptural interpretation to refute the Millerites' claims, "I therefore repeat my serious conviction that it is the duty of all theologians and divines and good biblical chronologists to come out against this doctrine and show it as false, and set all things to rest."[36] Lay preaching could happen anywhere, but required proper preparation and understanding of theological nuances to prevent the kind of excitement that was a threat to evangelicalism's dominant position in society.

Since the root of the trouble was a shared religious doctrine of the second advent, it fell to the evangelical churches to bring this destabilizing force into line. The first step for many mainstream denominations was to root out the heresy among their membership; so many people had become followers of Millerism that in some cases entire congregations disbanded to prepare for the end of the world. The *Madison Observer* in 1844 reported that the Lockport, New York, Baptist Church, "has been rent to pieces by Millerism."[37] Pointed and cohesive attacks from across evangelical boundaries were required to counteract the millennial fever inspired by Millerism. As Miller's message was capturing attention, evangelical ministers preached and spoke at public gatherings as well as from their pulpits against the movement. The sermons were meant to be guides for congregations to counteract the seemingly familiar theology that Millerites were preaching, because as early as 1840, evangelical ministers were fielding questions from

[35] Bliss, *Memoirs*, 70.
[36] *New York Herald*, November 11, 1843.
[37] *Madison Observer*, March 23, 1844.

their flocks about the validity of Miller's predictions. In 1840, Baptist minster John Dowling wrote that, "It is not in a capatious[sic] spirit that the following pages are sent in to the world, but in order to vindicate myself, as a minister of the gospel…by showing that the truth of the bible is not identified with the truth of his [Miller] theory; and because I believe that the tendency of *all* error is to destroy the happiness, paralyze the moral strength, and abridge the usefulness of such as imbibe it."[38] Dowling's admonition pointed to a real fear of Millerism damaging the ability of men and women to make correct moral judgments and do good in their communities which was an unacceptable disruption of the moral direction of the new republic.

The criticisms of Millerism in the Burned over District focused on how its "incorrect" interpretation of the Bible could cause irreparable damage to the fabric of society. The breaking up of families and disruption of regular business in cities, towns, and villages across New York State were seen as secular effects of the religious movement. Mainstream clergy described how the Millerite doctrine was going to break down the foundations of society by diluting true religion and thereby creating social chaos. In one anonymously authored 1840 monograph Millerites were characterized as:

> A class of men who have risen up lately, ay, and some women too, whose
> sole aim appears to be the promotion of anarchy and confusion. They aim
> to unloose the bands of social life; they seem to be discontented, and
> dissatisfied with every thing. They can only live in a continual tempest,
> and because their own hearts are perturbed and restless, because their own
> passions are raging like the sea in a storm, they endeavour to make every
> body else unhappy and dissatisfied.[39]

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[38] John Dowling, *An Exposition of the Prophecies* (Providence: George P. Daniels, 1840), 25-26.
[39] *Miller Overthrown or the False Prophet Confounded, by a Cosmopolite* (Boston: Abel Tompkins, 1840), 126 While the author is unknown, it is safe to assume it was written by a cleric as the critical biblical knowledge is extensive.

To combat Millerites meant linking evangelical religious practices and reform movements with a strong, progressive, and peaceful society.

The social upheaval and public unrest created by Millerites and their gatherings along with the unrestrained passion of their meetings were seen as clear indicators that Millerism was a danger to America. In an 1844 letter to William Miller, Presbyterian minister and New York University professor George Bush detailed how the doctrine damaged the ability of adherents to make correct choices. Bush wrote, "the consequence is, that under the influence of panic terrors calm reflection is precluded, and the mind cannot soundly judge of the true nature of its emotions, or discriminate between the impulse of wild enthusiasm, and a genuine pious zeal. It is no wonder, then that in this feverish excitement, reason often loses its balance."[40] In response, evangelical clerics ensured their congregations knew of their obligations to build a better society, not tear it down or to stand by waiting for a divine solution. The purpose of revival religion was to bring about a change in the world through the efforts of men and women of good character following the path of true religion. Emotional and personal response to spiritual awakening was exciting, but it was not the sign of the end of times. As Rev. Bush wrote, "We have arrived at a momentous era of the world, and that the expiration of these periods is to introduce, by *gradual steps*, a new order of things, intellectual, political, and moral. The great event before the world is not its *physical conflagration,* but its *moral regeneration.*"[41] Evangelicals believed that doctrinal error and religious fanaticism led to the abandonment of secular responsibilities and a breakdown of social boundaries and

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[40] *Reasons of Rejecting Mr. Miller's Views on the Advent* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1844), 14. Interestingly Rev. Bush is distantly related to the political Bush family of Texas. He also embraced another, less controversial religious movement, Swedenborgianism, in 1845.

[41] *Reasons of Rejecting*, 11. Italics original.

stability. The result was a damaged and immoral society that could only be cured by adherence to true, evangelical religion.

The challenge for many evangelical clerics in the Burned Over District was finding the grounds to remove Millerism from their congregations and communities without appearing to interfere with freedom of religious practice. To achieve this, evangelical clergy and laypeople began to argue that Millerism created a burden and disruption that transcended the Constitutional ban on interference on religious expression. If there was evidence that a religious movement created undue stress on society then, as a writer for the religious columns of the *Lowville Northern Journal* wrote in 1844, "This is a free country, and men have a sort of natural right to be fools; though we doubt, whether under the influence of such a delusion, a man has a right to give away his property and reduce his family to poverty, and perhaps to public charity."[42]

The danger of exerting too much pressure against the Millerites was not just potentially violating the Constitution, but many evangelicals had learned a lesson from the sympathy the Mormons garnered and how they used persecution to strengthen their followers. In *Strictures of Millerism*, Samuel Luckey described how the Millerites in Rochester used any persecution or opposition to cement their position among believers:

> Now such persons may be easily drawn away to become zealous partizans in almost anything…if the leaders in it can only gain their attention and secure their sympathies. Nothing more effectually accomplishes this than incessant complaints about opposition and persecution. It cannot be disguised that this policy has been largely practiced by the Millerites. From the first they have represented themselves as a greatly injured people, particularly by ministers and professing Christians who could not agree with them.[43]

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[42] *Lowville Northern Journal*, Nov. 7, 1844.
[43] Luckey, *Strictures,* 12.

To protect themselves against accusations of persecution, evangelical clergy used self-defence as a justification. In orthodox evangelical opinion, Millerites were trying to break up churches, families, and communities and William Miller was a man who seemed to rejoice in the coming end of the world. One author asked, "if it be possible, that a man who speaks thus flippantly--nay, triumphantly--of the awful perdition of his fellow-sinners, ever knew any thing of true religion? Such a man would rejoice while the world was in a blaze. Amid the dreadful screams and shrieks of despairing souls he would clap his hands for joy."[44] It was well within the purview of the churches to protect their flocks against a doctrine that preached a fiery end to all things. Evangelical churches removed the troublesome heresy from within their congregations by refusing to allow believers to speak, forcing Millerites out of their home congregations, and releasing any clerics who took on the second advent cause.[45] The removal of members from their home churches forced the creation of separate congregations, but also removed the adherents from community and society. Millerite publicist and publisher Joshua V. Himes wrote in 1844 that, "The doors of most of the churches of our land have been closed against this doctrine. Pastors have boasted that their churches are free from it. Members of churches in good and regular standing have been denied the privilege of exhorting their fellow servants…and they have been excommunicated without cause."[46] The effect of removing the Millerites from within the congregations made them distinctly other and separate, identifiable as something outside the boundaries of mainstream society, and thus preserved the integrity of true religion and true American communities.

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[44] *Miller Overthrown*, 75.
[45] Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 148-149
[46] *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, March 6, 1844.

The exhortations of evangelical clerics against the teachings of William Miller also generated secular responses among parishioners in central New York. Rochester was a primary centre of Millerite preaching, tents also went up and meetings were held in many of the smaller centres surrounding Rochester in Monroe County. In villages like Scottsville, where the longest and largest of the Millerite camp meetings was held in 1844, mainstream denominations had a hard-enough time maintaining their own membership without competing with Millerite preaching.[47] The Belcoda Baptist Church in Scottsville recorded instances where parishioners were removed, for example in 1838 a man was expelled because he, "has publicly avowed before the church that his views in regard to the ordinances of the gospel are contrary to those of our denomination and whereas in private as well as public he has more than once tried to defend his erroneous views."[48] The history of the Mendon Presbyterian Church noted that membership fluctuated wildly in the 1840s, referring to "potentially incendiary forces" that moved through the area. Church historian Robert Peck theorized that, "in view of the momentous changes in populations, politics, and social reform, one can believe that our church must have been buffeted by at least some of the storms swirling around it."[49] In the counties surrounding Rochester where the Millerites had set up massive tents and were actively preparing for the advent, the reactions were more direct. A Millerite periodical, the *Advent Herald*, reported in 1844 that, "In Dansville, the meetings were broken up and their place of worship torn down. In Scottsville, the meetings were disturbed, and the seats broken in pieces. In Geneseo…they fired a cannon to represent the last trump and

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[47] Whitney L. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 47-48, 304.
[48] Harriet Brown Dow, *Belcoda: A Biographical and Historical Story of a Country Church* (1920), 11.
[49] Robert Peck, "History of the Mendon Presbyterian Church," August 29, 1990. In authors possession.

kindled a bonfire to represent the final conflagration. Unmeasured contempt is the portion of believers everywhere."[50]

In Rochester, evangelical preaching and wildly exaggerated claims about the practices of the Millerites attracted crowds intent on seeing or disrupting the meetings. Jenny Marsh Parker was the daughter of Joseph Marsh, an former evangelical minister who became a leading proponent of Millerism and published the Millerite periodical, *The Voice of Truth* in Rochester. She wrote of "a mob of scoffers frequently making the street almost impassable. The Millerite was hooted at on the street, caricatured in the public prints."[51] Millerite meetings were regularly interrupted by people who were looking to shout down or ridicule the millennial speaker. In central New York on the eve of the final date for the second advent in October 1844, reports indicated that citizens had taken evangelical messages to heart and took it upon themselves to impose secular restrictions on the religious movement; "They [Millerites] have had to close their public meetings to a greater or less extent. In Rochester, the meeting was disturbed, and finally broken up…the meetings have been held in the Hall during the day and at private houses in the evening."[52] The peace and well being of the community took precedence over the religious freedom of the Millerites

The potential damage to the American Protestant evangelical community was in the possible repercussion of what all assumed would be an eventual disappointment when the world did not come to an end. In his 1843 *Strictures of Millerism*, Samuel Luckey wrote, "Another important feature of Millerism is the consequence which must result to

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[50] *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, Nov. 6, 1844.
[51] Jenny Marsh Parker, *Rochester, A Story Historical* (Rochester, N.Y.: Scrantom, Wetmore and Company, 1884), 252.
[52] *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, Nov. 6, 1844.

the cause of revelations and the general interests in Christianity if the end should not come at the time they now set."[53] The failure of such a grand prophecy that had attracted so much attention would be fodder for those who challenged the place of any faith in the structure of the country. Believers in true religion had to prepare themselves to defend the place of Protestant evangelical Christianity in American values: "They cannot suffer God's eternal truth to be made the sport of infidels by the rashness of erring mortals, and remain silent. The stake is too tremendous. To pretend that the positiveness with which the Millerites assert the coming of Christ…as a Bible truth does not compromise the truth of Scriptures if it should fail is the perfection of folly."[54] To protect the elite status of white Protestant evangelicalism required active refutation and removal of the Millerite heresy.

By the time William Miller's predictions began to gain influence and attention, orthodox denominations had been dealing with new religious movements coming out of revival religion for close to a decade. The reaction to Millerism was much quicker and more direct than to Mormonism. It is possible that the tolerance shown to Mormonism led to a more direct and immediate reaction to Millerism from evangelical denominations. It is clear however, that this version of evangelical prophetic and emotional religion was universally attacked by the mainstream denominations without the benevolent indulgence shown Mormonism in the 1830s. Disturbance of the peace, the crumbling of traditional family structures, and the threat to those wishing to conduct normal business were all fair targets. Miller's critics hoped that by providing correct information on Millerite prophecy, a nineteenth-century Americans who valued individual choice would be able to

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[53] Luckey, *Strictures*, 16.
[54] Luckey, *Strictures*, 18.

discern what was right and true. In the introduction to *An Exposition of the Prophecies,* John Dowling wrote, "I love the independence of mind which "calls no man master," and resolves to grant assent only upon conclusive and satisfactory evidence. Whether Mr. Miller's positions are confirmed by such evidence, or whether they are built upon a foundation of sand, the reader will, I hope, be able to decide."[55] In perhaps the most famous of public speeches against Millerism Dr. Brownlee declared, "I pledge my word that the world will not come to an end next year. I appeal to every candid Christian here whether I have not demolished these Millerites and their doctrines,"[56] The importance for evangelical preachers to bring people into alignment with their way of thinking was so important because, where Mormonism was distinctly separate, Millerites were not.

William Miller's desire to not divide congregations had clearly fallen by the wayside early in the 1840s. Historian George Knight argued that the shift from preaching within congregations to creating separate gatherings was the result of a more strident and militant branch of Miller's followers including Joshua V. Hines.[57] However, there is clear evidence to show that, while Hines and others capitalized on the expulsion of Millerites from evangelical congregations, it was not until evangelical church leaders forced men and women out of their home congregation that these new fellowships were created. Evangelical denominations held that those believers would eventually recant and return to the fold of true religion once deprived of the support of their home congregations. In one example, a man who had given away all his money in preparation for the advent wrote a

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[55] Dowling, *An Exposition*, 28.
[56] *New York Herald*, Nov. 11, 1842. Dr. Brownlee's sermon was reprinted in dozens of major newspapers and publications and was referred to as an inspiration for many anti-Millerism authors. Brownlee's sermon was also a regular focus of Millerites who felt it necessary to refute his argument for months after the sermon.
[57] Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 73, 76.

letter that was delivered to several different clergy, who then refused to read it out but, "The name will be readily communicated to any one who shall inquire for it."[58] The clergy controlled the man's re-entry into society, protecting their flock from unwarranted sympathy, and perhaps as a lesson to those who chose to stray from the path of true religion. Being the arbiters of who could and could not be active in society was an important way evangelical denominations controlled and defined the nature of American identity and society.

Evangelicals also warned of the dangers of Millerism because of the fraudulent nature of the leader's and follower's claims. As with the Book of Mormon, cleric after cleric lined up to dispute and refute Millerite calculations and show how any educated person simply could not accept the prophecy of William Miller. Similar to claims of fraud against Mormonism, in central New York the claims against Millerism were more direct. In *Miller Overthrown*, the author argues that Millerite preaching about the end of the world was creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, "If there is to be an end to all civil order, if treason, murder, robbery, and continual uproar, are to be the *order* of the day…I must say that I fear Mr. Miller is doing his part to bring about such deplorable events. In the first place, to persist on prophesying of such a state of things is the readiest way to hasten it on."[59] The consistent and persistent uproar and disturbance created by Millerites at their meetings and gatherings were linked with the general decline of the American society by evangelical clergy. This translated into secular reactions that drew on mainstream religious denunciations of Millerites as a criminal danger to society. One newspaper in central New York wrote, "Many of the weak-minded and ignorant of the religious

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[58] *New York Morning Courier*, Nov. 9, 1843.
[59] *Miller Overthrown*, 124. Italics original.

community who are led astray by Millerism are, perhaps, to be pitied for their credulity, but their more intelligent leaders richly deserve a residence in the State Palace at Sing Sing."[60] The passions of the men and women caught up in the Millerite humbug caused nothing but problems, and the leaders of the movement, those who traveled and preached across New York, needed to be held accountable for inflaming those passions. Like Mormonism, if the activities of the religious movement could be deemed criminal, then they could be curtailed.

The mainstream churches did everything they could to provide information to the secular authorities to indicate how the harmless humbug had developed into a dangerous heresy. For mainstream denominations Millerism was burning too hot for even the malleable religious landscape of western New York state. As Benjamin McArthur noted, "Millerites may have started as exemplary evangelicals, but their excessive biblical literalism and sense of radical supernaturalism wore thin on a religious culture in the process of change."[61] The position of evangelical Christianity was to drive the nation forward as Methodist Charles Thompson wrote in an 1877 history of revival religion, "How responsible the position of the American Church! If she is faithful to her sublime place as mediator between the Throne[God] and the nation, how the abiding works of the Spirit may light up all our country's path."[62] Religious awakening and revival was contributing to reform movements that would establish America as the leader in changing the world. The biblical literalism of the Millerites could not be reconciled with the

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[60] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, Oct. 22, 1844 Sing Sing was one of the more notorious prisons in New England.
[61] McArthur, "Millennial Fevers," 376.
[62] Charles L. Thompson, *Times of Refreshing: A History of American Revivals from 1740-1877* (Chicago: M.W. Smith, 1877), 483.

evangelical message of the exceptional place of religion in American society. By presuming to know what God literally meant, Millerites denied there was a future for The United States, and so the evangelical push to reform and perfect was pointless. One author questioned Millerite fatalism in 1840, asking why, if the world was going to end immanently, God would be so good to the United States, "in giving us seed time and harvest, winter and summer, and above all, such political blessings as our revolutionary fathers could hardly have hoped for."[63] Miller and his followers were denying the position of true evangelical Christianity in the formation of a strong and viable republic and a truly Christian world. In one of the first examinations of American religion in 1844, Robert Baird noted the importance evangelicals placed on spreading their Protestant message, believing that it was, "at once a duty and privilege to assist in promoting it abroad…in complying so far as they can with their Saviour's command to 'preach the Gospel to every creature' they are most likely to secure the blessings of that Saviour upon their country."[64] To show how successful American religious freedom was to the rest of the world required an image of true religion, a Protestant evangelical vision of the way religion could shape and form a nation. Presbyterian Stephen Cowell wrote in 1854, "It was in the very spirit of true Christianity that the hospitality and blessings of the United States were offered to all the world."[65] True religion had to root out the heresy that threatened evangelical supremacy, not only for the good of the faithful but for the good of the country and the rest of the world.

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[63] *Miller Overthrown*, 77.
[64] Robert Baird, *Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 292.
[65] Stephen Colwell, *The Position of Christianity in the United States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co. 1854), 12.

Conclusion-
Forming the Boundaries: True Religion in America

There was a deep perceived link between mainstream, evangelical religion and civil progress and harmony in the communities of central New York in the early nineteenth century. In his 1837 annual address to the town council, the mayor of Rochester noted the peace and prosperity of the town was "a most gratifying eulogy for our civil and religious institutions, and for the intelligence and morality of the community in which we live."[1] Evangelical Americans believed that strong and stable communities required lively and vibrant religious institutions that would help to define and reinforce the values that Americans held dear. The nominal idea of religious freedom gave the impression of a society that was tolerant of new ways of spiritual expression. White Americans who were committed to individual choice and republican values in early nineteenth-century America felt that their ability to choose their own brand of religion was another advantage of living in such a "free" country. In some ways, the explosion of different versions of mainstream evangelical denominations seemed to confirm the plural nature of American religion. The rise of Mormonism and Millerism however, changed that for many communities, more specifically the communities of the Burned Over District where the movements originated and thrived. The plethora of religious choice was now perceived as damaging to their communities and beyond. For example, in New York City well outside the Burned Over District, the *Morning Express* reported in 1844, "some apprehensions of a breach of peace were felt by some of our citizens and Mayor Harper, assisted by some of the Police Justices and Police Officers, interfered and caused

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[1] *Monroe Democrat*, Jan. 2, 1837.

the Churches of the Millerites to be closed."[2] The activities of Mormon missionaries in

the 1830s and the gathering of Millerites in the 1840s were treated in the same manner in

most places, with suspicion and active attempts to force them from the community.

The need for a unification of believers was regularly linked to preventing or

correcting societal and cultural ills. New York Presbyterian pastor Calvin Colton wrote in

1832 that unless orthodox denominations could come together in the face of heretical

challenges to the Protestant vision, "it seems to me, irreligion, or the common worldly

mass of unbelief, must for ever hold the vantage ground. Society, the world must be

melted down in a common crucible, or else the moral elements will still remain

heterogeneous, dissociate, and discordant."[3] Examples of this danger existed in new

religious movements that challenged what were being defined as true American values by

mainstream evangelical denominations. The evangelical goal of shaping the world in

preparation for the Kingdom of God needed to start in the cities, towns, and villages of

nineteenth century America. Mormons were troublesome not just because they were

considered deluded, but because they cut at the foundational roots of communities and the

nation. In his *Antidote to Mormonism*, James McHensey wrote, "Where, or when was

there ever a people more highly favoured than we have been in this country? The healthy

form of our government securing to every one full liberty of conscience; the Bible

strewed all over the land, and the blessings in rich abundance showered around our tents,"

and Mormonism could, "prove to be the rod of God's anger…think it not strange that

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[2] *New York Morning Express*, Oct. 22, 1844.
[3] Calvin Colton, *History and Character of American Revivals of Religion* (London: Frederick Westley and A.H. Davis, 1832), 34.

Mormonism should prove a scourge to chastise an ungodly nation."[4] *Mormonism Exposed*

contained section titles like:

> THE MORMON LEADERS DESIGN TO ASSUME A POSITION OF
> INDEPENDENCE ABOVE THE AUTHORITIES OF THE NATION.
>
> THE MORMON LEADERS HOLD THAT THEM OR THEIR SECT,
> ARE JUSTLY ENTITLED TO THE TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL
> DOMINION OF THESE UNITED STATES, AND THAT IF THEY
> CANNOT OTHERWISE OBTAIN THIS DOMINION THEY ARE TO
> GAIN IT BY THE SWORD.[5]

The Mormon heresy had the potential to overthrow the republic through the weakening of

American values and an abandonment of true religion. In contrast, Millerism did not

encourage the tearing down of established structures because they were going to be

engulfed in flames and destroyed regardless. Moral degeneration was a result of Millerite

pessimism and their belief in the immediate end of all things. This was described in a

series of items in the October 22, 1844 *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser* that spoke to

the varieties of social ills that arose when Millerism was present.[6] In *Strictures of

Millerism* Samuel Luckey wrote from Rochester, New York, on how Millerism took

people away from what was good and right through the ubiquitous preaching wearing

down their listeners, "They will be either shocked and disgusted, or gradually acquiesce

and approve. With respect to both persons and institutions, their *love* becomes *hatred*; and

what they formerly valued most highly they now denounce most vehemently."[7] Millerism

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[4] James McHensey, *An Antidote to Mormonism* (New York: Burnett & Pollard, 1838), 16.

[5] *Mormonism Exposed* (New York: New York Watchman, 1842), 37, 38

[6] *Long Island Framer and Advertiser*, Oct. 22, 1844. The paper draws on reports from across New England about drunkenness, civil unrest, and questionable business practices. In many cases, newspapers printed two or three examples of the damaging effects of Millerism, perhaps hoping to prove the danger through preponderance of evidence.

[7] Samuel Luckey, *Strictures on Millerism or the Second Advent Doctrines* (Rochester, N.Y.: R. M. Colton Printer, 1843), 14.

and Mormonism made it necessary for mainstream, white evangelicals to define the parameters of what was good, right, and American.

In upstate New York, as it was throughout the United States, white Protestant evangelicals put aside minor differences in doctrine to come together against humbug and heresy. According to *The Religious Intelligencer* in December 1833, the ministers of evangelical denominations were partially to blame for the fracturing of Christian belief, "To talk of separating the churches from one another on account of hair-splitting differences of opinion is one of the most head-long and mad enterprises …that ever entered the mind of man."[8] In 1844's *Religion in America* however, contemporary religious commentator Robert Baird denied there was a fracturing of evangelical denominations:

> While earnest in maintaining, alike from the pulpit and the press, their own views of Truth and church order, there is rarely anything like the denunciations and unchurching other orthodox communions, but every readiness to offer help when needed. They all unite in opposing…the heresy that denies the proper divinity and atonement of Christ together with those other aberrations from the true Gospel which the heresy involves.[9]

Baird is referring to what most of the converted in the Burned Over District believed; the true gospel was evangelical and came from the deeply personal relationship men and women had with their God and their religion. While Mormonism and Millerism were not the same movements, they were identified similarly as not true to evangelical goals for the nation. If God had abandoned America to the threats of Mormonism and Millerism, it was on the shoulders of the evangelical denominations to claw their way back and

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[8] *The Religious Intelligencer*, Vol. XVIII, Dec. 14, 1833, 459
[9] Robert Baird, *Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 268, 269. Baird is adamant that evangelicals are interchangeable, relating examples of clerics and laypeople crossing denominations with regularity.

establish the dominance of true religion. Methodist minister Charles Thompson wrote, "As we have seen, even national troubles and disasters pave the way for the more victorious march of the gospel. How resistless the union when the hand of human faith clasps the hand of God!"[10] New religious movements posed challenges, but they could be fought against and overturned, to ensure the place of true and correct religion in the lives of Americans.

The impact of new religious movements across central New York was felt as direct attacks on the foundation of the nation. To combat the advancement Mormonism and Millerism, many evangelicals believed a united front must be presented in a reasonable and thoughtful manner to protect true religion. An author in the June 7, 1833 *Liberal Advocate* listed three ways mainstream religion could prevent the advancement of the emotional, erroneous religions:

> That in the formation of religious principles, too much candour and consistency cannot be exercised; as the great diversity of religious opinion in the world leaves great chances for us to mistake the right, and embrace those that are erroneous and sinful. Second, that after we have formed in our own mind, the principles by which we mean to be governed in matters of religion, a strict adherence thereto is a necessary requisite to its final promulgation throughout the world. Lastly, that we ought always to be candid and sincere in matters of Religion, evincing to the world that the religion we profess, is the only true one.[11]

The religious culture of personal conversion, emotional revival, and societal reform was driven by orthodox evangelical denominations that had achieved massive gains and accomplishments in the first half of the nineteenth century. Robert Baird wrote of the uniformity of fundamental points of doctrine concerning the trinity, depravity of man, the

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[10] Charles L. Thompson, *Times of Refreshing: A History of American Revivals from 1740-1877* (Chicago: M.W. Smith, 1877), 482, 483.
[11] *Liberal Advocate*, June 7, 1834.

condemnation of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous. Baird claimed, "on these doctrines, in their substantial and real meaning, there is no difference among evangelical churches in the United States."[12] Facing the radical and expansive new religious movements of Mormonism and Millerism, white Protestant evangelicals, both lay and clergy, began to lay aside the differences that had created space for the growth of the new movements. An unsigned 1844 letter to the editor of the *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser* said:

> The man who thinks his neighbour doomed to eternal destruction because he differs from him on some points of faith, has no cause to speak of the fanaticism of the Millerite. We recommend a consideration of the principle which lies at the root of that and a thousand other ills. For each to reform himself, will be found the best way to prevent the recurrence of all forms of Millerism, and moreover, to get the better of many other evils.[13]

Millerism and Mormonism, pessimistic and separationist religious movements, were working against the principles of building a better world through evangelical Christianity and required serious action to counteract them. A writer for the *New York Sun* in 1842 declared, "That the press, the pulpit, and all other aids which can be made available in rescuing the people of the United States from these delusive inventions of knaves, and fools, and lunatics, should no longer be suffered to remain inactive."[14] It would take a united evangelical effort, one that would define the boundaries of acceptable, true religion in American society through the nineteenth century.

Evangelical religion had gained a dominant position in the religious landscape of America because of ability of white men and women to worship according to their conscience. As noted previously, that freedom was perceived as allowing the growth and

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[12] Baird, *Religion in America*, 185.
[13] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, Nov. 9, 1844.
[14] *New York Sun*, Nov. 9, 1842.

rise of heretical movements that threatened evangelical prominence. When the Book of Mormon first appeared, it was treated with disdain and ridicule. The prophet Joseph Smith was characterized as a "an idle fellow lounging about the villages, jumped up into a very grave parson like man," with no real spiritual authority or relevance.[15] When Miller's prediction began to draw adherents to his millennial vision, it was viewed as a ridiculous sort of religious humbug based on false interpretations of Scripture. Millerism was expected to flame out in due course according to the *Republican Watchman* in 1843 "If the world is not destroyed in 1843 then his doctrine, if it may be dignified by that name, is a gross delusion, and Miller will be classed with the hundreds of fanatic dreamers who have predicted the end of the world before him."[16] To the shock and consternation of orthodox denominations, Mormonism and Millerism did not fade away. Instead they grew stronger and challenged for religious and secular space in society. By 1843 the two had become linked in many minds as examples of how religion could go horribly wrong, "Millerism and Mormonism have had their origin in the love of excitement and the superstition which still exists in the minds of many; it is not reasonable to suppose that the leaders and advocates of either of these modern humbugs are honest in their belief."[17] Their continued success would force mainstream denominations to discard their positions of amused benevolence and their acceptance of free religious expression. Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians would come together to combat the heresy that was threatening their position in American society and they would do it in both the religious and secular realms.

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[15] *New York Morning Courier*, September 1, 1831.
[16] *Republican Watchman*, April 23, 1843.
[17] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, January 17, 1843.

Mainstream evangelical denominations would connect with secular and religious social reform organizations to link true religion to the well-being of communities. Groups like the Mormons and Millerites helped evangelicals define the boundaries of acceptable behaviour by clearly defining what was *not* true American religion. Uniting orthodox denominations to exclude others created societies and communities that adhered to a form of Christianity that, while experiencing some vagaries in expression, maintained a singular white, Protestant evangelical ideal. The connection between community and church was so deeply ingrained in American society that when evangelical minsters spoke on matters of societal importance, they linked the religious with the secular.

For most evangelical denominations, the corruption of society was due to a lack of true religion in the lives of Americans which directly led to the rise of new religious movements.[18] Historian Frank Lambert points to how evangelical denominations created voluntary organizations to improve secular society by changing the spiritual lives of congregants through a steady stream of strong religious instruction and guidance.[19] The *Communicant's Manual* for the Brick Presbyterian Church in Rochester, for example, detailed how their members "should be model citizens taking as intelligent, active, and self-sacrificing a part in public affairs as he can, and doing all in his power to right every social wrong."[20] The direct link between an orthodox religious life and a stable, prosperous community was clear: "bad commercial, political, and social conditions not only result in injustice and hardship. They corrupt character, destroy souls."[21] The deep

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[18] *Albany Argus,* Dec. 10, 1831 has an excellent example of how true religion could have prevented a corrupt society that was then primed and ready for Mormonism.

[19] Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 55-56.

[20] *Communicant's Manual, Brick Presbyterian Church* (Rochester, New York, 18??), 56.

[21] *Communicant's Manual*, 56.

connection between the religious and the secular in the nineteenth century made their separation extremely difficult. As historian Franklin H. Little noted, maintaining religious and civic order required "a consensus of all concerned"[22] while Mark Noll argued that, "the institutions of American national culture very often grew from initiatives pioneered…by evangelical Protestants."[23] With the importance of correct religious practice in the forefront of evangelical minds, the disruption of new religious movements was more than just a challenge for church membership; it was a challenge to define the cultural fabric of the new nation.

Mormonism and Millerism were not the only new religious movements in the 1830s and 1840s, but they drew the most attention and the most direct persecution. What made Mormons and Millerites different than other new religious movements were their attempts at integration into mainstream society and religion. Mormons were dedicated to continual proselytizing as part of the faith and Millerites preached to bring others into their fold before the end of the world. [24] One of the greatest strengths of the evangelical movement was spreading the word of God through revival or through roaming bands of preachers bringing the Gospel to the small communities around the Burned Over District. The efforts of Mormons and Millerites came in direct contact with those evangelicals, often attending revival meetings organized and run by Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, taking the opportunity to present their doctrine in the open and emotional atmosphere of a revival meeting. This direct interaction forced responses, and as the

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[22] Franklin H. Little, "The Churches and the Body Politic," in *Religion in America* ed. William G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), 39.
[23] Mark. A. Noll, *America's God: From Johnathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 199.
[24] W. Seward Salisbury, *Religion in American Culture: A Sociological Interpretation* (Homewood: The Dorsey Press: 1964), 162, 191.

movements grew in membership and influence, the evangelical responses were more unified. As mainstream evangelical churches evolved in the early nineteenth century towards a more controlled and less emotional form of practice, issues over membership and differences in denominational doctrine were put aside to contain the spread of the new religious movements. The gradual unification reflected the work of ecumenical voluntary societies like the American Home Missionary Society or the American Tract Society. These organizations were dedicated to spreading the evangelical message to the men and women of the United States, and their ecumenical nature helped to shape the informal but homogeneous evangelical response to the heretics in their midst.

Mormonism and Millerism were, at varying times, characterized as delusional and dangerous for much of the same reasons as non-religious movements like Mesmerism or phrenology. When Millerism began gathering more and more adherents in 1840, it was connected with Mormonism as the most obvious examples of detrimental religious delusion. The differences between the two movements did not prevent observers from claiming both founders and organizations were fraudsters out to cheat gullible Americans. One description from 1843 painted Millerites and Mormons as both having the same goal of making money out of religious belief, "when we have met with an advocate of any of these systems, we have almost invariably found some 'moonshine' in his composition…determined to make money out of everything available."[25] The very public presence of the new movements and their concurrent rise to prominence meant a connection in the criticism despite the differences in doctrine and expression. By the mid 1840s Millerism was the most prominent of threats in New York, but did not mean that

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[25] *Long Island Farmer and Advertiser*, Dec. 6, 1843.

Mormonism was forgotten as a threat to evangelical hegemony. In the introduction to

Abel C. Thomas' *A Complete Refutation of Miller's Theory*, evangelical preacher C.S.

Bailey wrote of how he believed Mormonism had been proven false so now the focus

needed to be on Millerism, "In this age we have Mormonism and Millerism before us.

The former a book speculation well known to all, and the latter an oft repeated prophecy

that the world must shortly come to an end. In the following pages will be found a

complete refutation of Millerism, while Mormonism needs no refutation."[26]

What is remarkable in a supposedly plural religious landscape like the Burned

Over District is the unplanned, yet unified position of the evangelical denominations

against Mormonism and Millerism. It was believed that the unification of Protestant

evangelical believers was essential for the good of the nation and for the preservation of

true religion. The denominational name was less important than adherence and practice of

correct belief. In one of his lectures on revival religion in 1832, Albany, New York

Presbyterian minister William Sprague wrote:

> We profess to believe that our neighbours of many of the different
> denominations around us hold the fundamental truths of the gospel, and
> are walking in the way to heaven…who among us is there that does not
> regard *Christian* as a much more hallowed name? In other words, where is
> the man who would not consider it comparatively a light matter whether an
> individual should join our particular communion, or some other, provided
> he gave evidence of being a real disciple of Christ?[27]

This sentiment was echoed nearly a decade later when Robert Baird described the

uniformity of evangelical churches: clergy swapping pulpits, laity attending services

outside of their own fellowship, and the rejection of active prostelyzing among the

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[26] Abel C. Thomas, *A Complete Refutation of Miller's Theory of the End of the World in 1843*
(Philadelphia:1843), 4.
[27] William Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1832), 78. Italics original.

denominations.[28] Baird wrote, "We deny not that in some of the divisions of Churches that have taken place in the United States, men have at times permitted themselves to speak and write with acrimony unbecoming the Gospel. But such cases have been local and exceptional rather than general and ordinary and never could justify any sweeping charge against the evangelical denominations as a body."[29] The consensus view was of a world, nation, and society formed and shaped by an evangelical's personal and emotional relationship between man and God.

Nowhere else in the world was the individual permitted and encouraged to form that bond so freely and openly, and nowhere else was that relationship driving waves of social reform and change like in the United States. The evangelical denominations continued to work toward unifying their efforts to promote the good of the nation and the world. Robert Baird noted how the evangelicals came together across boundaries in the creation of voluntary societies, they "all bring Christians of different denominations into better acquittance with each other, and tend to promote mutual respect and affection."[30] In 1832 Calvin Colton described the purpose of revival in the evangelical tradition and practice when a group of Presbyterians and Baptists came together, "In this meeting sectional and party feeling was wholly laid aside, and those of different names met and laboured upon the common footing of Christians and servants of the Most High."[31] According to Simeon Harkey in 1842 only evangelical, revival religion could drive the nation to be the best example of a true, pure Christian society. He wrote:

> They now begin to inquire into, and read about the wants of the church and
> the world, and their hearts and hands are open and ready for every good

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[28] Baird, *Religion in America*, 269.
[29] Baird, *Religion in America,* 269.
[30] Baird, *Religion in America,* 268.
[31] Colton, *History and Character*, 234.

word and work. The cause of Education and Missions, of Bible, Tract, Sabbath School, and Temperance Societies now lays hold upon their affections, and receive their cheerful co-operation. Their hearts are now warmed up with the holy fire of divine love, and it spreads all around and ignites everything with which it comes in contact. In a word, Christians now begin to *feel* and *do* their duty.[32]

The name of the church mattered less than the conversion experience and personal relationship with evangelical religion that fostered and promoted a sense of American identity.

Mormonism and Millerism were also products of that personal and emotional relationship. They were set apart however, pushed to the boundaries of American society because they were not part of the mainstream evangelical push towards a perfect Christian world. The Mormons claimed that all other denominations were missing the new and important testament as defined by their Prophet Joseph Smith. William Miller was preaching for the end of the world with no redemption for those who ignored his apocalyptic millennial message. These two movements undercut the foundations of what was rapidly becoming the default, dominant form of religious expression in the United States. While religion and faith were legally separated from the state, evangelical religion and practice defined what the American state would become. American religion would mix with American culture and start to form an American identity defined by the voluntary, personal, emotional, and individual relationship between a person, their country, and their Protestant evangelical faith.[33] By refusing to work within the borders of evangelical expression, especially in areas like central New York, Mormonism and

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[32] Simeon W. Harkey, *The Church's Best State or Constant Revivals of Religion* (Baltimore: Publication Rooms, 1842), 76.
[33] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, London: Princeton University Press, 1989) 7.

Millerism found they could not operate in the supposedly free religious atmosphere of early nineteenth century America. The counties of central New York had seen wave after wave of religious revival; they had embraced the evangelical message, but one that was meant to be unifying within the boundaries of a person's chosen tradition. The great evangelist Charles Finney wrote in 1832, "when the Baptists are so opposed to the Presbyterians, or the Presbyterians to the Baptists, or both against the Methodists, or the Episcopalians against the rest, that they begin to make efforts to get the converts to join their church…stirs up bitterness, and raising selfish strife, grieves away the [Holy] Spirit."[34] Mormons and Millerites took advantage of the discord among the other sects to gain followers, making it necessary for the evangelical denominations to put aside their differences to combat these challenges to evangelical true religion.

This unification of evangelical believers was not an organized movement, and as a result has not been recognized by historians. Nathan Hatch for example, argues that American religion was essentially democratic, driven by continued dissent within the dominant traditions and competing voices. He states that American Christianity was "intellectually open to all, organizationally fragmented, and popularly led" and "highly diverse, loosely structured, and greatly decentralized."[35] As demonstrated in this project however, evangelical reactions against Mormons and Millerites, movements that were intellectually and theologically innovative, challenge this portrayal of the essentially pluralistic nature of American religion and by extension society. As Charles Finney stated "if Christians expect to unite in prayer and effort, so as to prevail with God, they must be

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[34] Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on the Revival of Religion* (New York, Chicago, Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1868), originally published 1832, 267.
[35] Hatch, *Democratization*, 208, 209.

agreed in speaking and doing the same things, in walking by the same rule, and maintain

the same principles, and in persevering till they obtain the blessing, so as not to hinder or

thwart each other's efforts."[36] Coming together to promote a common set of goals and

principles created a body of believers with an agenda to create and shape a nation and a

people in the evangelical image. When new religious movements threatened the ability to

affect those changes or challenged for prominence in communities and congregations,

evangelicals presented a united front. By encouraging protests and persecutions against

some new religious movements but not others the mainstream evangelical denominations

defined the borders of correct and true religious practice in America.

The idea of a pluralistic religious landscape, open to all forms of worship and

practice is a commonly held misconception of American culture. The separation of

specific kinds of religious practice as dangerous to the well being of the nation began in

the 1830s and 1840s and laid the framework for other, later religious exceptions. The

freedom to practice a religion does not mean the freedom to thrive in American society.

Mormonism and Millerism are early examples of new religious movements whose growth

and influence threatened newly established societal definitions. Individual choice was

celebrated and encouraged; the power of the common man was supreme in the early

nineteenth century. There were, however, individual choices that could threaten the fabric

of American society, and so while maintaining an air of freedom, those choices solidified

into clearly defined right and wrong. Mormonism and Millerism were the clearest and

most public examples of wrong choices, and clear examples also of the limits of religious

and social freedom in the United States. The white, Protestant evangelical ethic broke

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[36] Finney, *Lectures*, 306.

through a sea of voices to become established as the only truly American way of living, working, and operating in America. The name on the church door was not important; adherence and commitment to evangelical practice and traditions defined the American way of life superseded the denomination. The nativist movement in the 1850s, the push against Spiritualism in the 1890s, and the twenty-first century othering of Islam all have roots in the evangelical definitions of American identity. In later evangelical movements, there are echoes of the language of the early nineteenth century. Calls to limit the practice of other religions because their danger to society by the American Party in the 1850s or the immigration ban in 2017 invoke memories of the calls against Mormons and Millerites in the 1830s and 1840s. Their practices were religiously different, and they were censured and persecuted for a different belief. These persecutions laid the framework for how Americans use religion to define their identity and place in the world. Plurality led to cohesion and exclusion as men and women across boundaries moved to create a powerful movement of evangelical believers devoted to bettering the world in their religious image. Freedom of religion is not automatic and not universal in the United States and has not been since the earliest days of the republic.

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