

The American Transcendentalists: A Religious Historiography

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In “‘A Little Beyond’: The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” Charles Capper noted that “Transcendentalism, once a mainstay of surveys of American thought, has virtually vanished from the historical radar screen.”¹ Although a good deal of critical acclaim and academic productivity on the subject exists, primarily in the discipline of literary studies, neither “constitutes the history of a movement. That requires some sense of its contours, phases, and significance as a past, multiform, collective entity, interacting with other such entities in various ‘times.’.... As a historical movement,” he argued, “Transcendentalism would seem to have entered into a long eclipse.”² Taking a cue from Capper, whose historiography is erudite and thorough on matters of literary and intellectual – but not religious – history, a review of the secondary literature suggests the narrative of Transcendentalism read explicitly as a religious demonstration is both problematic and incomplete.

This essay examines two major trends in the historiography of American Transcendentalists with an eye toward the secondary conceptualizations of the movement in more recent studies of American religion. Considering the question of how – and to what extent – historians and other scholars have included, interpreted, and thereby shaped

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the Transcendentalists in the narrative of America's religious history, I argue that specific agendas fashioned scholarship on American Transcendentalism in a range of "eras" and determined where the movement fit in relation to the given central themes and narrative programs of various critics. In the first section, after a short account of Transcendentalism's contemporary and autobiographical history, I look at the nineteenth-century work done by Protestant Christian religious historians and theologians – exemplified by Robert Baird, Leonard Woolsey Bacon, and Daniel Dorchester – while paying particular attention to how their construction of a unified and evangelical thesis left no room for what they perceived as deviant, divisive, and therefore threatening movements such as Transcendentalism. The second section focuses on the generational and disciplinary shift that attended the twentieth-century rise in American Studies and the "history of ideas" – as well as the emerging field of Religion and Literature – through a study of F. O. Matthiessen and Perry Miller, among others. It is these scholars who brought the Transcendentalists back into the conversation and thus located them as important and representative components within a larger framework of American intellectual, cultural, and subsequently religious history. I conclude by assessing some of the central trends and problems in the last half-century of American religious history with regard to Transcendentalism as well as pointing to more recent thought and scholarship on the matter.

"Teach the rest to sneer": Nineteenth-Century Currents

Looking back over the various print culture outlets of nineteenth-century America, we find no shortage of writing on the motley group of figures and ideas

composing the Transcendentalist movement. Even excepting the massive outpouring of writing the Transcendentalists themselves produced (including memoirs and personal histories composed after the fact, such as Parker's 1859 *Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister* and Emerson's 1883 *Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England*), we find throughout newspapers, journals, magazines, published sermons, personal correspondence, and even popular fiction an overwhelming public interest in – and debate over – the Transcendentalists.³ A central theme in much of these writings is an attempt to define Transcendentalism (a problem with which modern scholars still struggle). For just one early example, on February 22, 1839, the *Boston Recorder* published a letter to the editor – signed “Many Enquirers” – that began, “Mr. Editor,-- Will you or some of your correspondents, give to the public a popular and easy answer to the question, What is *transcendentalism*. . . . few of us can pronounce the word, and fewer still can tell what it amounts to.”⁴ The writer went on to say that the question of whether Transcendentalism was “that form of atheism called pantheism” or “one of the highest degrees or states of religion” divided his circle. Interestingly, the editors, after presenting an open call for efforts to solve this problem, wrote that they themselves declined the challenge for the reason that they “like so much better to ‘live and move and have our being’ on *terra firma*, than among the clouds or even above them.”⁵ In the ensuing two months, until April 19, 1839, editors published parts of a weekly series called “Transcendentalism Translated” and, judging by the nature and swell of letters on the subject, the pieces served to further the curiosity and ambivalence of the general public in and around Boston.⁶ Nor was this an isolated incident. One finds similar conversations taking place in such Protestant Christian publications as the *Christian Register*, *New York*

Evangelist, Biblical Repository, Christian Examiner, Christian World, and Christian Secretary, amid other, more secular-oriented, newspapers and periodicals. Thus, in addition to matters of simple definition, we also perceive distinct attempts to locate or conceptualize the group within a familiar religious framework.

More critical for our purposes, though, is the place of American Transcendentalism in second-order history: those broad and general narratives that attempted to account for either most religious groups or the phenomenon of religion as a whole in the United States. Perhaps the best place to begin any general historiography of religion in America is with Robert Baird's groundbreaking chronicle from the mid-nineteenth century, *Religion in America; or An account of the origin, relation to the state, and present condition of the evangelical churches in the Unites States. With notices of the unevangelical denominations*. Indicative of Baird's interests is the space he allots to each of his subjects. In a book weighing in at just under seven hundred pages, Baird devotes fewer than fifty pages to the "unevangelical denominations" mentioned in his title, much of which is reserved for Catholics, Jews, and Mormons. Transcendentalism receives less than two pages and only then as a mere and minor schism – further proof for Baird of Unitarianism's unorthodox, excessively liberal, and fragmenting nature. He concludes,

Its adherents [that is, those Unitarians taken with "German Transcendentalism"], generally, are not very profound thinkers, nor very well acquainted with the philosophy which they have embraced, or with the evidence on which it rests. It promises to relieve its disciples from the necessity of building their religious faith and hopes on probabilities ... and it affords an unlimited range for the play of the imagination. It has charms, therefore, for the contemplative and for the enthusiastic.⁷

Disregarding the actual views of the Transcendentalists (for instance, he boils their religious beliefs down to “pantheism” and “defection”) and avoiding explicit mention of any individual “adherents” (though as corroboration of their “heresy” he does, without identifying, refer to an 1841 sermon, one that most contemporary readers would have recognized as Theodore Parker’s “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” first preached at the ordination of Charles C. Shackford in South Boston), Baird points out that their “impious doctrines have been promulgated in periodicals and otherwise, from time to time, with increasing boldness.”⁸ Yet the remainder of his very short account only deals with this group insofar as they prove his thesis of Unitarianism’s theological infidelity and dangerous semblances of Deism. In all fairness to Baird’s consistency, successive treatments of Universalists, Swedenborgians, and Fourierists continue this interpretive style and line of approach.⁹ With each, Baird argues that those who orchestrate the movements are fundamentally uneducated; they pervert true knowledge and give easy-to-swallow religion to the credulous and profane haters of true, evangelical religion. Baird’s final estimation, a rather functionalist one, is that none of these groups, including the Transcendentalists, will (or deserve to) endure, much less thrive, because they lack reforming influence. Given that this monumental work was the point of reference and yardstick of American religious history for years to come, these are inauspicious beginnings for the presence of Transcendentalism.

The situation did not improve with subsequent histories. In *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* (initially published in German in 1854 and appearing in the U.S. in English translation a year later), the next major history of American religion, Philip Schaff limited his treatment of the group to lobbed accusations

of “destructive liberalism” and “godless transcendentalism.”¹⁰ We find slightly more attention given to the Transcendentalists by the time of Leonard Woolsey Bacon’s *A History of American Christianity* (1897), which, significantly, was one of the books in Schaff’s American Church History Series. Yet the traditionally censorious reaction to Transcendentalism had in no way diminished after nearly half a century. R. Laurence Moore has suggested that Bacon had a “strong conviction that providential design governed history” as well as believing that “America’s religious destiny was, despite appearances, to end schism, not multiply it.”¹¹ This conviction of faith goes a long way in explaining Bacon’s remarks on what he terms “the conflict between the Unitarians and the pantheists.”¹² First singling out Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bacon writes that, in his books and lectures,

Christianity and all practical religion were condemned by sly innuendo and half-respectful allusion by which he might ‘without sneering teach the rest to sneer’.... The blank pantheism which he then enunciated called forth from Professor Henry Ware, Jr., a sermon in the college chapel on the personality of God, which he sent with a friendly note to Mr. Emerson. The gay and Skimpolesque reply of the sage is an illustration of that flippancy with which he chose to toy in a literary way with momentous questions, and which was so exasperating to the earnest men of positive religious convictions with whom he had been associated in the Christian ministry.¹³

Bacon then turns his attention to Parker, who fares even worse under his scalpel. Although scathing remarks on Emerson are somewhat of an anomaly in later religious histories, Bacon’s focus on Parker does exemplify a larger pattern in American history. Specifically, an inveterate theme resides in those studies that note and even struggle with – rather than eschew – the existence of the Transcendentalists. These studies increasingly

depict Emerson, after years spent on the lecture circuit, as a defender of virtue (albeit one given to rhetorical and hyperbolic flourishes) instead of depravity while Parker, a theological radical to the end, receives the brunt of the bias. Consider Bacon's portrayal:

Paradox was a passion with him, that was stimulated by complaints, and even by deprecations, to the point of irreverence. He liked to 'make people's flesh crawl.... With this temper it is not strange that when he came to enunciate his departure from some of the accepted tenets of his brethren, who were habitually reverent in their discipleship toward Jesus Christ, he should do this in a way to offend and shock.... Channing did not live to see the characteristic tenets of the heresiarch to whom he hesitated to give the name of Christian not only widely accepted in the Unitarian churches, but some of them freely discussed as open questions among some orthodox scholars.¹⁴

Bacon never refers explicitly to the Transcendentalists as a religious group, choosing instead to label them as non-religious philosophers and writers. He admits to their influence in American culture but argues that their religious beliefs and attitudes were too insubstantial to "give them any permanent standing in the church.... [T]hey came to be no longer recognizable as a religious or theological party."¹⁵ What is noteworthy in this account is, first, his allusion to their once-recognizable status as a religious group and, second, his belief that their only surviving legacy is in secular culture. The reason for this, as Moore intimates and as we see in a great deal of American religious history, is Bacon's underlying evangelical thesis that seeks to undermine the presence of any disuniting elements within America's religious (that is, Protestant Christian) makeup.

Daniel Dorchester's *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement*

Down to the Present Time (originally composed in 1888 and revised in 1895), though published slightly earlier than Bacon's work, represents something of a positive, if limited, shift in the historical appraisal of Transcendentalism. Apart from the insider history mentioned earlier – particularly the writings of former and second or third-generation Transcendentalists like Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Franklin Benjamin Sanborn – Dorchester is remarkable for his relatively agreeable estimation. For example, consider the following statement: "It is probable that they [Emerson's *Essays*, published in 1841] would have been at once widely welcomed as a positive addition to literature had it not been for some startling paradoxes and audacious statements, which, while they were in direct conflict with the theological beliefs of the people, were supported neither by facts nor arguments, but rested on the simple testimony of the author's individual consciousness."¹⁶ Dorchester clearly hedges his bets here; though Emerson's writings conflicted with the theological convictions of his contemporaries, we perceive no personal animosity in the historian himself. Yet, and this is key, Dorchester makes sure to mention that the essays would have made a fine contribution to the country's literature, but not to its religious heritage. On the following page Dorchester even goes so far as to call Emerson a "great influence in the Unitarian body and outside of it."¹⁷ The reason for this affirmation is due in large part to Dorchester's confidence that Emerson, "after long exploring the dreamy solitude of Pantheism, came to be, in the estimation of his intimate friend, Mr. Alcott, a 'Christian theist.'¹⁸

Again, in Dorchester we sense the trend first observed in Bacon: increasing acceptance, admiration, and eventual canonization of Emerson paralleled with harsh

denunciations of Parker. The following quote, though lengthy, deserves to be reprinted here because it is at once acerbic yet typical of religious history regarding the Transcendentalists at this time:

[Parker's] influence was destined to be widely felt, leading many minds to assert their independence of Christ and divine revelation.... Channing, who died in 1824, had been, more than any other man, the leader and prophet of the body [the Unitarian denomination], whose beautiful spirit was every-where felt, exerting its sweet, genial, and almost magical influence. But Mr. Parker strode forth into the field Goliath-like, rash, self-willed, without reverence for accumulated wisdom and experience, confident of superiority to the past, relying upon his own personal insight.... Parker was a natural polemic, scenting the battle from afar and neighing for the conflict. He loved sharp, incisive statements, had a fatal habit of gross exaggeration, often sacrificed truth on the altar of personal conceit, and often in attempts at bold and startling rhetoric.... Parker was a merciless critic of Christ ... with the intellectual weakness of a child. While stating one class of facts with remarkable cleverness, at the same time he had a pre-eminent ability, or liability, whichever it was, for utterly overlooking other facts, no less evident, of an opposite character.... He was an able, a decided, and an uncompromising representative of a system which was positively anti-Christian, and yet he claimed to be a restorer of true Christianity.... he seems to have had no fully matured system. He was rich in thought, but not logical and well defined; strong and forcible in style, but bold, erratic, paradoxical and irreverent.¹⁹

A third facet frequently found in this trope is that religious historians acknowledge neither individual members (besides these two representatives) nor the movement as a whole. For instance, the short sections on Emerson and Parker comprise a handful of pages, while the other members (who remain unnamed) and the group it composes warrant just one sentence.²⁰ We should recognize, though, that even the notes

on Emerson and Parker fall within Dorchester's segment on Unitarianism; this, moreover, is just one subdivision of a small (thirty-page) chapter entitled "Divergent Currents" from 1800-1850, one which also covers Universalists, the Progressive Friends, the New Jerusalem Church, and Millerism. Dorchester returns to mention the aftermath of the Transcendentalists in his coverage of the period extending from 1850-1894. Again, he subsumes the Transcendentalists within the brief bit on Unitarianism, part of a somewhat larger chapter on divergent currents that now includes Jews, Shakers, Multifarious Skepticism, "Free Religion," The Latest Socialism, and Mormonism (capitalized in the table of contents thought not always in the main body). Although the group comprised "many able, brilliant and cultured writers," Dorchester argues here that the "religion" of Emerson and Parker – "the extremes of unbelief" in which "marked symptoms of radical departures appeared" – did not arouse "much open sympathy."²¹ Once more, the dominant narratives pictured the Transcendentalists as a fleeting and fruitless bunch that had some impact on literary culture but no place of which to speak within America's larger religious history.

Baird's, Bacon's, Dorchester's, and even Schaff's histories are not necessarily unique, but they are distinctive for their explicit grappling with the dilemma of Transcendentalists and religion. As we have begun to see with our examples, a good deal of religious history composed in the nineteenth century tended to pursue any number of approaches, some concurrently, in dealing with the "problem" of Transcendentalism. One course, seen earlier in the history and often coming from conservative Unitarians (most famously from "pope" Andrews Norton in his 1839 "A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity"), was to condemn the Transcendentalists as irreligious and heretical.²² A

second approach was to deem the Transcendentalists non-religious – that is, as a splinter group of formerly religious persons who left to practice the “non-religious” arts of philosophy and writing. A third tactic was to give the customary citation of Emerson and Parker as evidence of Unitarianism’s divisive nature but disregard other Transcendentalists as individuals or a collective. Lastly, a fourth and perhaps most common trend was total avoidance of Transcendentalists altogether.

A pattern begins to form when we examine these methods in tandem. Transcendentalists, amidst other deviating strains, had little to no import in these triumphal historians’ Anglo-Protestant and evangelical Christian narratives; no import, that is, except for substantiation of the impermanence and inefficacy of peripheral religious groups. The central argument and ethos in these texts was that we can only understand American religion as an ongoing and divinely ordained project of religious unification led by evangelical Protestantism. Thus the central agenda coursing throughout nineteenth-century religious history is a long process of marginalization carried out by the dominant group against what were taken to be religious fragmentations. In sum, specialists in theology and denominational history constructed most if not all of American religious history at this time and they had no interest in analyzing the religious dimensions of the Transcendentalists. This evangelical consensus model was rather concerned with fleshing out ideas of divine providence and manifest destiny. Consequently, in this historiographical schema evangelicalism was the hinge and the adhesive that led to America’s distinctive and successful religious history.

It is important to observe that Baird, Bacon, and Dorchester constitute a rather microscopic percentage of writing in the nineteenth century that deals in part or explicitly

with the American Transcendentalists. For example, a mere glimpse at Joel Myerson's comprehensive *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism* (1984) proves no such dearth exists.²³ Even when we narrow the range to the more limited subject of Transcendentalism and religion, one is not too hard-pressed to locate resources. However, with very few exceptions these studies – usually brief and restricted in scope – tend to fall within three realms: individual biographies, histories of Unitarianism, and popular or sentimental pilgrimage essays. Excluding the denominational studies of Unitarianism, the bearing of these genres on American religious history was relatively insignificant. By contrast, the evangelical consensus models of Baird, Schaff, Bacon, and Dorchester are almost solely responsible for dictating the initial and long-standing parameters of the field. Thus it is difficult to exaggerate the influence of these works on multiple generations of scholarship and the consequent determination of what and whom later critics would include – and how – in the conversation.

“Beyond the escapism, fantasy, and sentimentality”: The Rise of American Studies

A curious shift occurred in the historiography of Transcendentalism in the early to mid-twentieth century. In this period we see not only a fissure opening between generations, but between academic disciplines as well. As Capper pointed out, after “Frothingham's dry philosophical exposition and Higginson's earnest cultural appreciation,” departments of History, Philosophy, and English continued a trend of eschewing noninstitutional subject matter to the detriment of Transcendentalism.²⁴ A similar phenomenon of forgetfulness and avoidance settled upon American religious historians during the early twentieth century. However, an interdisciplinary collaboration

of scholarship that coincided with the rise of intellectual history, American Studies – that field concerned with tracing synthetic concepts and themes through American culture – and the later subfield of Religion and Literature was responsible for reintroducing the Transcendentalists into the story of American religious history and culture.

An authoritative account of the renewed interest in Transcendentalism as a literary, philosophical, and socio-political force – and of its reintroduction into these generic studies – already exists in Capper and need not be reiterated here. What requires noting for our purposes is that, after a spate of early twentieth-century “modernist” criticism (such as Van Wyck Brooks’ 1915 *America’s Coming of Age*) that equated the Transcendentalists with Victorian evasion, genteel idealism, and “failed cultural nationalism,” a handful of academics began to contextualize the Transcendentalists within a larger pattern of intellectual culture.²⁵ These include, for instance, the scholars George Santayana, Lewis Mumford, and Vernon Louis Parrington in the disciplines of philosophy, literature, and history. Throughout most of the writings of this period, though, we find a general attitude of disdainfulness toward the Transcendentalists’ “mysticism” and an ultimate dismissal of their religious dimensions. Thus continued the long tradition in American scholarship of deemphasizing the religious orientation of the Transcendentalists.

Even so, these early studies heralded the formation of Religion and Literature as a field of study and, subsequently, presented an opportunity for new incursions on the dominant evangelical model in American religious history. One case in point of this follow-on revision was Clarence L. F. Gohdes’ *The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism* (1931). Although Gohdes was a professor of literature who focused

his attention on Transcendentalist-owned journals such as *The Dial* and *The Harbinger*, what is worth mentioning is his emphasis on the religious dimension of Transcendentalism.²⁶ All told, he proposed that, while the Transcendentalists may have passed from the scene and out of public consideration, they lived on in their ideas and left a lasting – if not acknowledged – intellectual and cultural legacy. Still, at this time academics viewed the Transcendentalists as a whole rather condescendingly. For just one example of a less than positive portrayal of the group, we can turn to Thomas Cuming Hall, a professor of English and American History and Culture at the University of Goettingen. Hall conceived his 1930 *The Religious Background of American Culture* to be an inclusive and meticulous account of religion and American culture from its European origins up until the early twentieth century. Within its pages, however, he reduced the Transcendentalists to “aesthetically starved but actively minded persons” who were rendered intoxicated by their “unwholesome diet” of tangled European philosophies.²⁷ Ostensibly, the only reason for their inclusion in his story is an attempt to separate the wheat, Emerson, from the chaff: “It is surely a great mistake to rank Emerson with a group that generally bears the name of the ‘Transcendentalists’, however intimate his personal relations were with many members of the group.”²⁸

Another example of situating the Transcendentalists in a larger record of American culture is Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress: Orestes A. Brownson* (1939). Writing a “senior honors essay in history and literature at Harvard” under Perry Miller’s direction, and with the topic suggested by his father, Schlesinger envisioned this work as a piece of intellectual history – “the complex and tricky area where ideas and politics overlap and intersect.”²⁹ Setting Transcendentalism within the

context of Jacksonian Democracy and its atmosphere of political and religious upheaval, this short biography – which took into account Brownson’s “fellow pilgrims” – argued that the Transcendentalists as a whole continued to hold significance for the enduring problems in American history regarding society, culture, and religion. Yet just a half-dozen years later, in his *The Age of Jackson* (1945), the increasingly politically oriented Schlesinger had adopted the post-World War II theme of hostility “to anything that smacked of effete individualistic idealism”; this led him, consequently, to paint the Transcendentalists as “aloof fence-sitters, timid escapists, and precious naysayers.”³⁰

The principal catalyst – or at least the most influential and prominent work – of this tradition must be F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). In his now-classic book, Matthiessen examined moral and mythic themes in key nineteenth-century American writers (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman) with an eye toward the new – that is, post-evangelical – religious symbols represented in this literature. Matthiessen admitted his debt to Mumford, Parrington, and Van Wyck Brooks; nevertheless, he distanced himself from Brooks’ later, Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flowering of New England* (1936),³¹ which he called a “charming but sentimental” book that “has robbed the period of most of its clash and struggle” and “has so diluted Thoreau that it is hard to tell him from Bronson Alcott.”³² As observed in the nineteenth-century religious histories, even here we identify in Matthiessen the limited focus on two representative Transcendentalists (though by this stage Thoreau has been substituted for Parker). Nevertheless, perhaps more than any other thinker of his generation, Matthiessen, in his reassessment of the religious in American literature, rendered the Transcendentalists available and culturally

significant for a wide range of scholars.

Following the path laid by Matthiessen, the growing field of American Studies in the post-World War II era gave religion – and oftentimes Transcendentalism – a more central place in their work while maintaining the penchant for concentrating almost wholly on Emerson and Thoreau. Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Traditions* was first published in 1957 (sections of chapters had appeared elsewhere as early as 1955). In this book, which contrasted the cultural preoccupations of American and English writers, Chase argued that what was distinctly "American" about the American novel was its fundamental concern with issues of metaphysics, good versus evil, and myth-making. Nonetheless, he was quick to point out that this religious predilection was "far beyond the escapism, fantasy, and sentimentality often associated with it."³³ Furthermore, throughout his appraisal of Hawthorne and Melville, among others (he also published on Whitman and Dickinson), Chase suggested that Americans had introduced "into the novel what one may roughly describe as the narrow profundity of New England Puritanism, the skeptical, rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment, and the imaginative freedom of Transcendentalism. In doing so they have created a brilliant and original, if often unstable and fragmentary, kind of literature."³⁴

Similarly, R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955), clearly followed in the wake of Matthiessen. Lewis was above all interested in understanding what he saw as early attempts to form a distinctly American mythology. Focusing on the antebellum period from 1820 to 1860, his book sought to explain how moral postures were represented. More specifically, Lewis analyzed how American culture produced a debate, possibly even a contest, over

the ideas with which it was preoccupied, such as salvation, identity, and the order of nature: “intellectual history, properly conducted, exposes not only the dominant ideas of a period, or of a nation, but more importantly, the dominant clashes over ideas.”³⁵ Thus this book, intended as a sort of genealogy or history of the present, outlined the dialogue – with Emerson and Thoreau once again in the forefront – that led to the creation of American culture as we now recognize it.

No discussion of the Transcendentalists’ reintroduction into the story of American religion would be complete without a look at Perry Miller’s achievements. It is almost impossible to exaggerate his contribution in bringing this revision about, the principal reason being his insistence that Transcendentalism was first and foremost a religious movement of self-styled prophets where “worship remained the controlling motive.”³⁶ Early in his career, Miller, an intellectual historian affiliated with American Studies and especially literature, tended to present the Transcendentalists as both parochial and marginal. For instance, in his *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War*, he relegated Transcendentalism to the sideline in favor of early nineteenth-century revivalism.³⁷ Yet with works such as his 1940 “From Edwards to Emerson” (likely his most famous and most misunderstood essay) and his 1950 *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, Miller argued for a religious connection between Transcendentalism and Calvinist Puritanism. In the former work, Miller took as his starting point the conviction that “certain basic continuities persist in a culture ... which underlie the successive articulation of ‘ideas.’”³⁸ He then proceeded to underscore what he saw as a link of mysticism extending from Edwards to Emerson, and hence from the Puritans to the Transcendentalists: namely, the will to confront the divine or transcendent

in the world (universe or nature, respectively) without intermediation. There was a key contrast between the two, however, that Miller was quick to emphasize:

“Edwards sought the ‘images or shadows of divine things’ in nature, but could not trust his discoveries because he knew man to be cut off from full communion with the created order because of his inherent depravity. But Emerson, having decided that man is unfallen (except as his sensibilities have been blunted by civilization), announced that there is no inherent separation between the mind and the think, that in reality they leap to embrace each other.”³⁹

Although Miller was more often than not involved in individual studies of Transcendentalists, in the latter work, a collection of selected writings with headnotes and an introductory essay by Miller, we see a shift to focus on the group as both a whole and a distinctively religious demonstration. In fact, he proposed that “this inherently religious character” of the Transcendentalists had been long overlooked primarily because scholars frequently concentrated on individuals, such as Thoreau and Emerson who translated their spiritual cause “into the language of philosophy and literature,” rather than on the collective.⁴⁰ On the one hand, then, Miller argued that we must consider equally their self-description as a somewhat united “party of the Future” and recognize that they managed “to achieve in the sum total of their work a significance that really does transcend the boundaries of their time and their place.”⁴¹ On the other hand, he suggested that “the fascination of this particular tempest ... is precisely that it churned up prophetic issues”; to put it differently, “the real drive in the souls of the participants was a hunger of the spirit for values” and thus Transcendentalism should “be read as fundamentally an expression of a religious radicalism in revolt against a rational conservatism” and “a

protest of the human spirit against emotional starvation.”⁴² In the end, Transcendentalism for Miller was an attempt to form a vigorous religion outside the confines of theological strictures and one that resulted in a singular yet characteristically American expansion of mind and spirit.

For the renewal of academic interest in Transcendentalism, we cannot overstate the importance of these aforesaid twentieth-century scholars. The next generation of students involved with American literature carried on this fascination with the Transcendentalists. Scholars such as Ann Douglas, Roland Delattre, and Giles Gunn worked to establish the place of Transcendentalism in American thought and culture while keeping its religious aspects to the forefront. For a minor but telling instance, *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (1973), edited by Brian Barbour, is indicative of this shift. In a section on theological perspectives and all through the pieces we see special attention paid to the religious roots and importance of the Transcendentalists in addition to its intellectual influence within American culture. The focus of this collection, then, is in part an attempt to place the movement in a larger context – to provide and explain the social, historical, and religious conditions within which the movement operated.⁴³

Nor was this interest limited to those working in departments of History, Philosophy, and English. Religious historians also became acquainted with and attracted to the Transcendentalists through the work of those in American literature and the burgeoning field of American Studies. For just one example we can turn to Rowland Sherrill who was affiliated with English and Religious Studies departments alike. Sherrill, throughout his career but particularly in his books on Melville (1975’s “*The*

Span of Portents”: *The Meaning of Transcendence in the Fictions of Herman Melville* and 1979’s *The Prophetic Melville: Experience, Transcendence, and Tragedy*), argued that a wrestling with the transcendent – with ideas that the Transcendentalists had made prescient – left a lasting legacy on history and American culture. More specifically, Sherrill was interested in the Transcendentalists’ Adamic impulse – that is, the notion of an American Adam in a new paradise and wilderness. He thus defined nineteenth-century America as essentially romantic in its “premises about the necessity of avoiding the corruptions of civilization” and “virtues of communion with the natural world.”⁴⁴

To conclude, the concept of Transcendentalism *qua* a religious demonstration made its way back into the histories of American religion through American Studies and scholarship on religion and literature. These scholars were increasingly cognizant of the religious factors involved in the movement and endeavored to tie these themes into larger cultural and intellectual patterns and, because of their work, American religious historians started to give the Transcendentalists another, closer look. It is to this phase – the most recent chapter in the historiography of Transcendentalism – that we now turn.

***“Among other things....”*: Countervailing Trends**

A paper of this length cannot do justice to all of the seminal work on religion and the Transcendentalists produced since mid-century.⁴⁵ Still, for our current purposes we must consider, however briefly, the standard approach set forth by William Hutchison and assumed in later textbooks such as those by Sydney Ahlstrom, Winthrop Hudson, Edwin Gaustad, and Peter Williams; the continuities and new developments in intellectual history carried out by William Clebsch and Amanda Porterfield; and the

models of popular and metaphysical religiosity represented by Catherine Albanese and Leigh Eric Schmidt.

That Hutchison, in his 1959 *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance*, took as his starting point the assumption that most scholars by his time were in agreement that Transcendentalism was “a movement that strove insistently to infuse new spirituality into the common life” speaks to the broad and considerable influence of his literary and American Studies forebears.⁴⁶ Yet general recognition of the Transcendentalists’ religiosity does not mean mid-century historians of American religion included them any more than those of the previous century. William Warren Sweet, in his 1952 *Religion in the Development of American Culture 1765-1840*, spent only a couple of pages on Unitarianism and omits the Transcendentalists altogether.⁴⁷ Likewise, although Sidney Mead mentioned Emerson, Thoreau, and even Alcott in his 1963 *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America*, he excluded Transcendentalism from the story.⁴⁸ Hutchison’s book – which argued that we should think of Transcendentalism as an initially threatening but ultimately fructifying revitalization movement within Unitarianism – was therefore important in its attempt to situate Transcendentalism within mainline Anglo-Protestantism, specifically its liberal tradition (which Hutchison covered in more detail in his 1976 *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*).⁴⁹

Yet despite Hutchison’s best intentions to reintroduce the Transcendentalists as a significant component in American religious history, his work had an inadvertent and negative consequence, evidenced by subsequent textbook portrayals of the group. Now-standard primers that have gone through multiple editions and continue to be republished

gave the Transcendentalists a nod but primarily as a contained incident within Unitarianism. Prominent examples include early exemplars such as Hudson's 1965 *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, Gaustad's 1966 *A Religious History of America* (revised in 2002 with Leigh Eric Schmidt), Ahlstrom's 1972 *A Religious History of the American People*, and even more recent ones like Williams' 1990 *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures*.⁵⁰ Ahlstrom's magisterial tome is by far the most even-handed of these textbooks. Ahlstrom apportioned Transcendentalism a half-dozen pages or so (in a 1192 + xxiv page book), discussed the movement elsewhere in the history when relevant (for example, in sections on utopian and reform movements), and at least noted members of the Transcendental Club besides Emerson and Parker (though all in one brief sentence, on page 600). Yet – and this is perhaps due in large part to his life-long interest in Unitarian Christianity – Ahlstrom fixed Transcendentalism in a very restricted framework between Unitarianism and the mediating romantic religion embodied by Horace Bushnell.⁵¹

Hudson's technique – though terser – was similar. In the first edition of his widely-used classic (now in its eighth edition with John Corrigan as co-author), Hudson tucked away the Transcendentalists in a chapter – echoing approaches found in Baird, Bacon, and Dorchester – entitled “Divergent Trends and Movements.”⁵² By later editions the authors had renamed this section (without changing it substantially), “The Broadening of Denominational Life.”⁵³ Things were still worse for the Transcendentalists by the arrival of Gaustad. In his text Transcendentalism received just two passing mentions: one dealing with Emerson's resignation from the Unitarian ministry “to continue a philosophical and religious search that became known as Transcendentalism” and another

which noted that New Thought “resonated greatly with Transcendentalist musings.”⁵⁴

Williams’ thorough treatment – which substituted an exhaustive and chronological cataloguing for a thematic narrative – gave the Transcendentalists a fair amount of consideration: no more, perhaps a little less, and sandwiched in a five-page chapter called “Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and Universalism.” Unfortunately, even in its most recent form (3rd ed., 2008) he claims, “Although it resulted in some significant experiments in church organization, transcendentalism was primarily a literary and intellectual movement.”⁵⁵ Likewise, Jon Butler’s, Grant Wacker’s, and Randall Balmer’s *Religion in American Life* (originally published in 2000, though already in its third edition by 2008), while technically not a textbook, did not bode well for Transcendentalism with only two cursory notes. One remark came at the end of a short passage on Emerson: “Because truth transcended the ordinary realm of daily sense perception, Emerson and an elite band of like-minded friends called themselves Transcendentalists.”⁵⁶ In the other reference, the authors wrote that Isaac Hecker “first attended a Methodist church, then joined a Transcendentalist community near Boston. (Among other things, Transcendentalists believed in radical economic and social equality).”⁵⁷ Thus both of these books, for all intents and purposes, reduced Transcendentalism to a group noteworthy for its literary, economic, and social – but not religious – concerns.

In each of these aforementioned histories of American religion, we perceive an uncertainty and even fumbling with the role of Transcendentalism. It seems a majority of American religious historians felt obligated to include the movement in their story yet continued to regard the group as epiphenomenal in light of early nineteenth-century

revivalism and evangelicalism. Let us now direct our attention to some historians who have given the Transcendentalists a more central place in their narratives.

Though Clebsch, who narrowed his focus to three foundational figures in his 1973 *American Religious Thought: A History*, might be accused of canonizing Emerson at the expense of his fellow Transcendentalists, his book was significant in its determination to place the group at the center of a long history of religious opposition to external and superficial moralism. Like Miller, Clebsch drew a connection between Jonathan Edwards and Emerson; Clebsch, however, set himself apart when he argued that both “resisted the moralistic spirituality toward which America’s chief religious heritage, Puritanism, almost inevitably trends. They resisted not by denouncing moralism but by exploring and affirming another kind of spirituality, which is here called esthetic ... a consciousness of the beauty of living in harmony with divine things – in a word, being at home in the universe.”⁵⁸

Porterfield’s aim in her 2001 *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth-Century Awakening* was comparable. Examining the development of post-Protestant spirituality in America and arguing that its cultural roots exist in particular Anglo-Puritan elements that lent themselves to prioritize individual experience and personal transformation, Porterfield was able to give the Transcendentalists a primary role in her historical narrative. Like Clebsch, Porterfield suggested the Transcendentalists “regarded the esthetic dimension of religious experience as primary and morality as ancillary” and also linked Emerson to Edwards in their belief that “the moral sentiment of righteousness suffused the religious sentiment of assent to the beauty of the universe.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, she refuted a recurring criticism of

Transcendentalists by arguing, “in the Transcendentalist schema, genuine self-reliance was not narcissistic or antisocial. Rather,” Porterfield continued, “attunement to oneself and confidence in the authority of one’s feelings and intuitions ushered one into a deep kinship with others by virtue of the underlying spiritual intelligence coursing through one and all.”⁶⁰ In the end, Porterfield’s placement of the Transcendentalists as main and influential characters in a new spiritual awakening signaled a marked shift in American religious history.

Clearly influenced by the Religion and Literature scholarship, the interests of Clebsch and Porterfield were, in one sense, to demonstrate how American Transcendentalism was part of an intellectual history of liberation from religion as a form of social control and supernaturalism. By contrast, the approaches of Albanese and Schmidt represented a different construal of Transcendentalism. In *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (1977), Albanese distanced herself from intellectual history and drew instead upon the more presence-oriented *Religionwissenschaft* discipline of the history of religions. Using Wach’s definition – that “being religious means having religious experience or ... an ‘experience of the Holy’” – and relying on Eliadean theory (paying particular attention to signs, symbols, and the sacred), Albanese linked the spirituality of the Transcendentalists with what she saw as universal currents in the world’s religions.⁶¹ Specifically, her argument was that the Transcendentalists’ belief in the ancient theory of correspondence – that is, the idea that one could find spiritual truth in nature – united the group with other religious peoples in history. Though this study feels outmoded by today’s standards, Albanese’s work was important in its attempt to define Transcendentalism as an explicitly religious movement

that fit easily not only within broad intellectual and cultural themes in American intellectual history, but in a phenomenological framework of characteristics identified as typically religious.

Albanese refined her interpretation and approach in later works but paid no less attention to spirituality as the driving force behind the Transcendentalists. In *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists* (1988), a collection of selected writings of Emerson, Alcott, Parker, and Thoreau, she furthered the idea that Transcendentalism was a “mingling of past and present, of orthodox and heterodox, of West and sometimes East” and reminded readers that the group historically “has been called rationalist and intuitive, Puritan and Gnostic, coldly ethereal and warm with energies not unlike those expressed in the revivals.”⁶² In *Nature Religion in America* (1990), Albanese argued that the Transcendentalists – as culture brokers – shaped popular religious mentality in their voicing of a robust and widespread American impulse to seek the divine in nature. In so doing, nature religion became, in effect, a type of civil religion.⁶³ In her widely used textbook, *America: Religions and Religion* (originally published in 1981 and currently in its fourth edition of 2006), Albanese gave the Transcendentalists a central place in sections on both the Protestant liberal and metaphysical occult traditions.⁶⁴ Lastly, in her *tour de force*, 2007’s *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, Albanese made the case that Transcendentalism functioned within a substantial and significant tradition of religious history (American, European, and ancient) opposed to, or at least separate from, evangelical and mainstream-denominational Protestantism. That is, Albanese argued that the narrative scope should be enlarged to account for the religious significance and historical impact of the

Transcendentalists.⁶⁵ This was in distinct contrast to the evangelical thesis represented perhaps most influentially in William McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (1978)⁶⁶ and continued by scholars such as Nathan Hatch, George Marsden, and Mark Noll. Albanese's contention was also contrary to Jon Butler's state-church thesis proposed in his *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1990).⁶⁷

As a final point, whereas Porterfield and like-minded scholars were interested in situating Transcendentalism within a larger context of deliverance from authoritarian and traditionally restrictive forms of religion, Albanese wished to link the Transcendentalists to an expansive history of popular religiosity. Yet the ground Porterfield and Albanese broke is analogous in that each drew a connection between Transcendentalism and the "spiritual but not religious" crowd gaining public notoriety in the late twentieth century. The ramifications of this historiographical shift are still being unpacked and applied by modern scholarship. For just one example, Leigh Eric Schmidt, in his *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (2005), located American spirituality's genesis in the nineteenth century with religious liberalism in general (Unitarians, Reform Jews, Quakers, Vedantists, Spiritualists, practitioners of New Thought, and Theosophists) but with the Transcendentalists in particular. However, Schmidt disagreed with those scholars – such as Porterfield and Albanese – who "ground the history of American "spirituality" in early American Protestantism, ... the iconoclastic religion of the American Enlightenment, ... [or] the esoteric world of Freemasons and gentlemanly inquirers into the occult."⁶⁸ Schmidt felt these claims serve two distracting and anti-historical purposes: they either reinforce the orthodox perspective that history is a battle between truthful religion and heretical spirituality or they reify and mythologize

spirituality as venerable and timeless.⁶⁹ Still, Schmidt's solution bordered on fashioning the Transcendentalists as a *sui generis* category. In other words, since he believed they were imagining themselves as charting a course "away from the old 'religions of authority,'" Schmidt tended to ignore or at least gloss over the historical roots, influences, and traditions on which they drew – factors other scholars such as Porterfield and Albanese kept firmly in mind.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Where does this account leave us? What are we to do with this historiography that is at best ambivalent and at worst exclusive? If we aim to understand the extant religious dimensions of the Transcendentalists and push this scholarship forward, the next generation of scholars must do two things. First, we need to be in conversation with those reemphasizing the centrality of evangelicalism in American religious history, such as Marsden, Hatch, Noll, and Stout. While recognizing the undeniable importance of Protestant Christian evangelicalism in this story, we should make clear the voice of innovative religious movements – of disunited or diffused religious trends such as seekers and those who identify as "spiritual but not religious." We should not further their case for the mere sake of cataloging exhaustively each and every movement in the name of pluralism (as necessary as this may be). Rather, groups such as Transcendentalism represent a momentous and sizable shift toward – for lack of a better term – post-Protestantism, a phenomenon scholars have just begun to explore.

Second, we must pay closer attention to the conflicting impulses found within these movements. That is, we often detect a seemingly incompatible desire in the

Transcendentalists and others to break down systems of authority and tradition while simultaneously building up new ones in their place. These very overlaps, shifts, and conflicts in the story are, in part, what make it an interesting one. Yet the long and fecund past of these contradictions in American religion is often lost in narratives of consensus, progress, and exceptionalism. When we begin to unpack these counter-currents, we will have made at least some amount of headway in explaining the problematic history of religious pluralism in America.

To sum up, the early writers of America's religious history excluded Transcendentalism for the reason that it did not fit within the dominant Protestant evangelical model and its attendant narrative of consensus. With the rise of American Studies, scholars began paying general attention to the role of religious factors in larger cultural and intellectual currents. This in turn led to increasing recognition of the relevance of Transcendentalists for the story of religion in American history and culture, and, to be sure, Transcendentalism belongs in this story. As scholars in recent years have demonstrated, although the religiosity of American Transcendentalism is poorly understood, the group certainly expressed "a perennial religious dilemma in a distinctly American form."⁷¹ Philip Gura's *American Transcendentalism* (2007) and Barbara Packer's *The Transcendentalists* (2007) – the most comprehensive histories to date – trace the movement's origin to transatlantic religious ideas and emphasize its continuing religious and spiritual preoccupations. Even Martin Marty argued the Transcendentalists provided America with a religious counter covenant to the traditional ones of organized as well as civil religion.⁷² Toward these ends, reading the American Transcendentalists as a religious or spiritual movement has opened up our understanding of what belongs within

the purview of studies of religion.

Taking a cue from Bron Taylor, I argue American Transcendentalism falls outside the normal scholarly categories while retaining certain typically religious characteristics. Addressing a theoretical question central to our current purpose, Taylor asks: how can spiritually motivated individuals and movements be understood as religious when many of them reject typically religious and supernatural worldviews? He suggests that even with the decline of traditional religions (with their “beliefs in nonmaterial divine beings”), “the desire for a spiritually meaning understanding of the cosmos, and the human place in it, has not withered away.”⁷³ Taylor’s work is thus helpful here in accounting for the inclusion of Transcendentalists in American religious history. He suggests that, although many of his subjects – Transcendentalist or otherwise – would be more inclined to identify as spiritual (emphasizing their subscription to moral values and profound experiences) than religious (referring to institutional and organized elements), “there is little analytical reason to assume these are different kinds of social phenomena.”⁷⁴ Transcendentalism, then, is rightly placed in religious studies as part of the diverse body of new and significant perceptions in North America that filled the old cultural niches and replaced traditional religions. What the Transcendentalists embodied, therefore, was the phenomenon of religion after religions. In Mark Taylor’s words, the movement was “about” religion.⁷⁵ Thus if we are to move beyond the narrow confines of the old way of telling America’s religious history – characterized as it has been by a focus on institutional, organized traditions – then we must account for the American Transcendentalists and their legacy.

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- ¹ Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: Transcendentalism in American History,” in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, ed. Charles Capper and Conrad E. Wright. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), 3.
- ² Ibid., 3.
- ³ Emerson’s probably wrote his recollections in 1867 and, due in large part to his worsening aphasia, compiled them with the help of others and first delivered them as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum in 1880.
- ⁴ *Boston Recorder* (1830-1849); Feb 22, 1839; 24: 8. America Periodical Series Online, 21. <http://proquest.umi.com> Accessed by the author October 2008.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ *Boston Recorder*; Feb 22 – Apr 19, 1839; 24: 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16. America Periodical Series Online, 21, 37, 41, 45, 49, 53, 57, 61. <http://proquest.umi.com> Accessed by the author October 2008.
- ⁷ Robert Baird (1844), *Religion in America; or An account of the origin, relation to the state, and present condition of the evangelical churches in the Unites States. With notices of the unevangelical denominations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 559-60.
- ⁸ Ibid., 560.
- ⁹ Ibid., 565-67, 576.
- ¹⁰ Philip Schaff (1854), *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), xxviii.
- ¹¹ Robert Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 12.
- ¹² Leonard W. Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897), 353.
- ¹³ Ibid., 351-52.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 354.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 353.

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- ¹⁶ Daniel Dorchester (1888), *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1895), 505-06.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 507.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 655.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 507-09.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 504-07.
- ²¹ Ibid., 628-29.
- ²² Andrews Norton, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity, delivered at the request of the "Association of the Alumni of the Cambridge Theological School," on the 19th of July, 1839, with notes* (Cambridge, MA: John Owen, 1839).
- ²³ Myerson, Joel, ed. *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1984).
- ²⁴ Capper, "A Little Beyond," 9, 11.
- ²⁵ Capper, "A Little Beyond," 9-17.
- ²⁶ Clarence L. F. Gohdes, *The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1931), 3, 10.
- ²⁷ Thomas C. Hall, *The Religious Background of American Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1930), 236.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 236.
- ²⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1939), *A Pilgrim's Progress: Orestes A. Brownson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), ix, x.
- ³⁰ Capper, "A Little Beyond," 17-18.
- ³¹ Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1936).
- ³² F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), xvii.
- ³³ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1957), x.
- ³⁴ Ibid., x.

³⁵ R. W. B. Lewis (1955), *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 1-2.

³⁶ Perry Miller (1950), ed. *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 9.

³⁷ Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965).

³⁸ Miller (1956), *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 184-85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁴³ Brian M. Barbour, ed. *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1973).

⁴⁴ Rowland A. Sherrill, *The Prophetic Melville: Experience, Transcendence, and Tragedy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 102.

⁴⁵ Scholars in the last generation have published a handful of biographies of individual Transcendentalists concerned to more or less extent with questions of religion. See, for example, David M. Robinson's *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) and Alan D. Hodder's *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). However, works such as these only lend support to my earlier argument that many scholars have avoided the religious dimensions of American Transcendentalism as a whole by focusing on individual biographies of Emerson and Thoreau. To be sure, there are a few monographs that have attempted to handle the group's relationship with religion – Philip F. Gura's *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) and Barbara L. Packer's *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) are the most comprehensive – but they prove to be the exception rather than the rule.

⁴⁶ William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England*

Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), vii.

⁴⁷ Sweet, William W. *Religion in the Development of American Culture 1765-1840* (New York: Scribners, 1952).

⁴⁸ Mead, Sidney. *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁴⁹ Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

⁵⁰ Interestingly, Williams' dissertation, written under the guidance of Daniel Walker Howe, author of *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (1970), and Sydney Ahlstrom, was entitled "A Mirror for Unitarians" (1970).

⁵¹ Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the American People*. 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For the single sentence on members of the Transcendental Club, see page 600.

⁵² Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 158.

⁵³ Corrigan, John and Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 142.

⁵⁴ Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, Revised Edition, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002), 159, 229.

⁵⁵ Peter Williams (1990), *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 224.

⁵⁶ Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer (2000), *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 263.

⁵⁷ Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Religion in American Life*, 255.

⁵⁸ William A. Clebsch, *American Religious Thought: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xvi.

⁵⁹ Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth-Century Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 217.

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- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.
- ⁶¹ Catherine L. Albanese, *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), xii.
- ⁶² Albanese, *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), vii.
- ⁶³ Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- ⁶⁴ Albanese (1981), *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2006).
- ⁶⁵ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- ⁶⁶ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- ⁶⁷ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- ⁶⁸ Leigh E. Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), 5-6.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.
- ⁷¹ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 54. As Catherine Albanese argued in *Nature Religion*, this problem involved choosing between a notion of “matter as ‘really real,’ the embodiment of Spirit and the garment of God, and – on the other hand – a view of matter as illusion and unreality, ultimately a trap from which one needed to escape” (82; qtd. in Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 54-55).
- ⁷² Foreword to Catherine Albanese’s *Nature Religion*, xi-xiv.
- ⁷³ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, x.
- ⁷⁴ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 3.
- ⁷⁵ *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1999).