



# Can Faith Change the World? Religion and Society in Vermont's Age of Reform

*By the mid-1830s, Vermonters were the most churchgoing people in the Protestant world. Eighty percent attended church regularly. If any people had the spiritual power to transform the world, they did.*

By RANDOLPH ROTH

Vermont's great age of reform is known today for its moral crusades, especially the campaigns to end slavery, protect Indian rights, increase observance of the Sabbath, improve education, end war, rehabilitate criminals, and prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol. Those crusades were founded on faith. Most Vermont reformers, like most moral reformers today, were willing to use the power of the government to force their moral vision upon the recalcitrant. But they realized that government action alone could not change the world. Only a spiritual revival, born of human effort and God's grace, could transform the hearts and minds of Vermonters and usher in a genuine era of reform.

Such a revival did appear in Vermont after the War of 1812. Vermonters young and old joined churches by the thousands and dedicated themselves to ushering in Christ's thousand-year reign of peace on earth. By the mid-1830s, Vermonters were the most churchgoing people in the Protestant world. Eighty percent attended church regularly. If any people had the spiritual power to transform the world, they did.

As Abby Hemenway's *Gazetteer* reminds us, life in Vermont towns centered on churches. Most were evangelical. They included the Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Free Will Baptists, and Methodists. Evangelical churches had rigorous standards for full church membership. Prospective members had to testify before the congrega-

tion that they had been “born again”—that they had experienced an indwelling of the Holy Spirit and that God’s grace had given them the power to do good and be good. Evangelical church members were subject to the “watch and care” of their churches. They would be disciplined or excommunicated if they fell back into sin. Only a minority of the adults and teenagers who attended evangelical churches met the test for full membership, but such members comprised a large portion of the townspeople who remained in town and prospered from decade to decade. Many influential Vermonters were devout.

Many churches were not Evangelical: the Episcopalians, Unitarians, Free Congregationalists, Christians, and Universalists. Their test for membership was simple and very American: If you paid to support the church, you were a member. Although these churches required a lower level of spiritual commitment for full membership, their members were as committed to Christian ideals as were Vermonters who attended evangelical churches. Nonevangelical churches, like evangelical churches, enjoyed extraordinarily wide and enthusiastic support during the Age of Reform.

Vermonters also created and populated the great new religious movements of the time. William Miller, the founder of the Seventh Day Adventist church, was born across the state line in nearby Granville, New York, but he lived in Poultney for a time and considered Vermont his home. Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, founders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, were also from Vermont. John Humphrey Noyes, the leader of the “perfectionists,” was from Putney. Noyes believed that the Bible had been misread: The second coming of Christ had occurred in 70 A.D., when Christ appeared before his disciples, so the millennium had already begun. God had given humans the power to be perfect—they simply did not realize it, and so had kept sinning. Noyes urged his followers to act on this knowledge. In 1838 they founded a perfectionist community, based initially in Putney. The perfectionists were chased out of town a few years later, but they regrouped in Oneida, New York, where their religious commune survived for forty years. They made their living by manufacturing brooms, bear traps, and what is known today as Oneida silverware. They did not believe in private property or in monogamous marriage. They practiced communal ownership of property and “complex” marriage, an institution in which every adult was married to every other adult in the sect, spiritually and sexually. The Noyesian perfectionists believed that possessiveness in property and persons, a legacy of sin, would disappear once humans embraced the uplifting power of God’s grace.

Vermont was thus a peculiarly spiritual place. Vermont’s reformers

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viewed their efforts to change the world as an extension of their efforts as Christians to renew their society spiritually, to live by Christian ideals.

But could faith change the world? Vermont's reformers were certain it could, especially during the first decades of the reform era. Reform was on the rise. Peace reigned internationally. Democratic regimes were on the rise throughout Latin America. The British empire abolished slavery. Alcohol consumption was down, school attendance up, and the so-called "Civilized Tribes" of the American Southwest—the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole—were embracing Christianity. Crime rates fell, and it appeared that the nation's new penitentiaries—including the Vermont State Prison in Windsor—were rehabilitating felons successfully through a regimen of hard work and daily prayer. The millennium appeared at hand.

If so, were reform movements necessary? Some reformers elsewhere in the nation believed that reform movements were misguided. To them, faith alone had the power to change the world. Charles Grandison Finney, the great Presbyterian revivalist from New York, hated slavery but opposed abolition. He believed that true interracial harmony would come to the South only through evangelism. If they saw the light, slave-owners would free their slaves voluntarily and former slaves would embrace their former masters in a spirit of forgiveness. Any other solution to the slavery problem would lead to violence and enduring hatred. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a transcendentalist, also opposed reform movements, even though he embraced their aims. Forcing people to change was futile, he believed; only God could change them. For Emerson, the overriding necessity was to get in touch with the "oversoul." Emerson believed that God was in everything. Those who saw and heard God would follow God's will and make it manifest in the world by leading righteous lives. The devout could change the world, but only by changing themselves.

Few Vermont reformers embraced the views of Finney or Emerson. Faith alone might reform most Vermonters eventually, but that could take a long time, and evil caused suffering in the here and now. Furthermore, not everyone was a Vermonter. The chance of ever redeeming urban taverners, Southern slaveowners, or Western Indian killers was slim. A few Vermont reformers withdrew, as did the Mormons and the perfectionists, to form more perfect societies, but most embraced practical measures—social pressure and government coercion—to force change upon the unwashed and the unwilling. Vermont's practical reformers recognized, however, that the source of their strength was spiritual. Faith was still the most certain and effective way to change individual and social behavior.

So did faith change the world, at least in Vermont? The answer to that question, alas, is the answer to nearly every historical question: yes, no, and maybe.

The great revival, as Jeff Potash observes, started modestly, town by town, neighborhood by neighborhood. A new preacher would arrive who was effective and who reached people. Churchgoers would feel a sudden sense of conviction: “I don’t have grace. I’m selfish. I’m wicked. I’m going to hell. I need God’s help to be a better person. My children need God’s help. My spouse needs God’s help. So do my neighbors.” Weighed down by their sinfulness, churchgoers fell on their knees and asked forgiveness. They might come forward to the front pew in their churches, called the “anxious bench,” and struggle publicly against the devil within. The preacher would step down from the pulpit, lay his hands on them, and ask the Lord, “Please, get that sinfulness out. Give them the power to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior.”

Spiritual awakening swept whole towns. Dozens, even hundreds of townspeople could have “born again” experiences within the space of a few months. Suddenly the community would be energized. Church membership increased. Churches sent missions into other neighborhoods and held special prayer meetings and Bible readings. They printed temperance pamphlets for free distribution in the South, the West, or the cities of the Atlantic coast, where the awakening wasn’t strong.

The awakening took off in 1816, “the year with no summer,” when crops failed across the Northern Hemisphere. People turned to God in that year of want. Thereafter, the awakening got stronger and more self-conscious year by year. By the 1830s, the faithful did not simply wait for God to bestow awakenings on the unchurched; they instigated them. Congregations hired famous itinerant revivalists from out of town who were known to have a gift for saving souls. One of the most famous was Jedidiah Burchard, who came to Vermont in 1835 and was paid to conduct revivals in many towns.

Before an itinerant arrived, townspeople held “preparation meetings,” special prayer meetings that lasted for two or three weeks to get everybody ready for the appearance of the great revivalist. When the revivalist finally arrived, people came from miles around to be born again. Such revivals were tremendously successful. They persisted into the 1840s and helped create Vermont’s unprecedented levels of church membership.

As diaries and letters of the period reveal, Vermonters felt that God was among them, doing something special in Vermont. God meant Vermonters to have a special mission and purpose in the world. That was why the Holy Spirit had been at work in Vermont. New church members were eager to bear witness to their faith. That was the Christian’s

duty: to make the world a more godly place, to preach the message of salvation.

The great revival encouraged interdenominational cooperation. Before the awakening, Methodist preachers were still beaten on occasion by Congregationalist thugs, and Universalists were denounced as atheists. But by the 1830s and 1840s, members of those egalitarian denominations worked side by side with members of other denominations—including the more urbane Episcopalians and Unitarians—to sponsor revivals, missions, and prayer meetings. All but the Methodists supported interdenominational Sunday schools. Every denomination embraced the idea that interdenominational cooperation and friendly competition would make every Protestant church stronger. Each would get more members and enjoy more spiritual fervor. What united Christians was more important than what divided denominations.

One important legacy of the great revival was that interdenominational cooperation among Protestants laid the foundation, spiritually and financially, for broad reform movements. Churchgoers, rich and poor, gave generously to their churches and to the philanthropic and reform organizations they sponsored. And as the late William Gilmore discovered, Vermonters purchased an unprecedented number of religious, educational, and reform tracts, and through mission and reform organizations bought thousands more for free distribution outside Vermont.

Another important legacy of the great revival was the greater influence of women in town life and politics. Women gained power through the churches. Three of every five church members were female. Most churches still had rules that only men could vote to select a minister or decide church policy. But women won full voting rights in some churches and several women became successful itinerant revivalists. More commonly, churchgoing women organized their own reform movements and circulated their own reform petitions among women. Female militancy was crucial to the success of reform movements in Vermont.

At the same time, the great revival empowered women through the schools. Women had played a more important role in education since the Revolution. But the revival placed such profound importance on the state of a person's soul—and displayed so clearly the greater piety of women—that the idea emerged that devout women made the best teachers. Of course, finance played a part in feminizing the teaching force. Vermonters were frugal, and female teachers were paid only a third of what male teachers were paid. Vermonters could not resist a chance to serve God and spare the wallet. By the end of the great revival, two-thirds of all common school teachers were women.

Because of the great revival, a new order appeared in town life and

politics. That order drew its strength from the subtle forms of coercion and discrimination that New England has always been known for. As church members became more numerous and militant, church membership became more important as a mark of good character. Church members gradually took control of local businesses and town governments, and pressured nonmembers more and more insistently to join churches and temperance societies or leave town. Church members were more likely to receive business loans from their neighbors. They were more likely to raise the capital necessary to form partnerships. They were more likely to stick together with their own family members and to lend money to one another.

That connectedness made church members more successful and more powerful. Church members were more likely than nonmembers to stay in town from decade to decade and were more likely to be upwardly mobile. So even though full church members comprised a minority of the adult population at any one time, they comprised a majority among those who remained in town over time, and an overwhelming majority among the rich and powerful. And as the power of church members increased, nonmembers were increasingly isolated. They were less likely to get loans or find business partners, and more likely to live on the margins of local society. They found it more difficult to get ahead. Many nonmembers moved to the cities, to upstate New York, or to the Old Northwest. Their departure further enhanced the power of church members in Vermont.

As church membership became critical to success in business and politics, the churches changed. In the early 1800s, when churches had relatively few full members and little social influence, Christians imagined themselves to be in much the same situation as the early Christians in the Book of Acts. They saw themselves as members of a small band of disciples who bore witness to their faith in a hostile or indifferent world. To them, Christianity was not about power. It was about showing love and concern for their fellow human beings, especially their fellow church members, and about acknowledging and accepting human frailty. Most church discipline cases involved interpersonal sins: gossip, slander, or fraudulent dealings in economic relations. And churches hesitated to excommunicate people, even when members had committed egregious sins. They worked with sinners, sometimes for years, before expelling them, hoping that the sinners would see the error of their ways, ask forgiveness, and return to good standing.

As churches became more powerful, the gospel of love declined. Church membership became a sign of respectability. Did a person drink? Smoke? Observe the Sabbath? Christians embraced a rote morality that focused on the external trappings of the Christian life. Concern about slander

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and gossip diminished. Church discipline focused not on interpersonal sins, but on violations of the code of respectable conduct. As church members pressured others to embrace the new standard of respectability, they became vicious gossips. They would speak, for instance, about a neighbor who came into town so drunk that he fell off his wagon. In 1800, if a member had said such a thing about another church member, even if that member had in fact been drunk, the gossip would have been disciplined, because the first duty of a church member was to go to the man who had fallen, pick him up, bring him before the church council, and help him with his alcohol problem. Now, as the church records of the 1830s and 1840s reveal, if church members caught a man drunk, they expelled him from the church, and thought the less of him and the more of themselves for it. The sinner was back in the outside world. Christians lived in the inner world.

There is a wonderful story about this change in attitude, probably apocryphal, but true to the spirit of the times, from South Newbury. Mr. Lyon was the town drunk. He experienced religion, joined the church, and became the toast of the town. But Mr. Lyon soon went back to drinking and the church excommunicated him. A note was found tacked up outside the store which said, "Whereas Mr. Lyon has not kept his promise to reform, we the Church Committee return him to the outside world from whence he came. By the Church Committee." The next day another notice appeared. "Whereas Mr. Lyon is so much worse than when he joined the church, we of the outside world refuse to accept him back. By the Outside Committee."<sup>1</sup> The story gets at the heart of the change that was occurring. As people felt more pressure to be good and show signs of reform, more of these jokes cropped up, and animosity increased toward the churches. In the town of Strafford, where nonmembers were still numerous, they appointed the town skeptic to enforce the Sabbath laws. The skeptic, Abel Rich, was nonchalant when a revivalist confronted him in 1835 before a crowd of neighbors and asked if he had got religion. "None to boast of, I tell ye," Rich said. He added that he bore no grudge against the preacher, but declared that if the preacher "should be mobbed and I was the only witness, I would forget it before morning-g-g, that I would-d-d."<sup>2</sup>

Such deflating humor became more important to nonmembers as they felt greater pressure to conform. Nonmembers organized their own gatherings around simple secular events. For example, if the mail was to arrive by stage on Sunday morning, men who were nonmembers would congregate at the post office, which was usually across the green from the church. They would get rip-roaring drunk and yell at the church members as they went in and out of church. A culture war had broken out.

Another result of the increasing polarization of church members and nonmembers was an increase in expressions of misogyny among men who were not church members. Such misogyny appeared frequently in Democratic Party newspapers, as churchgoing women turned against the policies of the Jackson administration on slavery, Indian rights, alcohol, and Sabbath observance. Democrats who wanted to defend their right to behave as they pleased complained that women were not being kept in their proper place. The women's rights movement had given birth to an anti-women's rights movement.

Yet another result of the increased pressure to join churches was that people who joined during revivals were three times more likely to end up excommunicated than people who joined in spiritually calm times. That pattern held for both males, who were always most likely to be excommunicated, and females. Many converts backslid within months of joining.

Church members were aware of these problems. Revivals got people into churches, but long-time members had no choice but to kick the recent converts out if they returned to drinking, Sabbath breaking, or skipping church. Long-time members wondered aloud: Were they Christianizing the world or bringing worldly people into the church who were not yet ready to appreciate Christ's message? Were the churches neglecting spiritual concerns in their campaign for more members, more donations, more power to shape the world?

It was at this time, also, that racism began to creep into the speech of white church members. As white Vermonters turned against one another over moral and spiritual issues, white Christians seemed to be trying to shore up their own self-esteem at the expense of blacks, who were depicted in written exchanges between whites as archetypes of unrespectability. William Townsend, a young man from Reading who had joined a church after years of wayward behavior, tried to convince his fifteen-year-old brother, Dennis, to take a different path than he had and join a church right away. William chided Dennis for his love of fiddling, warning that it would lead to idleness and dissipation. "It is true a fiddle makes a very pretty little squeaking noys and is a good instrument for Negroes. . . . If you wish to be a real fine White Nigger[,] practice fiddling and when you get learnt you can go and play for Dancing parties." William told Dennis that he would never become rich or great if he fiddled "like them black ones."<sup>3</sup> In other words, you had to act "white" if you wished to be successful.

Such racist remarks were common. Church leaders declared in their official pronouncements that "Sambo" was welcome at their revival meetings, and then wondered why blacks, who seemed so interested in the Bible and in religious hymns, would not attend.

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Finally, the great revival sometimes had extraordinarily incongruous consequences. Indeed, in several instances the great revival led, through bizarre chains of events, to rape or murder.

Rebecca Peake of Corinth had been young and poor when she married a much older man, a widower who already had children by his first wife. The marriage landed her on a prosperous farm. There was gossip about her, suggesting that she was a fortune hunter. She was not popular with her neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

The marriage was a success, despite the predictions of Peake's detractors, until her husband's grown sons by his first marriage failed economically. Her husband rewrote his will and left all the property that he and Rebecca owned to his children by his first marriage. He cut out his children with Rebecca, saying that they would do well once his older children were back on their feet. Rebecca was furious, but she had no recourse. She could not go to her neighbors, because they believed the will served her right. She could not go to court because she had no legal rights there. If she were to divorce her husband, she would win nothing but the right to any property she had brought to the marriage; she had brought none.

Rebecca went to Randolph in 1835 to a revival meeting, at which the great itinerant preacher, Jedidiah Burchard, appeared. She prayed intensely for days. She felt the sudden indwelling of the spirit, and God spoke to her: Her husband and his children by his first marriage deserved to die. She was to be God's instrument in their deaths. After the next revival meeting, she walked to the apothecary and bought arsenic, which she claimed was to kill rats. She went home and mixed the arsenic into the hash she served that night. The older son died, but the younger son and her husband survived. Spiritual fervor could lead to many things.

The Peakes' marriage was not the only one affected by the great revival. Zenas and Joseph Burnham were brothers from Pomfret, where both farmed. Their wives had been born again in the revival of 1816–17. The women became respectable and socially ambitious, and like many women who joined churches during the great revival, decided to limit the size of their families, so that they could invest more resources, materially and spiritually, in the children they had.

The Burnhams had no more children after their wives joined the church. How did they avoid having children? Because Zenas and Joseph complained that their wives were "no fun anymore" after they joined the church, and because the only sure way Vermonters knew to control family size was to avoid sex, it is clear that both women had decided to limit or eliminate sex with their husbands.

Joseph and Zenas were frustrated men. They were not church mem-

bers and so could not find solace in their faith. They were hard-working men who had provided well for their wives and children. But they felt they had been wronged by their wives. Zenas and Joseph therefore made an arrangement with their niece, Julia Burnham, who rented a farm from them with her husband, Samuel Burnham, one of their cousins. Samuel was “slow” and his family was poor. Joseph and Zenas brought their niece presents of ribbon or cloth, and she in return had sex with them if they happened by while Samuel was not at home. Their *ménage à trois* turned into a foursome when Julia and Samuel’s young servant girl, Sarah Avery, also agreed to exchange sex for presents. Sarah was a town pauper from Reading, eighteen years old and very poor. She had no prospects. Once the Burnham brothers began to flatter her and lavish gifts on her, she joined their sexual circle.

Julia Burnham and Sarah Avery decided one day that they would get Joseph and Zenas a present for all they had done for them. They had no money to buy a present, so they thought of the next best thing: They would bring Sarah’s fourteen-year-old half sister, Susan Vose, up from Reading, where she was a town pauper, under the pretense of working on Julia and Samuel’s farm. But the real purpose was to present her as a sexual gift to the Burnham brothers.

Susan Vose did not realize the danger she was in. She was delighted to have a chance to live with her sister once again. But after ten days on the Burnham’s farm, having withstood repeated attempts by Joseph Burnham to seduce her with kind words and offers of presents, she panicked. She tried to run away, but Julia Burnham and Sarah Avery caught her and dragged her into the bedroom. They took off her clothes and held her down while Joseph raped her. They left the room and locked her in the bedroom that night with Joseph, who raped her again. She finally escaped and told the neighbors what had happened.

Joseph and Julia were thoroughly punished for their crime. The guards and the prisoners at Windsor prison knew what the Burnhams had done and persecuted them for it. Joseph died three months after entering the prison, in part because the warden and the prison doctor denied him treatment, believing he was feigning illness to avoid work. Julia, it appears, was raped by one or more prison guards.

Vermont church members did not see the irony of the incident: that the revival itself had set the horrible chain of events in motion and had driven some formerly respectable (although not churchgoing) people to do things that they might not otherwise have done.

The revival also played a role in causing the tenfold increase in wife murder that hit northern New England in the 1830s and 1840s. The impact of the revival on most marriages was positive. The average marriage

became less violent because of the companionate vision of marriage that the revival and the temperance movement promoted. Men, and to a greater extent women, were less likely to strike or abuse one another verbally. But the revival and the temperance movement stigmatized men who were not successful and who continued to drink, smoke, and swear, and placed them in an increasingly difficult situation. Their chances of success had diminished because informal networks of mutual support favored church members, and their chances of marital contentment diminished as their wives began to insist that they change their behavior. Such marriages became explosive. Paradoxically, the great revival led simultaneously to a decrease in nonlethal violence and an increase in lethal violence in marriage.

Of course, no one blamed the revival for the murder of Rebecca Peake's stepson, the rape of Susan Vose, or the murder of so many wives. But resentment of the revival increased and by the mid-1830s nonmembers grew militant, arguing that church members discriminated against them and were bent on destroying their way of life. And elite church members, especially among the Unitarians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists, grew disillusioned with the revival as it brought fewer and fewer "respectable" Vermonters into their churches and forced long-time members to spend more and more of their time expelling new recruits. Elite church members seldom said publicly that the revival had gone too far, but they said so privately. They ordered the ministers of their churches to pull back, which they did. The great revival continued into the early 1840s with the support of Adventists and other enthusiasts in the hill towns; but the revival was elsewhere in decline. The revival did not die because spiritual enthusiasm burnt itself out naturally. It died because respectable church members came to believe that spiritual progress would be more certain if it came with less emotional intensity and was less populist in its appeal.

These stories point to the great irony of the revival, which is one of the great lessons of the Bible: Even the devout cannot know God's will. Evil can come out of good. Good can come out of evil. Many Christians forgot that for a time amid the enthusiasm of the revival.

In the end, faith changed Vermont and the nation as a whole for the better. Marriages were less violent, alcohol ruined fewer lives, and a campaign for racial justice began. But the legacy of the great revival, like all human legacies, was mixed.

#### NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, the essay is based on evidence and analysis available in three works by the author: *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut*

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*River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); “The Other Masonic Outrage: The Death and Transfiguration of Joseph Burnham,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 14 (1994):35–69; and “Spousal Murder in Northern New England, 1776–1865,” in Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, eds., *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 65–93. See also David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1790–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); P. Jeffrey Potash, “Welfare of the Regions Beyond,” *Vermont History*, 46 (1978):109–128; Potash, *Vermont’s Burned-Over District: Patterns of Community Development and Religious Activity, 1761–1850* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991); and William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1830* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

<sup>1</sup> *Vermont History News*, 35 (1984), 118.

<sup>2</sup> William B. Parker, *Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 14.

<sup>3</sup> William Townsend, Jr. to Aurelia Townsend, 1 September 1833; and to Mr. and Mrs. William Townsend, Sr., 18 September 1833 and 1 February 1834, Townsend Family Papers, Vermont Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup> “Trial of Mrs. Rebecca Peake, indicted for the murder of Ephraim Peake, tried at Orange County Court, Dec. term, 1835. Embracing the evidence, arguments of counsel, charge, and sentence” (Montpelier: E. P. Walton, 1836).