



# Religion Sparks Reform

## MAIN IDEA

A renewal of religious sentiment—known as the **Second Great Awakening**—inspired a host of reform movements.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Many modern social and political reform movements grew out of the reform movements of 19th-century America.

## Terms & Names

- Charles Grandison Finney
- Second Great Awakening
- revival
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- transcendentalism
- Henry David Thoreau
- civil disobedience
- utopian community
- Dorothea Dix

## One American's Story

When **Charles Grandison Finney** preached, his listeners shrieked, moaned, and fainted. The most famous preacher of the era, Finney inspired emotional religious faith, using a speaking style that was as much high drama as prayer or sermon. Converted at the age of 29, Finney traveled by horseback to deliver his message. Finney seated the most likely converts in his audiences on a special “anxious bench,” where he could fasten his eyes upon them. He lectured on the depth of the conversion experience.



▲ Charles Grandison Finney

### A PERSONAL VOICE CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY

“I know this is all so much algebra to those who have never felt it. But to those who have experienced the agony of wrestling, prevailing prayer, for the conversion of a soul, you may depend upon it, that soul . . . appears as dear as a child is to the mother who brought it forth with pain.”

—*Lectures on Revivals of Religions*

The convert's duty was to spread the word about personal salvation to others. This religious activism—or evangelism—was part of an overall era of reform that started in the 1830s. Reforms of the period included women's rights, school reform, and abolition, the movement to outlaw slavery. All of these movements emerged as responses to rapid changes in American society such as early industrial growth, increasing migration and immigration, and new means of communication.

## The Second Great Awakening

Much of the impulse toward reform was rooted in the revivals of the broad religious movement that swept the United States after 1790, known as the **Second Great Awakening**. Finney and his contemporaries were participants in



the Second Great Awakening. These preachers rejected the 18th-century Calvinistic belief that God predetermined one's salvation or damnation—whether a person went to heaven or hell. Instead, they emphasized individual responsibility for seeking salvation, and they insisted that people could improve themselves and society.

Religious ideas current in the early 19th century promoted individualism and responsibility, similar to the emphasis of Jacksonian democracy on the power of the common citizen. Christian churches split over these ideas, as various denominations competed to proclaim the message of a democratic God, one who extends the possibility of salvation to all people. The forums for their messages were large gatherings, where some preachers could draw audiences of 20,000 or more at outdoor camps.

**REVIVALISM** Such a gathering was called a **revival**, an emotional meeting designed to awaken religious faith through impassioned preaching and prayer. A revival might last 4 or 5 days. During the day the participants studied the Bible and examined their souls. In the evening they heard emotional preaching that could make them cry out, burst into tears, or tremble with fear.

Revivalism swept across the United States in the early 19th century. Some of the most intense revivals took place in a part of western New York known as the burned-over district because of the religious fires that frequently burned there. Charles Finney fanned these flames, conducting some of his most successful revivals in Rochester, New York. The Rochester revivals earned Finney the reputation of “the father of modern revivalism.” Revivalism had a strong impact on the public. According to one estimate, in 1800 just 1 in 15 Americans belonged to a church, but by 1850, 1 in 6 was a member. **A**

**THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH** The Second Great Awakening also brought Christianity on a large scale to enslaved African Americans. There was a strong democratic impulse in the new churches and a belief that all people—black or white—belonged to the same God. Thus, the camp meetings and the new Baptist or Methodist churches were open to both blacks and whites. Slaves in the rural South—though they were segregated in pews of their own—worshiped in the same churches, heard the same sermons, and sang the same hymns as did the slave owners. Enslaved African Americans, however, interpreted the Christian message as a promise of freedom for their people.

In the East, many free African Americans worshiped in separate black churches, like Richard Allen's Bethel African Church in Philadelphia, which by 1816 would become the African



### MODERN REVIVALISM

Evangelical Christianity reemerged in several different religious organizations in the late 20th century. One example is the Christian Coalition, a religiously based citizen-action organization with almost 2 million members.

As with the Second Great Awakening, members of these religious organizations often are active in political movements that spring from personal religious beliefs. Indeed, some of the organizations use television much like Finney used the revival meeting to encourage believers to act on their faith.

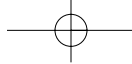
### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Effects

**A** How did the Second Great Awakening revolutionize the American religious tradition?

This early-19th-century tray depicts Lemuel Haynes preaching in his Vermont Congregational Church.





Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen inspired his congregation to strengthen its faith as well as to fight against slavery.

### A PERSONAL VOICE RICHARD ALLEN

**“Our only design is to secure to ourselves, our rights and privileges to regulate our affairs temporal and spiritual, the same as if we were white people, and to guard against any oppression which might possibly arise from the improper prejudices or administration of any individual having the exercise of Discipline over us.”**

—quoted in *Segregated Sabbaths*

Membership in the African Methodist Episcopal Church grew rapidly. It became a political, cultural, and social center for African Americans, providing schools and other services that whites denied them.

Eventually the African-American church developed a political voice and organized the first black national convention, held in Philadelphia in September 1830. Richard Allen convened the meeting, in which participants agreed to explore the possible settlement of free African Americans and fugitive slaves in Canada. Allen’s convention was the first of what would become an annual convention of free blacks in the North. The African-American church gave its members a deep inner faith, a strong sense of community—and the spiritual support to oppose slavery. **B**

## History Through

### Art

#### A VIEW OF THE MOUNTAIN PASS CALLED THE NOTCH OF THE WHITE MOUNTAINS (CRAWFORD NOTCH) (1839)

This painting by Thomas Cole is an example of the Hudson River school. Like the transcendentalists, its painters celebrated the beauty of the American landscape, and the truth found in personal emotion.

**What relationship between humans and nature does Cole’s painting portray?**

### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**B** How did the African-American church support its followers?

## Transcendentalism and Reforms

Many reformed-minded individuals sought an alternative to traditional religion but found revivalism too public a forum for religious expression.

**TRANSCENDENTALISM** By the mid-1800s, some Americans were taking new pride in their emerging culture. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, a New England writer, nurtured this pride. Emerson led a group practicing **transcendentalism**—a







philosophical and literary movement that emphasized living a simple life and celebrated the truth found in nature and in personal emotion and imagination.

Exalting the dignity of the individual, the transcendentalists spawned a literary movement that stressed American ideas of optimism, freedom, and self-reliance. Emerson's friend **Henry David Thoreau** put the idea of self-reliance into practice. Abandoning community life, he built himself a cabin on the shore of Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived alone for two years. (See Literature of the Transcendentalists, page 246.) In *Walden* (1854), Thoreau advised readers to follow their inner voices.

### ★ A PERSONAL VOICE HENRY DAVID THOREAU

**“I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. . . . If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”**

—*Walden*

Because Thoreau believed in the importance of individual conscience, he urged people not to obey laws they considered unjust. Instead of protesting with violence, they should peacefully refuse to obey those laws. This form of protest is called **civil disobedience**. For example, Thoreau did not want to support the U.S. government, which allowed slavery and fought the War with Mexico. Instead of paying taxes that helped finance the war, Thoreau went to jail. **C**

**UNITARIANISM** Rather than appealing to the emotions, Unitarians emphasized reason and appeals to conscience as the paths to perfection. In New England, Unitarians quickly attracted a wealthy and educated following. In place of the dramatic conversions produced by the revivals, Unitarians believed conversion was a gradual process. William Ellery Channing, a prominent Unitarian leader, asserted that the purpose of Christianity was “the perfection of human nature, the elevation of men into nobler beings.” Unitarians agreed with revivalists that individual and social reform were both possible and important. **D**

## Americans Form Ideal Communities

Some of the optimism of religious and social reform also inspired the establishment of **utopian communities**, experimental groups who tried to create a “utopia,” or perfect place. These communities varied in their philosophies and living arrangements but shared common goals such as self-sufficiency. One of the best-known utopian communities was established in New Harmony, Indiana. Another was Brook Farm, located near Boston.

In 1841 transcendentalist George Ripley established Brook Farm to “prepare a society of liberal, intelligent and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more wholesome and simple life than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.” A fire destroyed the main building at Brook Farm in 1847, and the community immediately disbanded. Most utopias lasted no more than a few years.

#### MAIN IDEA

##### Synthesizing

**C** In what way did Thoreau's experience at Walden reflect transcendentalist beliefs?

#### MAIN IDEA

##### Contrasting

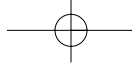
**D** How did the Unitarians' approach to religious experience differ from the revivalists'?

### ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

#### HAWTHORNE AT BROOK FARM

New England writer Nathaniel Hawthorne spent about six months at Brook Farm in 1841. He hoped to find solitude in which to write, but instead spent close to ten hours a day working in the barns and fields. He was forced to conclude that life there was “unnatural and unsuitable” for him.

Ten years after he left Brook Farm, Hawthorne, now considered an established author, wrote *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). A fictional account of communal life based on Brook Farm, the book suggests that striving for perfection may yield unexpected results.



▲ These fine oval wooden boxes were made in the Shaker village in Canterbury, New Hampshire. They were used for storing small items.

The failure of the utopian communities did not lessen the zeal of the religious reformers. Many became active in humanitarian reform movements, such as the abolition of slavery and improved conditions for women.

**SHAKER COMMUNITIES** Religious belief spurred other ideal communities. The Shakers, who followed the teachings of Ann Lee, set up their first communities in New York, New England, and on the frontier. Shakers shared their goods with each other, believed that men and women are equal, and refused to fight for any reason. When a person became a Shaker, he or she vowed not to marry or have children. Shakers depended on converts and adopting children to keep their communities going. In the 1840s, the Shakers had 6,000 members—their highest number. In 1999, only about seven Shakers remained in the entire United States.

## Schools and Prisons Undergo Reform

By the mid-19th century, thousands of Americans holding a variety of philosophical positions had joined together to fight the various social ills that troubled the young nation. Some social reformers focused their attention on schools and other institutions.

**REFORMING ASYLUMS AND PRISONS** In 1831, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville had visited the United States to study its penitentiary system. Observing prisoners who were physically punished or isolated for extended periods, de Tocqueville concluded that “While society in the United States gives the example of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism [rigid and severe control].” Reformers quickly took up the cause.

**Dorothea Dix** was compelled by personal experience to join the movement for social reform. On visiting a Massachusetts house of correction, Dix was horrified to discover that jails often housed mentally ill people.

### A PERSONAL VOICE DOROTHEA DIX

“I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth. . . . Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience! . . . Injustice is also done to the convicts: it is certainly very wrong that they should be doomed day after day and night after night to listen to the ravings of madmen and madwomen.”

—Report to the Massachusetts Legislature



▲ Dorothea Dix (ca. 1846)

In 1843 she sent a report of her findings to the Massachusetts legislature, who in turn passed a law aimed at improving conditions. Between 1845 and 1852, Dix persuaded nine Southern states to set up public hospitals for the mentally ill.

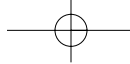
Prison reformers—and Dorothea Dix in her efforts on behalf of the mentally ill—emphasized the idea of rehabilitation, treatment that might reform the sick or imprisoned person to a useful position in society. There was, as revivalists suggested, hope for everyone. **E**

**IMPROVING EDUCATION** Before the mid-1800s, no uniform educational policy existed in the United States. School conditions varied across regions. Massachusetts and Vermont were the only states before the Civil War to pass a compulsory school

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Effects

**E** How did the reformers change the treatment of the mentally ill and prisoners?



attendance law. Classrooms in the early schools were not divided by grade, so younger and older pupils were thrown together. Few children continued in school beyond the age of ten.

In the 1830s, Americans increasingly began to demand tax-supported public schools. For example, in 1834 Pennsylvania established a tax-supported public school system. Although the system was optional, a storm of opposition erupted from well-to-do taxpayers. They saw no reason to support schools that their children, who were mostly enrolled in private schools, would not attend. Opposition also came from some German immigrants who feared that their children would forget the German language and culture. Within three years, however, about 42 percent of the elementary-school-age children in Pennsylvania were attending public schools.

One remarkable leader in the public school reform movement was Horace Mann of Massachusetts. After a childhood spent partly at work and partly in poor schools, Mann declared, "If we do not prepare children to become good citizens, . . . if we do not enrich their minds with knowledge, then our republic must go down to destruction, as others have gone before it." In 1837 he became the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. In 12 years of service, Mann established teacher-training programs and instituted curriculum reforms. He also doubled the money that the state spent on schools.

Other states soon followed Massachusetts's and Pennsylvania's good example. By the 1850s every state had provided some form of publicly funded elementary schools. In states in the far West and in Southern states, however, it took years before public schools were firmly established. **F**

**MAIN IDEA**

**Summarizing**

**F** What efforts were made to improve education in the 1830s?

**HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT**

**MCGUFFEY'S READERS**

If you attended school during the mid-to late-1800s, you probably would have used a McGuffey's reader. William H. McGuffey, a teacher and preacher in Ohio, first published his popular grade-school reading books in the 1830s.

The readers, which had sold more than 60 million copies by 1879, taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as the democratic cultural values of hard work, honesty, and love of country. They also contained little moral lessons to live by, such as "Idleness is the nest in which mischief lays its eggs."



**ASSESSMENT**

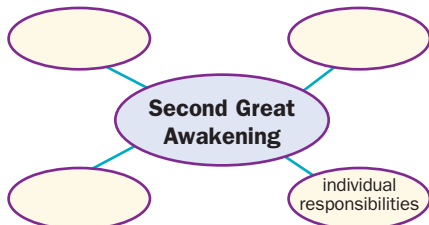
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Charles Grandison Finney
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry David Thoreau
- utopian community
- Second Great Awakening
- transcendentalism
- civil disobedience
- Dorothea Dix
- revival

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

In a web similar to the one shown, fill in events and ideas that relate to the Second Great Awakening.



Why did revivalism catch hold in the early 19th century?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. SYNTHESIZING**

Consider the philosophical and religious ideas expressed during the Second Great Awakening and other religious reform movements. What were the key values and beliefs that guided 19th-century reformers' actions? **Think About:**

- concepts of individualism and individual salvation
- attitudes toward social responsibility
- the viewpoints of Finney, Channing, and Emerson

**4. ANALYZING ISSUES**

How do you think the 19th-century reform movements in schools, prisons, and asylums might have influenced reform movements today?

**5. COMPARING**

Why might the idea of utopian communities appeal to the transcendentalists?