

FROM FOUNDERS TO FUGITIVES:
THE STRANGE ODYSSEY OF
FREETHOUGHT IN AMERICA

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Recently two prominent liberal commentators noted the near vanishing-point decline of the anti-religious viewpoint in our public discourse. Writing in the *New Republic*, Michael Kinsley observed that "the noisy village atheist, the missionary of unbelief, is a virtually extinct social type."¹ In the same vein, assessing the "victim" strategy of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, Molly Ivins of Texas stated "...you would never guess that anti-religious sentiment in this country has been marginalized to the point of disappearance by listening to the television preachers."² Among scholars concerned with nineteenth-century America, Martin Marty refers to "the infidels—that ragged band of village atheists, stray French Utopians, maverick freethinkers, and other drop-outs."³ And more recently, in a discussion of the origins of unbelief in America, James Turner alludes merely in passing to "a handful of...political and social radicals, Francis Wright and Robert Dale Owen the best known."⁴

This paper is concerned with the early nineteenth-century phases of how this situation came about in this country. I will be mostly concerned with the period 1825-50, with glances at the 1790s, and the latter half of that century. I believe we must come to terms with one of the most fundamental paradoxes of American intellectual history in the first one hundred years of our national existence, namely that many of those who led the Revolution and established our organic law—founders like Jefferson and Paine—were freethinkers of one kind or another. By the late nineteenth century, such individuals were being arrested, tried

¹Michael Kinsley, "Martyr Complex," *New Republic*, September 13, 1993.

²Molly Ivins, "Christian Coalition Folk seem a tad confused about target of hostility," *Kansas City Star*, September 15, 1993.

³Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire* (New York: Dial, 1970), p. 51.

⁴James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 102.

and frequently convicted under charges that today we would view as clearly unconstitutional. The founders became fugitives. This perspective developed out of my research into the history of Freethought, which was once a social, intellectual and political movement in the United States, but is now for all practical purposes, buried in oblivion.

Freethought's point of departure was a general critique of religion, including the supposed divine authority and origin of the Bible, the creation story of Genesis, miracles, the Virgin Birth, and so on. Freethinkers were devoted to mental liberty, especially to question, study and understand all claims for religious beliefs, but their concerns also came to encompass political democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech and press, and the struggle to develop the frontiers of modern science.

Freethought was involved in the very founding of the nation. The Constitution is a secular document which nowhere mentions God, and explicitly forbids a religious test to hold political office. The colonial history of America was replete with examples of state interference in matters of religion. The theocratic state of the puritans was founded, so they claimed, on the authority of God himself, interpreted of course by the male elders of the community. Throughout the 18th century, there had been a long controversy concerning the Test Act, and other civil disabilities suffered by dissenters and Catholics. In Virginia, the Church of England oppressed dissenters such as the Baptists with jail terms.⁵ While several of the Founders, notably Washington, attended church, so far as we can tell, their personal religious beliefs tended toward Deism. It is clear that Jefferson was close to Deism, and in any case, as President he declined to issue a national proclamation for Thanksgiving Day.

⁵Sanford H. Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty in America* (1902; rpt. New York: Cooper Square, 1968).

However, undoubtedly the most famous dissenter of the time was Thomas Paine, whose pen, said the poet Joel Barlow, was as important to the cause of the revolution as the sword of Washington.⁶ Paine suggested the actual name of this country: the United States of America. Paine is only sketchily known by our fellow citizens today. Why is this? The reason is that even in his own day, Paine was viewed as a dangerous radical, in part because he supported the French Revolution in his *Rights of Man*, and went on to write the greatest work of Deism, *The Age of Reason*, which exposed many of the traditional concepts of Christianity as fallacious and unsound. Paine was something of a hot potato, and when he came back to the U.S., old friends like Jefferson held him at a distance. There was no place for him in the government, and indeed, in 1806 he was even prevented from voting. In his last years, Paine faced depression, alcoholism, and poverty. Paine's life has always seemed to me emblematic of the fate of the radical in this first of modern revolutionary countries. It was not going to be an easy one.

Paine, of course, had been deeply involved in the drama of the French Revolution, and his connections had "tainted" him. Indeed, there was in the 1790s a full scale anti-Jacobin hysteria in America, in which "atheists" were specifically stigmatized.⁷ Paine, to be sure, was a Deist, and explicitly denounced atheism, but mere facts were of little importance in the tense atmosphere of those times. Furthermore, it may well have been the case that there was more organization of pro-French Revolution sentiments than has sometimes been thought.⁸

It is curiously inauspicious that such revolutionaries as Jefferson and Madison forcefully expressed their views of religion, but only in private

⁶J.W. Skelton, *Tom Paine: The Founding Father America Disowned* (Madison: Fleetwood Art Studio, 1977), p. 20.

⁷David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), chapter 3. Pat Robertson fully accepts John Robison's 1797 "Illuminati" conspiracy theory in his 1991 book, *The New World Order*. Similarly, Christian television today regularly features the anti-Masonic views of evangelist John Ankerberg.

⁸Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976).

correspondence and papers. For instance, in 1823, Jefferson wrote Adams concerning the Presbyterian clergy: "They pant to reestablish, by law, that holy inquisition, which they can now only infuse into public opinion....We have given them stated and privileged days to collect and catechise us, opportunities of delivering their oracles to the people in mass, and of molding their minds as wax in the hollow of their hands."⁹ These views have now been published, but generally have little circulation beyond a small audience of scholars and students of freethought or skepticism. They are none the less invaluable because of the sharp light they throw on the contradictions and tensions of their age, and ages to come.

Such contradictions are also evident in the story of Jefferson's offer to sell his personal library to the nation, as a replacement for the Library of Congress which the British had burned in 1814. Congressman Cyrus King objected to the project on the grounds that "there were in this library many books of an irreligious and immoral tendency, embracing many of the works of the French infidel philosophers, who had caused and inflamed the volcano of the French revolution." Finally, after considerable agitation, one member shrewdly offered an amendment to the bill to appropriate the money, calling for the books to be publicly burned. King foolishly accepted this as a friendly amendment, whereupon the opposition collapsed. Jefferson's books became the property of the people, and the nucleus of the new Library of Congress.¹⁰

Jefferson was among the distinguished Americans whom Robert Owen met when preparing his great expedition to found a western socialist community. The 1820s saw a considerable expansion into new territories and states such as Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and so on. This area was intellectually and socially

⁹Cited in Edward L. Ericson, *The Free Mind Through the Ages* (New York: Ungar, 1985), p. 113.

¹⁰Henry Steele Commager, "Jefferson and the Book Burners," in *The Search for a Usable Past* (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 99-105.

fluid, and open to all kinds of experiments, such as New Harmony became (and had been in the Rappite period, commencing in 1805). Robert Owen's memorable 1826 4th of July address proclaimed that while the Revolution of fifty years before had secured political liberty, mental freedom in America was yet to be attained.

In 1828, Owen issued a general challenge to an open debate on the evidences of religion, which was accepted by the bright and ambitious Alexander Campbell. After negotiations, the debate duly occurred in Cincinnati, extending over nine days of April, 1829.¹¹ In those pre-MTV days, such were the powers of intellectual concentration among our people! The printed transcript of the debate fills two volumes, for a total of 551 pages. A full consideration of the debate is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to say that it surely merits close attention by anyone interested in the philosophical cross currents of America in those times. Owen stated that he was in Cincinnati to contend "that all the religions of the world have originated in error, that they are directly opposed to the divine unchanging laws of human nature; that they are necessarily the source of vice, disunion and misery; that they are now the only obstacle to the formation of a society, over the earth, of intelligence, of charity in its most extended sense, and of sincerity and affection. And that these district religions can be no longer maintained in any part of the world, except by keeping the mass of people in ignorance of their own nature, by an increase in the tyranny of the few over the many." Owen further argued "I also mean to prove that the opprobrious meaning generally annexed to the epithet *infidel* is most irrational and absurd." Campbell retorted: "Were I to talk about *sanity of mind*, I would undertake to prove, that every atheist under heaven is *insane*. And that there can be no greater proof of insanity, than to hear a person say there is no God."

¹¹*Debate on the Evidences of Christianity* (Cincinnati: Robinson and Fairbank, 1829). See also Robert Frederick West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), chapter 6; Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), pp. 131-136.

Owen, in turn, protested that he had not doubted the existence of a Deity, but that special revelation, miracles, original sin and so on were untenable according to the "facts." Owen's god, in short, was Nature, and he further proclaimed his famous Twelve Laws of Human Nature, based on the critical influence of the social environment on our behavior and actions. Campbell mocked Owen's Laws, implying that he intended to establish a new set of blasphemous Commandments, and even thought of himself as a divinity. From time to time, Campbell demonstrated a sharp sense of humor, as when he amended the word human in the Twelve Laws, to goat, thereafter reasonably inquiring, what then is the difference between humanity and that unlovely animal?

Sometimes Owen's patience wore thin; at one point he stated in evident exasperation: "You well know that Christian society, all over Christendom, abounds in vice and iniquity. [*Here there was some stir among the audience.*] My friends, if any of you are afraid to hear the truth, it is time for you to depart. [*Here a little more excitement, and some few left the church. Here a lady almost fainted, and another had her foot bruised in the crowd.*]"

Finally, after those many days of debate, Campbell asked "all the persons in this assembly who believe in the Christian religion or who feel so much interest in it, as to wish to see it pervade the world, will please to signify it by standing up. [*An almost universal rising up.*]....All persons doubtful of the truth of Christian religion, or who do not believe it, and who are not friendly to its spread and prevalence over the world, will please signify it by rising up. [*Three arise.*] Mr. Owen rises." Owen felt moved to add: "I am much pleased with Mr. Campbell's little manœuvre of the test, because I discover it pleases him and his friends. Truth requires no such support."

There is something momentous and dramatic about the Owen-Campbell confrontation, as if it almost set the tone for intellectual conflict in the American

West of that day. Though that debate was marked by civility, other confrontations were not so genteel, as we shall see in a moment.

There is an emerging consensus among American historians that the nineteenth century saw a powerful drive for Christian domination of our national life. Among the phrases one encounters are the "protestant crusade,"¹² a "righteous empire,"¹³ "the search for Christian America,"¹⁴ "awash in a sea of faith: Christianizing the American people,"¹⁵ "Christianizing the republic,"¹⁶ "the churching of America,"¹⁷ and rather sharply, "the arrogance of faith."¹⁸ Yet too often the story of the beleaguered "infidels" remains untold.

I have always wondered why this country founded on liberal principles, could be overrun by illiberal fanatics, yet the reason is so simple that it should be obvious: whereas other countries persecuted them unmercifully, here they were and are free to roam about, preach, proselytize, and flourish at will. That is, because of the idea of freedom we have been nearly overwhelmed with all manner of irrationalists, fakers, and sanctified confidence men. I will only offer in evidence the famous "revival" chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*. These were the men who, as Jefferson recognized seized "opportunities of delivering their oracles to the people in mass, and of molding their minds as wax in the hollow of their hands." I will turn to some theoretical considerations, after offering some examples of the repression of freethinkers in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

¹²Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

¹³Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial, 1970).

¹⁴Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America*, Expanded edition (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

¹⁵Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁶Jean V. Matthews, *Toward a New Society: American Thought and Culture, 1800-1830* (Boston: Twayne, 1991).

¹⁷Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

¹⁸Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

One famous case arose when the Boston publisher Abner Kneeland expressed his doubts concerning the existence of God, and was charged with the crime of blasphemy. Coming out of a background of religious dissent, Kneeland published a statement on the non-existence of God, Christ, miracles and the resurrection from the dead. S.D. Parker, counsel for the state, opened his case thus: "There have been other infidels, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Volney, etc. but the works of these persons were read only by men of literary habits—necessarily a few. But here is a journal, a newspaper, cheap, and sent into a thousand families. Where one man would be injured by Hume, Gibbon, or Volney, a thousand may be injured by this newspaper, so widely circulated, so easily read, so coarsely expressed, so industriously spread abroad." Judge Thacher agreed, citing Erskine's observation in the trial of Thomas Williams for publishing Paine: "Of all human beings, he says, the poor stand most in need of the consolations of religion, and the country has the deepest stake in their enjoying it, not only from the protection which it owes them, but because no man can be expected to be faithful to the authority of man, who revolts against the government of God." Kneeland was convicted in 1838, and served two months in jail, during which time his wife suffered a miscarriage.¹⁹ Today, it seems bizarre that the Constitution would declare that the government had no right to establish religious beliefs, while a subordinate jurisdiction, the State of Massachusetts, could proceed to do exactly that. But such were the contradictions of the American legal system in that era. The statements of Parker and Thacher vividly illustrate how the ruling class regarded religion as an ideological means of controlling the poor.

The South was a similar story. At the College of South Carolina, the noted jurist Thomas Cooper engaged in a decades-long (and ultimately unsuccessful) battle to retain his Presidency, against the inquisition of religious opponents,

¹⁹Commager, pp. 106-120.

especially Presbyterians.²⁰ "All these attacks," he said, "were manifestly and on the face of them the attempts of the Calvinistic Clergy and their adherents, to monopolize all the seminaries of education in the United States, and to advance beyond the power of opposition, the political predominance of that class of Sectarian Clergy. All this was too manifest to be doubted. It was the same kind of attempt, to monopolize for that sect, the home market of ecclesiastical dominion over, and the supply of teachers to schools and colleges, which the manufacturing monopolists had succeeded in establishing."²¹ It is notable that Cooper here recognizes exactly the same strategy of cultural control which the Massachusetts courts succeeded in establishing at the same time. It seems strange to us that Cooper was a racist, who readily defended the slave system, but again, such were the contradictions of the period. The Freethought movement in the South was crushed under the weight of a general defense of the lucrative cotton business. As cotton flourished, freedom declined. In the border states, like Kentucky, similar trends developed, with a struggle between the freethinkers or "liberals" and the Baptists, or the Methodists, or the Presbyterians, and sometimes all of them in an alliance of believers to extirpate liberalism.²² In our own time, we are familiar with the way in which radicals and dissenters in the South have often been literally driven out of town, but this practice has a long tradition behind it.

Coming out of their experience in New Harmony, Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen moved to New York City, where they published the *Free Enquirer*, established a Hall of Science, and traveled widely to promote social reform and Freethought. As an attractive and forceful speaker, Wright drew both large crowds and the wrath of the clergy in most places where she appeared. In Philadelphia during September of 1829, there was a tumultuous scene, when she

²⁰Clement Eaton, *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South* (1940; rpt. New York: Harper, 1964).

²¹*Dr. Cooper's Defence Before the Board of Trustees*, rpt. from the *Times and Gazette*, December 14, 1832.

²²Niels Henry Sonne, *Liberal Kentucky: 1780-1828* (1939; rpt. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968).

was twice forbidden the rental of lecture halls, and was forced to speak from a carriage in the street.²³

Though she was one of the most famous women in America in her own day, Anne Royall (1769-1854) is surprisingly obscure today.²⁴ Arising from humble beginnings in western Pennsylvania and rural Virginia, where she married a veteran of the Revolutionary army who taught her the intellectual principles of the Enlightenment and encouraged her to use his excellent library, Royall was deprived of any share in his estate. Thereafter she traveled widely in the South, and hit on the idea of writing books about her experiences there. Her first book, *Sketches of History*, was published in 1826, and sold well enough for her to continue in the project of travel writing. At the time of the anti-Masonic hysteria, she was often welcomed by local organizations of Masons when she traveled. She violently opposed the coercive aspects of Christianization: "The missionaries have thrown off the mask. They are preaching to the people to elect none but godly men to represent them...One of two things is inevitable. Either the country must put down these men, or they will put down the country. Their object and their interest is to plunge mankind into ignorance, to make him a bigot, a fanatic, a hypocrite, a heathen, to hate every sect but his own, to shut his eyes against the truth, harden his heart against the distress of his fellowman and purchase heaven with money. This is the business of those *pious* young men who scour the country, range regularly through every street, enter every house, beg every individual for money. 'You will go to Hell if you do not give money to spread the gospel.' This is downright blasphemy against God as if He could be thwarted for lack of money." In Burlington, Vermont, a storekeeper named Samuel Hickok threw her down the front steps into the snow, resulting in serious injuries,

²³Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 204-05.

²⁴Bessie Rowland James, *Anne Royall's U.S.A.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972).

including "a contusion, a dislocated ankle, a fracture of the larger bone of the leg, a smaller bone broken above the ankle, knee badly sprained and the flesh much bruised." Returning to her home in Washington, D.C. she declared: "I'll drill an army of women and shoot every Presbyterian I can find!" However, children of Christian fanatics broke her windows, and kept her up all night singing hymns in the street. In her latter years, she was forced to start her own small newspapers, in which she wrote: "It is apparent to all that something is fundamentally wrong, either in our institutions, or in the administration of them. Corruptions, frauds, impositions of the clergy, and the treachery of political aspirants have become the base instruments of contending parties, whose antagonism against each other would lead us to suppose they would sacrifice half the United States, provided they could reign over the other." In the last issue of her paper, published when she was 85 and near death, she sadly admitted that she had only thirty-one cents in the world.

The story of Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement is too well known to repeat in detail here, but it should be noted that he left the ministry because he could not conscientiously perform the ritual of the Lord's Supper. After his Divinity School Address of 1838 at Harvard, he was not again invited to that institution for thirty years.²⁵ Professor Andrews Norton of the Harvard Divinity School described transcendentalism as "the latest form of infidelity"; Emerson in turn referred to "corpse-cold Unitarianism."²⁶ Emerson's philosophy was polite, decorous and civilized, but nevertheless, for many of the clergy, notoriously pagan. Finally, there were many localized freethinkers, or people whose personal experiences brought them to at least some positions held by open freethinkers. Many young people agonized over the vision of eternal

²⁵*The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p.65.

²⁶Cited in Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Dissent in American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 50.

damnation held over them in the churches. Oliver Wendell Holmes, a Unitarian, wrote a remarkable essay on the eighteenth-century divine, Jonathan Edwards, whose impressively ferocious vision of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" became famous. Holmes declared that "a sermon of Edwards is like a nail driven through a human heart."²⁷ Harriet Robinson was working as a factory girl in the Lowell mills, when she openly questioned the doctrine of eternal damnation. "The terrors of an imaginative child's mind, into which these monstrous doctrines were poured, can hardly be described, and their lasting effect need not be dwelt upon...I had begun to think on religious subjects, and the more I thought the less I believed in the doctrines of the church to which I belonged." Persisting in her views, she was excommunicated. "For some time after this," she recalled, "I was quite in disgrace with some of my work-mates, and was called a 'heretic' and a 'child of perdition' by my church friends."²⁸ Similarly, Lucy Colman, later a well-known abolitionist, heard the same doctrine taught when she was a girl. She read the Bible, she said, "but I found it wholly inexplicable, and when I went to my good aunt (who was in the place of a mother to me), and begged her to tell me what such things meant, and why God used such filthy words, and what was the good of such laws, and why woman was required to do things that were wrong in the nature of things, the only answer that she could give me was, 'I don't know; put away the bible until you are older; read the Psalms and the New Testament.' Such was the food that was given to children to mentally digest sixty to seventy years ago."²⁹

In 1852, Alexander Campbell himself traveled to Nashville, Tennessee to combat Rev. Jesse B. Ferguson, a young minister whose "appeal was universal and

²⁷"Jonathan Edwards" in *Pages from an Old Volume of Life*, vol. 8 of the Riverside Edition of Holmes' *Writings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), p. 387.

²⁸Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, revised edition (Kailua, HI: Press Pacifica, 1976), pp.29-35.

²⁹Lucy N. Colman, *Reminiscences* (Buffalo: H.L. Green, 1891), p. 6.

tramps, gamblers, street-walkers, and the wordly sat spellbound by his oratory." His opponents complained that he attracted "the idle, frolicksome, theatrical, sensual, and profane part of the community."³⁰ Ferguson also came to doubt eternal damnation, and worse, publicly expressed that doubt from his pulpit. Campbell mounted a furious campaign against Ferguson, and succeeded in an effort to split his congregation. Driven from his church, Ferguson's last years were marked by aimless wandering; when he returned to Nashville to die in 1870, "his death was hardly noticed in the city where he had been so popular a few years before."

These examples should suggest that Freethought was already in 1830 or so, a real if fledgling movement in this country. Following the lead of Anthony Wallace, we badly need careful studies of local freethinkers ("the village atheists"), and collations of how many local Freethought struggles reflected broader tendencies and contradictions.³¹ The freethinkers were obviously not as well organized as the Christians, but their always minority and often doomed resistance deserves to come to light again today. We need a study of the American radicals and infidels which would have the same depth as E.P. Thompson's now classic *Making of the English Working Class*.

A few theoretical considerations may be in order. Overall, Robert Owen lacked a really workable theory of religion. He believed it was false and oppressive, but he couldn't explain it. Later on in the century, Freud and others began to elaborate the theory of irrationalism, especially the key concept of projection, to which I'll return in a moment. Christianity established a hegemony over America, a purposeful momentum which drew together several important

³⁰F. Garvin Davenport, *Cultural Life in Nashville on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), pp. 100-107.

³¹Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1980).

beliefs. First, while there were Christians who actually called for a Constitutional amendment making this by law a Christian country,³² many more were content to depend on literal armies of voluntary associations—missions, Sunday schools, soup kitchens, temperance societies, and so on. Religious newspapers grew from 14 in 1790 to more than 600 in 1830.³³ There was a close relationship between ministers and school boards. School prayer and Bible reading was common. "Unsuitable" teachers were driven out. Texts generally reflected a Christian triumphalist view of American history.³⁴ The American edition of a school science text by the British agnostic T.H. Huxley was rendered acceptable through the addition of material about God and religion.³⁵

Why did the Christians insist on a belief in Hell? I believe it was because they had to subdue the minds of the people through an instrument of terror. Indeed, a recent interpretation of conservative, nativist movements in American history is entitled "The Party of Fear."³⁶ For all the general belief in progress, Americans have always been chronically insecure. Perry Miller once pondered the dismal guilt-ridden Puritan sermons, and concluded: "...we may see in the sermons more than ministerial nagging of worldlings, more than hypocritical show, more than rhetoric. They were releases from a grief and sickness of soul which otherwise found no surcease. They were professions of a society that knew it was doing wrong, but could not help itself, because the wrong thing was also the right thing. From such ceremonies men arose with new strength and courage: having acknowledged what was amiss, the populace could go back to their fields and

³²"Our Cause," *Christian Statesman*, September 2, 1867. See also Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³³Butler, p. 278.

³⁴Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), chapter 3.

³⁵Charles Rosenberg, "Catechisms of Health: Teaching Health in the 19th Century Classroom," Clendening Lecture, University of Kansas School of Medicine, September 23, 1993.

³⁶David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (1988; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1990).

benches and ships, trusting that a covenanted Jehovah would remember His bond. When again they grew apprehensive, they could look into their own hearts, find what was festering there, and hasten once more to cleanse their bosoms of poisonous stuff....Knowing their impotence, the people needed a method for paying tribute to their sense of guilt and yet for moving with the times."³⁷ In other words, after public confession (which could so easily become hysterical, as in the various "Awakenings" and revivals), they could go home and start exploiting each other again. Hell, then, was simply a projection of the actual inner and often outer misery of the people, as Heaven was a projection of their desperate hopes for a better world. Such spiritual processes appear to continue throughout American history, indeed, to the present. Lawrence Goodwyn's concept of the "politics of deference"³⁸ is also useful, for if as Marx contended "the ruling ideas of every age are the ideas of the ruling class," then if a system of spiritual hierarchy can be established, much else will follow in a given culture.

Many historians have noted the continuity of illusory beliefs among the American people. Butler emphasizes the persistence of the occult.³⁹ Burnham rather dramatically expresses his view in his study of popularizing science and health in the United States: "How Superstition Won and Science Lost."⁴⁰ There were many clearly fantastic belief systems, such as Joseph Smith's "discovery" of ancient gold plates of lost scriptures, crackpot theories of the great Indian mounds,⁴¹ bizarre racial concepts,⁴² and so on. As Robert Owen contended in his

³⁷Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, in Michael McGiffert, ed., *Puritanism and the American Experience* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969), pp. 141-42.

³⁸Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

³⁹Butler, chapter 3.

⁴⁰John C. Burnham, *How Superstition Won and Science Lost: Popularizing Science and Health in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 1987).

⁴¹Robert Wauchope, *Lost Tribes & Sunken Continents: Myth and Method in the Study of American Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). See also Stephen Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

⁴²Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981).

debate with Campbell, if people do not have true beliefs in their heads, they probably will have false beliefs in their place. In this context we might recall a now little used, but in my view still useful concept of Frederick Engels: "false consciousness"—useful indeed to the ruling class. Real education such as Owen envisioned, might have remedied that, but again, that has too rarely been the case in America.

Furthermore, why should there have been such an emphasis on respectability, which visitors since DeTocqueville have noted? For a country so pivoted on individualism, why was there so much conformity? Why was Christianity, for some kindly and gentle, so much more often violent and coercive? The real motive was consolidation of power behind the drive for Empire. The lands of the Indians had to be seized, and Africans enslaved; both actions could be justified if those heathen races were subordinate, or maybe not even human at all. We would "civilize" them, perhaps. Capitalist and outright government support of missions and prominent evangelists is now well documented.⁴³ As Lucy Colman noted: "Christianity demands entire subordination to its edicts...Christians of this country and England do not hesitate to go into foreign countries, decry their gods and demolish the representatives of such gods, and if they, the natives, object, the sword soon settles the matter...Until the majority of the people are emancipated from authority over their minds, we are not safe."⁴⁴ Infidels tended to question everything, and thought of themselves as "citizens of the world" rather than shallow, flag-waving "patriots." Their consciousness, as Owen hoped, was world-wide in scope, not chained down by provincialism. The infidels here, and pagans

⁴³John Upton Terrell, *The Arrow and the Cross: A History of the American Indian and the Missionaries* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1979). See also Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

⁴⁴Colman, p. 7.

in other lands had to be stigmatized, or as our liberals of today put it, "marginalized."

The period between the Civil War and World War I, is sometimes called "The Golden Age of Freethought." At that time of its greatest strength, Freethought had newspapers with large circulations such as the *Appeal to Reason* and *The Truth Seeker*, as well as many local papers; whole towns and colonies of settlers; book publishing houses of considerable size; extensive circuits for popular lecturers such as Col. Robert G. Ingersoll; schools, institutes and colleges, and so forth.⁴⁵ Yet for all that flourished then, there was also severe repression, including numerous convictions of Freethought publishers (usually on obscenity charges).⁴⁶ Anthony Comstock estimated that he had brought 3,600 people to court, and had destroyed 50 tons of books.⁴⁷ Nye suggests that among the reformers of the first half of the nineteenth century, there were "only a few American martyrs,"⁴⁸ but later on in 1898, there was the horsewhipping and then assassination of magazine editor William Cowper Brann in Waco, Texas, and an assassination attempt against Kansas editor Etta Semple. All of which is to say that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Christianity vs. Freethought conflict continued, and continued to worsen.

Even though today, some denominations have jettisoned some of their more bizarre beliefs and practices, and have even in some cases adopted the tenets of liberation theology, a substantial section of contemporary American society thrives on deception and make-believe. A recent *Washington Post* article suggests that belief in miracles is becoming acceptable again.⁴⁹ Another article in *Forbes*

⁴⁵Fred Whitehead and Verle Muhrer, ed. *Freethought on the American Frontier* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1992), part 2.

⁴⁶Hal Sears, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977).

⁴⁷Carl Bode, Introduction to H. L. Mencken, *The Editor, The Bluenose, and the Prostitute* (Boulder: Roberts Rinehart, 1988), p. 7.

⁴⁸Russell Blaine Nye, *Society and Culture in America 1830-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 33

⁴⁹Laura Sessions Stepp, "Age of miracles is far from past," *Kansas City Star*, April 11, 1992.

argues that since no one now believes in the American economy, the capitalist class should do as much as possible to foster the public's concentration on religion.⁵⁰ And the conflicts of old are replayed in calls for "culture wars"; Pat Buchanan told the Christian Coalition exactly what it wanted to hear: "Our culture is superior," he proclaimed, "because our religion is Christianity and that is the truth that makes men free."⁵¹

But on this occasion, in this place, we are able to reflect on our hopes and dreams for a better society, a cause to which Robert Owen and so many of his family and associates dedicated their lives, here in the heart of the vast American land. Owen's steadfast campaign in favor of comprehensive, scientific and humanist education, his disbelief in Hell or eternal punishment, his philosophical defense of the "infidel" character, his commitment to truth and exposure of illusion, and his internationalist vision would serve us well if continued in our own times.

⁵⁰Cited in Tim Yeager, "Capitalist hope for 'new religion,'" *People's Weekly World*, March 28, 1992.

⁵¹"Buchanan crusades for 'cultural war'," AP story, *Kansas City Star*, September 13, 1993.