May 2014

THOREAU'S A WEEK, RELIGION AS PRESERVATIVE CARE: OPPOSING THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY, MANIFEST DESTINY, AND A RELIGION OF SUBJUGATION

Robert Michael Ruehl
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: http://surface.syr.edu/etd
Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the SURFACE at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues for a rereading of Henry David Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) as “Transcendental scripture writing.” By placing his book in this genre, Thoreau’s religious thinking comes to the fore. His book becomes a contextualized pilgrimage addressing three levels of human existence in the religious realm: (1) where we have been and are now, (2) where we could be, and (3) how to reach that next, better self with more intimate, liberative relationships with others. As he addresses human limitations and his hope for better human and nonhuman relationships, Thoreau articulates a religion of “preservative care” that seeks to address past wrongs while nurturing sustained peace, which makes his outlook significant for the present.

This vision of life filled with sustained peace, however, does not circumvent a serious reexamination of the violence that went into America’s founding. As he addresses the history of the United States, Thoreau emphasizes a dominant oppressive trend in America as Native Americans and the environment are continuously devalued and pushed to the margins. Thoreau associates this oppressive trajectory with a Western politico-theological justification for the domination, conversion, and attempted extermination of non-Christian, Indigenous peoples—a repressive posture that scholars currently define as the “Christian Doctrine of Discovery.” Thoreau makes it clear that belief in Christian supremacy and the desire to construct a decidedly Christian nation have led to the attempted mastery over Indigenous populations, their land, and the natural world, which has concomitantly led to diminished lives for those perpetuating this “religion of subjugation.”

He counters this with an ideal of non-institutionalized religion grounded in the natural world and informed by Native American values and ways of being. In the end, Thoreau’s “wild”
religion seeks to preserve The Law of Regeneration or the dynamic laws of nature in all existence—human and nonhuman alike. This is Thoreau’s religion of preservative care, and it has important implications for current religious dialogues addressing Indigenous rights and the repudiation of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery—especially within the liberal religious Unitarian Universalist denomination as Thoreau is considered part of its religious heritage. *A Week* prods the tradition to be more ecologically attuned in religious matters, to be less anthropocentrically oriented, and to be united with the downtrodden through a religious presupposition affirming solidarity with all oppressed beings—human and nonhuman alike. This orientation re-envisions religion as a healthy, transformative presence in the world as it aims to cultivate sustained peace, which is needed in today’s world negatively affected by violence and injustice too often grounded in religious discourses and buttressed by pernicious religious sentiments.
THOREAU’S *A WEEK*, RELIGION AS PRESERVATIVE CARE:
OPPOSING THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY, MANIFEST DESTINY, AND
A RELIGION OF SUBJUGATION

By

Robert Michael Ruehl
B.A. St. John Fisher College, 2000
M.Phil. Syracuse University, 2010

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion
in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

May 2014
I know of nothing more creditable to [Thoreau’s] greatness than the thoughtful regard, approaching reverence, by which he has held for many years some of the best persons of his time, living at a distance, and wont to make their annual pilgrimage, usually on foot, to the master,—a devotion very rare in these times of personal indifference, if not of confessed unbelief in persons and ideas.


Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or thought. Of course, the same isolation which belonged to his original thinking and living detached him from the social religious forms . . . Thoreau was sincerity itself, and might fortify the conviction of prophets in the ethical laws by his holy living. It was an affirmative experience which refused to be set aside. A truth-speaker he, capable of the most deep and strict conversation; a physician to the wounds of any soul; a friend, knowing not only the secret of friendship, but almost worshiped by those few persons who resorted to him as their confessor and prophet, and knew the deep value of his mind and great heart. He thought that without religion or devotion of some kind nothing great was ever accomplished; and he thought that the bigoted sectarian had better bear this in mind.


What, for our purposes, the testimony of Thoreau’s contemporaries makes clear is that in his own day Thoreau was generally conceived in spiritual terms, even in some cases as a sort of charismatic, if decidedly unorthodox, religious figure.

– Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness*, 20
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<p>| Preface                                      | 1     |
| Introduction                                | 17    |
| <strong>Chapter One</strong>                             |       |
| Thoreau and <em>A Week</em>:                       |       |
| Organic Intellectual and Transcendental Scripture Writing | 30    |
| Introduction                                | 30    |
| A Guiding Trope: Gramsci’s “Organic Intellectual” | 32    |
| Transcendentalism: A Counter-Hegemonic Movement | 45    |
| Organic Intellectual Literature: Writing for the Gods | 62    |
| Thoreau as a Religious Leader: H.G.O. Blake  | 70    |
| <em>A Week</em>: Manifesting the Qualities of the “Unnamed” | 77    |
| Conclusion: Alcott’s Assessment of <em>A Week</em>  | 82    |
| <strong>Chapter Two</strong>                             |       |
| Recontextualizing New England’s “Religion of Subjugation”: |       |
| The Perpetuation of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery | 86    |
| Introduction                                | 86    |
| The Historical Foundations for a Religion of Subjugation: |       |
| The Christian Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny | 92    |
| New England before Settlement               | 104   |
| Edward Johnson and His <em>Wonder-Working Providence</em> | 110   |
| Puritanism Considered: Calvinism, Religion, and Civil Society | 120   |
| New England after Settlement                | 137   |
| Religion of Subjugation in <em>A Week</em>         | 142   |
| Conclusion: New England’s Christian Dystopia | 157   |
| <strong>Chapter Three</strong>                           |       |
| Thoreau’s Nature Religion:                  |       |
| The Event of Nature, Rebinding Oneself to Wildness, and an Ontology of Flows | 161   |
| Introduction                                | 161   |
| A Biographical Summary of Thoreau’s Contact with Wildness or the Wild | 167   |
| What Is Wildness or the Wild for Thoreau?   | 175   |
| Thoreau’s Religious Foundation: An Ontology of Flows | 195   |
| Conclusion                                  | 205   |
| <strong>Chapter Four</strong>                            |       |
| Thoreau’s Practices for Religious Living in <em>A Week</em> | 218   |
| Introduction                                | 218   |
| The Pilgrimage or Quest                     | 223   |
| Labor as a Spiritualizing and Naturalizing Process | 229   |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Purely Sensuous Life</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Separate Intention of the Eye and Uncommon Sense</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawing: Solitude and Silence</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Natural Sabbath</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildness in Civil Society: Civil Disobedience</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Disobedience and Being a Good Friend</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

**Thoreau’s Contribution to Liberal Religion in the Present** 277

- Introduction                                                        277
- Seeking Restorative Justice                                          284
- Toward a Bioregional, Ecological Perspective                         288
- Conflict Transformation                                              292
- Toward New Principles and Purposes:
  - Suggestions for Today’s Unitarian Universalists                    297
- Conclusion                                                          314

**Works Cited** 323

**Vita** 352
PREFACE

In this preface, I will cover three relevant points relating to the dissertation. First, I will offer a brief history of Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. As will be evident later in the dissertation, Thoreau’s first book is undervalued and remains obscure within his corpus. For those familiar with his text, this will be a quick reminder about the book’s background, composition, and the struggles to get it published. For those unfamiliar with it, this summary will orient readers and make them familiar with his first book and will help to enrich the dissertation’s overall argument. In the end, while not essential to the dissertation’s overall argument, I believe the summary helps to contextualize Thoreau’s *A Week* by showing the text’s personal side.

Second, I want readers to be aware of my assumptions about Thoreau as I had come to recognize him after spending significant time with *A Week* and the secondary literature devoted to his text. For me, it is reasonable to see Thoreau as a nineteenth-century liberation thinker. He was embedded in white culture, but was always clear that to be “white” took a lot of learning, constraint, and domestication. His writings are oriented toward helping readers to escape their learned whiteness and all that this entails, such as the devaluation of “wildness,” the natural world, Indigenous peoples, unscripted actions, and spontaneous insights. As far as this dissertation is concerned, Thoreau’s liberation thinking addresses the interactions between whites in New England, the environment, and Native Americans. He wants to liberate whites, so they can appreciate the gifts of those non-white and nonhuman beings all around them.

Lastly, I want to address some of the methodological decisions concerning how I approached *A Week*. One of the important topics in Emersonian and Thoreauvian
Transcendentalism concerns what literary criticism is. For them, criticism is not a negative task; this is too easy. Every text can be picked apart and left in shambles, but for Emerson and Thoreau, they seek a constructive relationship with literary texts that honors the text’s gifts and allows the text to inspire them. They seek new views from books, and they want to allow those insights to inspire them and to aid them in the production of new works that will likewise inspire others. Criticism is a form of creative literature, then, that allows them to be constructive.

This does not mean that I accept everything Thoreau says without question, but my intent is not an ardent negative criticism, but a constructive criticism in the spirit of the movement to which Thoreau belonged. Instead of using some traditional theorists who orient academic pursuits in religious studies, I have chosen marginal theorists or intellectuals who I thought would help me to “open up” *A Week* in a complementary, novel fashion.

In other words, all the decisions made in writing this dissertation were made with deep reverence and based on careful decisions, so I could honor Thoreau’s *A Week* in a fresh way that would allow its insights and challenges to address two major problems today, namely, the continuous maltreatment of Native Americans and the continuous maltreatment of the natural world. Furthermore, behind every decision is a deep realization that too much negativity sustains our culture, and it is time to be more constructive. It is a narrow attitude that shuns certain thinkers because they are *passé*. Their apparent irrelevance is a good reason for reconsidering them as they may challenge our habitual intellectual blind spots. The use of marginal thinkers, then, was an intentional attempt to allow me to see Thoreau and *A Week* in a different way.

By addressing these aspects in what follows, I hope the dissertation will be more accessible because I have articulated my assumptions, but that is for the reader to decide.
A Brief History of *A Week*

Thoreau and his brother John decided to embark on a river trip leading them from Concord, Massachusetts to Concord, New Hampshire and then to the summit of Mount Washington in the White Mountains (or Agiocochook, “Home of the Great Spirit,” to the Algonkian people), which as Alan D. Hodder observes, “. . . amounts to following the river of life back to its source on the sacred mountain, the *axis mundi*, at the center of the world. The voyage thus recapitulates the mythical hero’s sacred quest, or, at a cosmogonic level, what Mircea Eliade refers to as the myth of the eternal return.”¹ In more mundane terms, however, they formulated this trip for practical reasons as a way to alleviate the stress from their teaching duties,² and they began building their new boat in the spring of 1839, which they named the “Musketaquid” or “Grass-ground”—this being the Native American designation for the river British settlers would rename “Concord.” After departing in the afternoon, the round-trip journey would take them two weeks.

They left on the last Saturday of the month, 31 August 1839, and they returned on Friday, 13 September 1839. Leaving their hometown of Concord, Thoreau and his brother followed the current of the Concord River into the Merrimack River. Instead of following the Merrimack’s path to the Atlantic Ocean, they travelled against the current as they went north into New Hampshire. From the sixth day of their voyage to the thirteenth, they left their boat behind in Hooksett, New Hampshire. They boarded a stagecoach to travel north to Plymouth, which dropped them near the White Mountain range, which extends from New Hampshire into Maine. They hiked their way to Agiocochook reaching its summit on Tuesday, 10 September 1839. They returned to their boat on Thursday and departed for home using the Merrimack’s current to

---

their advantage. On the last day of their voyage, however, they had to paddle against the flow of the Concord River, and after travelling approximately fifty miles on that Friday, they arrived home after sunset.³

Thoreau would take almost ten years to write, revise, and publish *A Week.*⁴ From his return on that Friday in September 1839 to 30 May 1849, Thoreau would slowly reconstruct the river journey as he condensed two weeks into one.⁵ An unexpected incident, however, would change Thoreau’s life during this period. John cut his thumb on 1 January 1842 as he was sharpening his razor, and ten days later, he died in his brother’s arms from lockjaw.⁶ Thoreau had experienced a powerful harmony with John; on 8 January 1842, Thoreau wrote, “Am I so like thee my brother that the cadence of two notes affects us alike?”⁷ John’s death sent Thoreau into a depressed state, and he generated psychosomatic symptoms similar to John’s. David M. Robinson poignantly describes this intense moment of loss in Thoreau’s early adulthood.

---

Although Thoreau seemed at first to react calmly to John’s death, he was actually repressing powerful emotions; he began to sink into a listlessness and depression, and eleven days later he too began to exhibit the symptoms of tetanus, or lockjaw, though he had not in fact contracted the disease. One can see in Thoreau’s terrifying psychosomatic reenactment of John’s symptoms a desperate reaching out in sympathy to a brother he could not help, and who had died in his arms . . . Thoreau’s symptoms became so severe that his doctors and family were concerned that he would die, and even after he began to recover, he remained bedridden for a month, and was seriously weakened well into the spring . . . He had lost, in John, the closest human relationship that he would ever have.8

After struggling through the shock of the loss of his brother and best friend9 and finally regaining his passion and strength for living after a long fragile period, Thoreau decided to develop their river trip into a book with a more concerted effort.10 Although he had already begun writing portions of *A Week* as early as 21 June 1840 with a journal entry written for the “Saturday” portion of the text and while he had compiled numerous notes on the book over the years, daily tasks continued to delay his newfound zeal for sustained composition of the book. It took his friend (and poet), Ellery Channing, to urge him to build a hut on Walden Pond, so Thoreau could complete *A Week* in a more reasonable time.11 On 4 July 1845, Thoreau moved into the cabin he had built on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s property on the shores of Walden Pond, and in earnestness, Thoreau began working on his first book and other writing projects.12 His residence at the pond and his time in partial solitude allowed him to finish two drafts of *A Week*,13 yet he also wrote his

---

8 Robinson, *Natural Life*, 33.
9 Bishop, “The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau’s *Week*,” 89-90.
12 When he moved into his cabin at Walden Pond, Thoreau had approximately 200 pages of notes for the text. Sullivan, *Thoreau You Don’t Know*, 163.
13 His first draft was called *Excursion on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which Emerson referred to in a letter to Charles King Newcomb on 16 July 1846. Within the next year, Thoreau had changed the name to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which is evidenced by an entry in Amos Bronson Alcott’s journal for 16 March 1847. Adams, “The Bibliographical History of Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,” 41.
first draft of *Walden,*\(^{14}\) parts of his posthumously published book *The Maine Woods,* and an essay on Thomas Carlyle.\(^{15}\) His two years on Emerson’s property were a time of continuous creative energy,\(^{16}\) and after leaving Walden Pond on 6 September 1847, Thoreau edited *A Week* for almost two more years as he slowly became confident it was ready to submit to a publisher.\(^{17}\)

Scholars have identified Thoreau as a careful literary crafts-person who worked and reworked his prose,\(^{18}\) and they further add how this careful shaping of his language often gives his sentences a poetic rhythm. In *Thoreau’s Complex Weave,* Linck C. Johnson chronicles this process for Thoreau’s first book before Thoreau was willing to send it to a publisher for final consideration.\(^{19}\) Thoreau began collecting material for *A Week* more seriously toward the end of 1844 and the beginning of 1845. He completed his first draft in 1845 and came back to it later in 1846 to revise and expand it. By February 1847, evidence indicates that Thoreau had completed his second draft of *A Week.* Then on 12 March 1847, Emerson wrote a letter to Evert Duyckinck who represented the publishing company of Wiley & Putnam, and in his letter, Emerson wrote that Thoreau’s first book was complete.\(^{20}\) Thoreau, however, delayed sending the manuscript to Wiley & Putnam for two months after they had requested it, so he could add certain portions to the book, such as the Hannah Dustan story included in the “Thursday” chapter. After a short period with the text, Thoreau requested Wiley & Putnam to return his manuscript, so he could

\(^{14}\) Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness,* 41-42.

\(^{15}\) McKusick, *Green Writing,* 141-42. Also see, Bingham, *Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination,* 14. Cain, “Henry David Thoreau,” 34. Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don’t Know,* 181. It is interesting to note that Thoreau envisioned *Walden* as a sequel to *A Week.* Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science,* 48. Cain also makes a similar point on page 41; he identifies the positive aspect of *A Week* as its failure, which made Thoreau delay its publication. This allowed it to be a “masterpiece” instead of a “supplement.” Also see Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness,* 41-42. Johnson, *Thoreau’s Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, with the Text of the First Draft,* xvii.

\(^{16}\) Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism,* 2.

\(^{17}\) Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness,* 30-31.


\(^{19}\) Johnson, *Thoreau’s Complex Weave,* 221-47. Also see Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau,* 243-47.

\(^{20}\) Wood, “Mr. Thoreau Writes a Book,” 369.
further amend it. While they were willing to publish *A Week*, Wiley & Putnam would do so only at Thoreau’s expense. After similar unsuccessful attempts, Thoreau decided to delay publishing
*A Week*, and this allowed him to further enhance the text in the interim. In January 1848, Thoreau composed his essay “Friendship” and shortly later wove it into the “Wednesday” chapter.21 A year later in February 1849, Thoreau was searching for a publisher again, and he contacted Ticknor & Co., yet they were more interested in *Walden* and were hesitant to publish *A Week*. Thoreau, therefore, declined to work with them and finally turned to James Munroe & Co., and again he would have to pay the printing costs—but this time out of his royalties. Thoreau accepted, and *A Week* was circulating for purchase on 30 May 1849.22

In all, however, *A Week* was a commercial failure.23 Thoreau and his publishing company gave seventy-five copies to friends and reviewers, and only 219 copies of the book sold. Out of the 1,000 copies printed, Thoreau had to repay James Munroe & Co. $290, which was a considerable sum of money for the time, and he did not pay the bill in full until 28 November 1853. A month earlier on 28 October 1853, Thoreau received the remaining books and humorously, and with a littler resentment woven throughout, describes the incident in a journal entry for that day.

For a year or two past, my *publisher*, falsely so called, has been writing from time to time to ask what disposition should be made of the copies of “*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*” still on hand, and at last suggesting that he had use for the room they occupied in his cellar. So I had them all sent to me here, and they have arrived to-day by express, filling the man’s wagon,—706 copies out of an edition of 1000 which I bought of Munroe four years ago and have been ever since paying for, and have not quite paid

---

for yet. The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs to a place similar to that to which they trace their origin . . . I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his labor? . . . Nevertheless, in spite of this result, sitting beside the inert mass of my works, I take up my pen to-night to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever.24

Despite the loss of his brother, the failure in the marketplace, and the debt he undertook to publish *A Week*,25 in the end he sat beside his extensive library of his own works and persevered as he upheld his daily discipline of writing. The following year, Thoreau would publish *Walden*. His love for writing and his unquenchable desire to inform the public through the written word could not be dampened, and he continued to see *A Week* as a prized literary child; this text would be with him during his final hours in 1862 as he laid in bed dying from tuberculosis. Robert J. Richardson, Jr. writes, “His last words came back to his writing. Early on the morning of May 6, Sophia [Thoreau’s younger sister] read him a piece from the ‘Thursday’ section of *A Week*, and Thoreau anticipated with relish the ‘Friday’ trip homeward, murmuring, ‘Now comes good sailing.’ In his last sentence, only the two words ‘moose’ and ‘Indian’ were audible.”26 These last hours reveal the pleasure he derived from his first book and his continued high valuation for nature and Indigenous peoples—central themes in *A Week*.

In the end, the final structure of his valued book contains eight chapters. The first chapter, “Concord River,” opens with an epigraph calling on his deceased brother to be his Muse,

---

25 Thoreau did not want to live a life in debt; this was not a condition in which to try to live a good, deliberate life. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 167.
reminding the reader of its elegiac nature: “Be thou my Muse, my Brother –.”27 This chapter is a sustained contemplation of the local history of the Concord River region as a site of conflict between Native Americans and British settlers and an acknowledgement of the river as an emblem for the renewing energy pulsating throughout all creation.28 Its flow is emblematic of the perennial law of regeneration; it reveals something about “the life that is in nature” which is “perennial, young, divine.” The remaining seven chapters relate to the days of the week beginning with “Saturday” and ending with the last chapter, which is “Friday.” The seven-day journey begins with the brothers waiting for a “warm drizzling rain” to stop, so they can launch their boat onto Concord River’s current.29 Finally, in the afternoon, the brothers are able to launch themselves in their homemade boat filled with potatoes and melons from their garden. They continue by boat until the beginning of “Thursday” when they leave their boat behind and go by foot to the summit of Agiocochook. After reaching the summit and the source of the Merrimack River, Thoreau and his brother return to their boat stored in Hooksett, New Hampshire. They start their return voyage in “Thursday,” and later that evening they camp for the night near Coos Falls, New Hampshire. In “Friday,” Thoreau and his brother awake and feel the fresh autumn weather that arrived while they slept. They depart early in the morning, before 5:00 A.M., and they float down through the fog on the Merrimack River. He and his brother finally make landfall in Concord, Massachusetts “far in the evening.”30 By the end of the voyage, the reader has not only traveled roundtrip but has encountered numerous digressions on various topics ranging from plant life to fish, poetry to myths, nature to civilization, religion to

27 Thoreau, A Week, 3. Alan D. Hodder emphasizes how elegiac tones are present in Thoreau’s corpus (his “characteristically elegiac mood”); Thoreau seems to hold joy and sorrow in tension in his writing. Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 36, 40-41, 106.
28 Bingham describes Thoreau’s time as one of conflict and rapid changes in society, so it is no wonder that Thoreau would be attuned to conflict in American history. Bingham, Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination, 15-17.
29 Thoreau, A Week, 15.
30 Thoreau, A Week, 393.
friendship, and domestication to nonconformity. *A Week* is a journey through physical space, but also an excursion through ideas and the realm of the mind.  

**Thoreau as a Liberation Thinker and an Advocate of Uncivilized Religion**

A desire orients this critical examination of Thoreau’s *A Week*, namely, a desire to remain faithful to Thoreau’s outlook as a reader and writer of literature and to confront his ideas and values allowing their uniqueness, timeliness, and sometimes their strangeness to come to the fore. A quote from *A Week* remained prominent as I began writing: “Books, not which afford us a cowering enjoyment, but in which each thought is of unusual daring; such as an idle man cannot read, and a timid one would not be entertained by, which even make us dangerous to existing institutions,—such call I good books.”³² I began with the assumption that Thoreau sought to make *A Week* one of these “good books.”

Three factors seem to indicate his determination to make it a quality text. First, he dedicated it to his deceased brother whom he loved very much; his painstaking writing and rewriting were a gift to his dead brother and best friend, John Thoreau. Second, he took ten years to compose the book and reworked the text extensively. Lastly, on 29 June 1851, approximately two years after he published his first book, Thoreau praised *A Week* in a journal entry; he displays a sense of pride as he compliments *A Week* for its rustic nature and its lack of domesticity. He writes that it lies “open under the ether—& permeated by it. Open to all weathers—not easy to be kept on a shelf.”³³ Thoreau aligns *A Week* with the natural world, and its lack of domesticity provides a quality of wildness that resists being constrained on a shelf.

---

³¹ This section has tried to elaborate what Linck C. Johnson describes as the five “major strands” or themes woven throughout *A Week*: (1) excursion, (2) elegy, (3) reform, (4) colonial history, and (5) digressions on literary subjects. Johnson, *Thoreau’s Complex Weave*, xii-xiv.


together with tame books. In other words, Thoreau’s *A Week* is precisely one of those daring works he esteemed, an uncivilized book permeated by the winds of nature allowing it to challenge civilized life and its institutions.

An initial question emerges from the above quote: What existing institutions or conditions is *A Week* challenging? To answer this question, I will highlight key features of Thoreau’s context.

American history and the emergence of the United States had a strong religious heritage, and Thoreau was aware of this as he grew up in New England. The Puritan heritage remained a vital component of New England identity, and it is impossible to escape the Puritan religiosity leaving its traces in the region, especially in the orthodox Calvinist churches found throughout New England. He found Puritan religion superstitious, oppressive, and unfounded. (In fact, both conservative and liberal religion left much to be desired in Thoreau’s mind.)

A direct result of this religiosity was the eviction of Native Americans and the decimation of their communities. This, however, was not something in the distant past, for the legacies of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson were still being felt when Thoreau and his brother had taken their two-week journey on the Concord and Merrimack rivers in 1839, which formed the foundation for *A Week*. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 helped to begin a decade of harsh treatment of Native Americans that would find “civilized” expression in the brutal treatment of Indigenous peoples during the Trail of Tears, which led to thousands of lifeless bodies from various Southeastern Indigenous communities.

There was also the growth of industrialization in New England. Corporations were erecting dams, railroad companies were clearing forests and laying mile upon mile of tracks, and mills were using both the dams and railroads to meet growing consumer wants. Thoreau,
therefore, was challenging religious institutions, economic institutions, and imperial apparatuses that were diminishing human life, destroying the natural environment, and decimating the populations of North America’s first inhabitants.

Thoreau sought to challenge the fabric of American identity, ideology, and politics; he was challenging the brutality that was the foundation of American civilization, most clearly seen in violence toward Native Americans, the natural world, and the constraints limiting and directing the day-to-day actions and thoughts of American citizens.

This orientation makes Thoreau an early liberation thinker as he merged politics, religion, and ecological insights to confront and undermine American systems of domination and oppression. Whereas his historical context was woven together and given continuity through theologico-political violence and ecological destruction, Thoreau understood that the problems of American society and history were not inevitable; a more peaceful way was possible. Instead of submitting to the traditions, habits, and doctrines of his time, Thoreau stepped beyond the confines of institutional religion and immersed himself in the natural world, Native American culture and history, and significant periods of relaxation away from civilized life—all of which challenged the capitalist industrial atmosphere and its burdensome timetables.

Through repeated attempts to extract himself from the routines of American life and Euro-American values, Thoreau developed his own religious perspective and a form of subjectivity faithful to his religious insights. Nature was sacred for Thoreau, and Native Americans in the New England region represented a more harmonious society healthily imbedded in and respectful of the local environment. This led Thoreau to assert a feral religious posture that would allow the religious seeker the freedom and responsibility to break free from the constraints of civilized life. To do so, however, was not an abstract, otherworldly practice; it
was localized in time and space. To liberate oneself, in Thoreau’s mind, was to step outside common sense or the community’s hegemonic values and scripted behaviors to encounter the world in a less mediated way. Sustained moments of freedom would slowly allow the person to be more liberated. This increasing freedom would lead to a person more able to engage and help her or his neighbors, a person more joyous and energized, and a person ready to oppose injustices sustained by custom or legislation. The ideal religious posture, then, is one always ready to live a life of civil disobedience, where one’s liberation emanates and supports the liberation of others—both humans and nonhumans.

**Authorial Positioning and Methodological Concerns**

This dissertation arises from my personal experiences within the Unitarian Universalist tradition and within the United States, which continues to struggle with issues of justice concerning our Native American sisters and brothers and the environment. The Unitarian Universalist tradition introduced me to Thoreau in a more meaningful way than I was used to, but my reading of Thoreau led me to question whether the tradition was fulfilling its obligations and establishing goals consonant with Thoreau’s nonconformist view of life and his high reverence for Indigenous peoples and our nonhuman sisters and brothers. I came to understand how contradictory it was for the United States to honor Thoreau as a literary hero and as an integral part of the American identity while America’s imperialistic foreign policy, environmental disregard, and continuous maltreatment of Native Americans would have left Thoreau openly hostile to the state. Before beginning to write this dissertation, then, I already had a deep appreciation for Thoreau, his writings, and his unwavering desire for a more just society.
This led me to work against the tradition of a highly critical approach to Thoreau’s texts; these have already been done in the 150 years since Thoreau’s death. There were many critics, and still are, who find Thoreau immature, too sentimental when it comes to nature, or not critical enough when it comes to ideas of masculinity, capitalism, and racial prejudices. I do not disregard the need for serious criticisms, yet criticism for criticism’s sake I find puerile. After passing through, and maybe still being in, the age of poststructuralism, it should be apparent that every argument, narrative, and generality can be deconstructed, and many scholars are satisfied with the dismantling component. They forgot that Jacques Derrida affirmed that every deconstruction includes a reconstruction. I seek, therefore, to move beyond this simple process of pointing out failures without any hint of how the concepts or narratives can be useful. This means that this dissertation is intentionally constructive in nature. I answer some of the previous objections to Thoreau and *A Week* by offering different, plausible perspectives heavily grounded in his text and the secondary literature.

This is intended to have two significant results. First, we need to start acting and thinking differently when it comes to the oppressed of this world, and Thoreau offers a broader vision of the human and nonhuman beings with whom we are in ethical relationships. He shows us that Indigenous peoples, the environment, and wildlife are all deserving of our respect; our freedom is limited by our responsibilities to these other beings whom Americans have traditionally excluded. Secondly, as Thoreau is seen as part of the American literary tradition, I found it important to show how one of our literary heroes stood against what we today take as “traditional American values.” To put it bluntly, Thoreau would be sickened by our actions and policies, and I think it is important for scholarly work to provide an internal criticism of these pernicious values. My intention, therefore, is to offer a new way of perceiving, thinking about, and acting in
the world. The hope is that this dissertation offers at least a slight awareness of possibilities our culture had previously obscured, and this is why a constructive approach was so important to my project.

This led to a slightly unconventional use of sources. For example, I am thinking about my use of Joseph Campbell instead of Victor Turner. This choice was not meant to diminish Turner’s work, nor was it intended to convey that I lacked knowledge of Turner, his view of liminality, or his significance for religious studies. Through inspiration from Thoreau, I decidedly turned to Campbell because of his status, or lack of status, in religious studies as a whole. I wanted to turn to a figure of “uncommon sense,” to use Thoreau’s terminology, to see if he could offer something that I was not seeing. In fact, the more I read Campbell, the more I found similarities between him and Thoreau, but they were different just enough where Campbell’s work helped to illuminate certain things in Thoreau’s writing that I had not seen before. While the postmodern age has dispelled most people of metanarratives, Thoreau and Campbell valued them, so my turn to Campbell for insights was an attempt to remain a little more generous toward Thoreau’s outlook. In the end, Campbell helped me to bridge my contemporary setting with Thoreau in a way that I thought was more aesthetically congruous than Turner was. All choices of sources tried to hold in harmony three endeavors: to be academically sound and rigorous; to be faithful to Thoreau’s religious, political, and aesthetic sensibilities; and to reveal a fresh insight concerning what it means to be religious.

Conclusion

As I wrote each day, a quote kept resounding in my mind; this is a quote from Gilles Deleuze. He wrote, “I believe that a worthwhile book can be represented in three quick ways. A
worthy book is written only if (1) you think that the books on the same or a related subject fall into a sort of general error (polemical function of a book); (2) you think that something essential about the subject has been forgotten (inventive function); (3) you consider that you are capable of creating a new concept (creative function). Of course, that’s the quantitative minimum: an error, an oversight, a concept . . . . Henceforth, for each of my books, abandoning necessary modesty, I will ask myself (1) which error it claims to correct, (2) which oversight it wants to repair, and (3) what new concept it has created.”34 While holding together Thoreau, Native Americans, the environment, civil disobedience, and religion, Deleuze’s quote helped to set the limits and allowed me to write more ardently and with directed enthusiasm to address some of the errors concerning Thoreau and A Week, to supply fresh insights to Thoreauvian, Indigenous, and environmental studies, and to offer a new concept for religious studies and people who seek to live a religious life. After reading this dissertation, I hope people will take seriously the need for a feral religious posture based on preservative care, so we can begin to counter both the injustices that went into America’s founding and the injustices that are still an integral part of American society.

INTRODUCTION

Shad are still taken in the basin of Concord River at Lowell, where they are said to be a month earlier than the Merrimack shad, on account of the warmth of the water. Still patiently, almost pathetically, with instinct not to be discouraged, not to be reasoned with, revisiting their old haunts, as if their stern fates would relent, and still met by the Corporation with its dam. Poor shad! where is thy redress? . . . Armed with no sword, no electric shock, but mere Shad, armed only with innocence and a just cause . . . I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against the Billerica dam? . . . Who hears the fishes when they cry?

– Henry David Thoreau, *A Week*¹

The whole enterprise of this nation which is not an upward, but a westward one, toward Oregon, California, Japan &c, is totally devoid of interest to me, whether performed on foot or by a Pacific railroad. It is not illustrated by a thought, it is not warmed by a sentiment, there is nothing in it which one should lay down his life for, nor even his gloves, hardly which one should take up a newspaper for. It is perfectly heathenish—a filibustering toward heaven by the great western route. No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny which I trust is not mine. May my 76 dollars whenever I get them help to carry me in the other direction . . . I would rather be a captive knight, and let them all pass by, than be free only to go whither they are bound. What end do they propose to themselves beyond Japan?

– Henry David Thoreau, from a letter to H.G.O. Blake, 27 February 1853²

In Thoreauvian studies, scholars have neglected *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). They have described it as the product of an immature period in Henry David Thoreau’s life, as an inferior text within his corpus, and as a disjointed, disappointing book.³ This relegation to an inferior position coincides with a lack of interest in *A Week* within the classroom.⁴ Teachers overwhelmingly concentrate on *Walden* as Thoreau’s most important text with “Civil Disobedience” a distant second, and this emphasis has largely silenced *A Week*

---

² Henry David Thoreau, Bradley P. Dean, and H. G. O. Blake, *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 82-83. Italics are present in the original text.
within the lecture halls. Furthermore, when they do address Thoreau’s writings, scholars generally do so from a literary, political, or environmental angle⁵ that underappreciates the religious ideas guiding and sustaining Thoreau’s thinking.⁶ This lack of interest in A Week and this non-religious approach to Thoreau’s corpus has generated a lacuna. This dissertation will help to fill the void by focusing on A Week as “Transcendental scripture writing,”⁷ which will help to disclose Thoreau as a serious religious thinker for his time and ours.

By reframing A Week as Transcendental scripture writing, this categorization begs the question concerning why Thoreau would want to offer a new religious perspective and what this religious perspective was challenging. This reframing implies that the religious context in which Thoreau was embedded was insufficient for him. In fact, Thoreau’s New England context had two disappointing components: (1) a subjugating Puritan religious heritage and (2) the nineteenth-century liberal religious hegemony of the Unitarian denomination. A Week challenges both of these religious elements.

His Puritan religious heritage perpetuated pernicious politico-theological assumptions—suppositions which scholars currently identify as the “Christian Doctrine of Discovery.”⁸ This

---


political, religious orientation supported European discovery of non-Christian territories with the intent of usurping the land for Christian nations while concomitantly subjugating, converting, or exterminating non-Christian Indigenous peoples. The values and concepts present in the Christian Doctrine of Discovery supported Puritanism in North America and found expression in the Indian wars during colonization and the later concept of “Manifest Destiny” in the 1840s, which promoted the belief that U.S. citizens had an unambiguous sacred destiny to extend from coast to coast to harness the North American continent for American purposes. To do so, however, Native American inhabitants had to be coerced to vacate their traditional homelands, so whites could gain access to natural resources while simultaneously making room for U.S. citizens to create new dwellings. *A Week* offered a new religious posture that undermined such sentiments supporting a religion of subjugation. Instead of supporting the attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples, Thoreau honored Native Americans in *A Week* through cultural solidarity with Indigenous peoples as he advocated incorporating Indigenous wisdom, values, and reverence for creation into white society.

The liberally religious Unitarians, on the other hand, had decidedly broken with the Calvinist assumptions guiding New England’s religious sensibilities. They were initially recognized as “liberal Christians” during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century. While the orthodox Calvinists and liberal Christians remained united in one Christian family through the 1700s, the nineteenth century led to a rupture in New England’s religious and political life. For thirty years from 1805 to 1835, the liberal Christians grew in prominence in Boston and Thoreau’s hometown of Concord, and they struggled for

---

control of Harvard College, the local congregations, and the judiciary. Eventually, they came to be known pejoratively as Unitarians who offered a liberal religious perspective valuing human dignity over human sinfulness, the oneness of God over the Trinity, and the use of reason and tolerance in religious matters over creeds and intolerance.\(^9\) Despite this liberalness, however, Unitarianism became the new religious orthodoxy in which Thoreau matured as a young man. He was baptized Unitarian; he attended a Unitarian Sunday school, he graduated from the Unitarian-controlled Harvard College, and he was buried in a Unitarian cemetery. But *A Week* was a strong pronouncement of a different religious sensibility. Unlike the Unitarian orthodoxy in the 1830s and 1840s that emphasized Christianity as the pinnacle of religion, *A Week* turned away from institutional Christianity as a local manifestation of religion deleteriously distancing people from the divine. Unlike Unitarians who still valued the Bible as an authoritative text, Thoreau turned to the natural world and personal experience as authentic, authoritative elements of the religious life. Similarly, unlike Unitarians who emphasized religion within the walls of an anthropogenic religious structure, Thoreau placed the person within the natural world to commune with plants, wildlife, rivers, and mountains to allow the human and nonhuman worlds to reverence the sacred together and to honor the continual processes of creation. *A Week*, therefore, offered a form of nature religion that honored the sacredness of the created order that was an alternative to the conservative and liberal Christianities sustaining New England’s religiosity.

This means that as Transcendental scripture writing, *A Week* was a counter-hegemonic text for the time. By challenging the Puritan religious heritage and its perpetuation of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, Thoreau was arguing for a politico-theological posture not informed by a desire to subjugate others. Against the Unitarian emphasis on tolerance in matters of Christianity, Thoreau advocated a pluralistic posture that moved beyond tolerance to active solidarity with and cultivation of marginalized religious sensibilities. Thoreau’s counter-hegemonic position, then, is articulated most clearly by Edward F. Mooney’s concept of “preservative care,” which emphasizes a compassionate, empathetic, and sympathetic orientation toward otherness that, ideally, allows for an intimate encounter focused on a supportive cultivation of the best in the other with reverence for the other’s singularity.  

This means that in *A Week*, Thoreau offers a religion of preservative care that seeks to protect and nurture the divine impulse in all creation; he seeks to preserve the regenerative energy in all he encounters.

This is also the side of Thoreau’s religious thinking that is oriented toward civil disobedience. He is unconcerned with consensus or the generation of homogeneity in matters of religion. Instead, he knows that creation and the creative processes sustaining existence necessitate diversity. Any aspect of society subjugating this diversity is working against the processes of creation or the Law of Regeneration—what Thoreau also called a “higher law” or the perpetual, creative unfolding of nature and the interconnected, interdependent, dynamic quality of all existence. To the extent that society or another person restrains or attempts to

---


The Law of Regeneration, each person has a right to resist. Rightly attuned in daily life, a person hears the call of conscience, which is an intuitive awareness of the reality of the higher law organizing and sustaining creation. One should follow one’s conscience and not the consensus of one’s society. The Law of Regeneration and one’s conscience supersede the Constitution and state laws, which means that to be religious is also to take part in civil disobedience and liberation—not conformity and constraint.

This has important implications for today’s religious dialogues concerning the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, especially in the Unitarian Universalist denomination. This tradition was created in 1961 with the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. This newly formed liberal religious tradition recently passed a resolution at the 2012 General Assembly to denounce the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. Since Thoreau is part of the tradition’s liberal religious heritage, it begs the question concerning how he can offer support for the denomination’s denunciation. As A Week points to healing broken human and nonhuman relations and cultivating just conditions for existence, Thoreau indicates a restorative justice component in religion. As he emphasizes the inherent sacredness of the natural world, Thoreau brings a bioregional awareness to religion. As Thoreau concentrates on past wrongs, on the values and societal formations leading to violence, and on an alternative path leading to sustained peace, Thoreau orients religion toward conflict transformation. These components should lead to a new theological trajectory within the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Thoreau’s text prods the tradition to take an active theological position focused on solidarity with the oppressed. He is also urging a non-anthropocentric religion where humans and nonhumans are persons worshipping the divine together. This means reassessing and possibly abandoning the Christian theology that is simultaneously anthropocentric in orientation and otherworldly in
focus. More specifically, this means a critical reexamination of William Ellery Channing’s theological influence within the denomination and the limits of this leading Unitarian figure’s ideas as they foster theological presuppositions supportive of a subjugating religious posture. What *A Week* supports is the abandonment of anthropocentric, otherworldly religious thinking for an environmentally grounded religious posture that is bioregionally oriented and politically aligned with the marginalized to cultivate sustained peace within human and nonhuman existence.

To elaborate this argument, the rest of this dissertation will unfold in five chapters.

Chapter One’s objective is to orient the reader to understand Thoreau as an organic intellectual and his compositions as “Transcendental scripture writing,” which is one possible genre reclassification for Thoreau’s *A Week* suggested by Stephen Adams. To accomplish this, the chapter will explain Antonio Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual and his understanding of this role as a counter-hegemonic position. Following this, the chapter will turn to Transcendentalism as a counter-hegemonic religious movement resisting a growing Unitarian orthodoxy. As Thoreau identified himself as a Transcendentalist, this will place him within the context of religious resistance as the Transcendentalists tried to provide an alternative viable religious way of being in the world. Thoreau’s writings, then, are part of a counter-hegemonic process, but he chose a novel way of viewing his writing audience. He was writing for the gods; in other words, his texts were primarily gifts to the gods, so his readers had to work hard to engage this sacred message as he challenged the status quo of his New England religious context to force readers to a new, better self. To see Thoreau, however, only through this limited role as a religious writer would be to reduce his influence as a religious figure in nineteenth-century Massachusetts. Thoreau did not only write about religious matters; he also tried to exemplify his

---

religious insights through his life. This is clearest through his role as a religious leader with his “disciple” H. G. O. Blake. I will examine Thoreau’s relationship with Blake and the letters he sent to Blake to disclose how Thoreau was a transformative influence on his religious life. Next, following the work of Phyllida Anne Kent, the chapter will turn back to the text of *A Week* to disclose how Thoreau wrote his book to manifest the qualities of the divine in each day, which means that he not only wrote a book as a gift for the gods but as a way of revealing what the divine qualities are for the reader. I will conclude this chapter by turning to his close friend Amos Bronson Alcott who identified each of these aspects of *A Week* in his journal entries concerning Thoreau’s text, which means the description I am proposing already existed among his closest friends as they saw Thoreau as a counter-hegemonic religious figure and writer aligning himself with the natural world and Indigenous peoples.

Chapter Two’s goal is to address the religious heritage against which Thoreau was struggling, which is what I call a “religion of subjugation.” The basis of this subjugating religious posture is grounded in the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. Primarily following the work of Robert J. Miller and Steven T. Newcomb, the chapter goes into significant detail about the emergence of this Christian politico-theological position through European exploration, but it does not stop there as it seeks to show its influence on New England colonization, life, and religion. This is accomplished primarily by addressing what New England was like prior to settlement; by addressing Puritan settlement, the underlying Calvinist theological presuppositions, and the consequences this had for Natives Americans and the environment in the region; and by addressing how this culminated in a religion of subjugation for all involved, which includes the Euro-American population. In other words, Thoreau not only addressed the

---

harmful effects of this religious posture on Native Americans and the natural world, but he also disclosed how a religion of subjugation negatively influenced the people who assumed such a religious posture toward the world; it diminished their relationships with Indigenous peoples, the environment, and other Euro-American settlers. The conclusion is that Thoreau is identifying a Christian dystopia in New England based on the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, its values, and theological ideas, which did not have to exist; there was an alternative way of being. As a counter-hegemonic text, *A Week* resisted the leading ideas sustaining this Christian dystopia by offering a novel way for thinking and being religious based on intimate encounters with the natural world and the incorporation of Indigenous values and wisdom into white society.

Chapter Three’s objective is to describe Thoreau’s religious alternative, which is based on his life-long immersion in the natural world and the healing quality of these encounters. With Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley, and Edward F. Mooney and Lyman F. Mower in mind, the chapter describes Thoreau’s encounters with the natural world and the “evental” quality of his relationship with his local environment; the natural world placed a “demand” on Thoreau, and he responded to that demand by steadfastly orienting his life around the regenerative processes in the natural world. These regenerative processes he called “the wild” or “wildness,” and he believed that such a condition should be revered and nurtured not only in the natural world but also in human cultures. Thoreau chose to articulate this wildness through the trope of the river and its flows; this constitutes his “ontology of flows.” As a religion of subjugation attempts to erect dams or to create constraints, Thoreau’s religious approach esteemsthe flows of creation as he seeks to preserve the dynamic processes of creation in human and nonhuman existence. This

preservative posture, I conclude, is at once pluralistic, focused on solidarity with all that is 
subjugated in an attempt to protect the best in those marginalized beings, and entails a readiness 
to support the qualities of creation through acts of civil disobedience, which means Thoreau’s 
religious posture is directly political as it seeks to liberate the regenerative processes of creation 
in all existence from unjust constraints.

The interesting aspect of *A Week* is that Thoreau did not just present the reader with an 
alternative religious view; instead, he used a narrative structure that allows the reader to discern 
practices that can sustain his pluralistic posture. Inspired by the work of Jane Bennett,\(^\text{15}\) Chapter 
Four describes these practices as themes present in *A Week* that one can incorporate to lead a 
qualitatively better life consonant with Thoreau’s values and worldview. The chapter identifies 
eight practices or orientations, which is not an exhaustive list but a mere beginning. The 
following aspects constitute this list: (1) life as a pilgrimage or quest, (2) labor as a spiritualizing, 
naturalizing process, (3) living a purely sensuous life, (4) cultivating a separate intention of the 
eye and uncommon sense, (5) withdrawing and embracing solitude and silence, (6) taking part in 
natural Sabbaths, (7) cultivating wildness in one’s society through acts of civil disobedience, and 
(8) allowing the anarchic component of civil disobedience to enter one’s friendships to help 
preserve what is best in one’s friends. This list, however, should not be taken as authoritative or 
as the only way to live. These practices are suggestions from Thoreau’s life; they offer ways of 
being that worked for him, but he does not expect them to resonate with all readers. Each reader 
needs to figure out if they are viable options; if not, they should be abandoned. Yet one thing is 
clear for Thoreau: Each person needs to find ways to rebind herself or himself to the divine 
permeating and sustaining all creation. Until people find a way to nurture possibility, buoyancy,

freedom, flexibility, and variety in their own lives and in everything they encounter, they are not honoring the divine. Whatever practices will allow this in each particular situation, the person should choose them if they fit the person’s character and do not violate one’s conscience.

The final chapter’s objective is to bring Thoreau’s ideas into the present by addressing three components: restorative justice, bioregional-ecological sensitivity, and conflict transformation. To gain traction, I embed these aspects within the current discussions concerning the Christian Doctrine of Discovery within liberal religion, namely, within the Unitarian Universalist tradition. As this tradition esteems Thoreau as part of its heritage and as it has recently denounced the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, the chapter offers a concrete assessment of how these three components can lead to a rethinking of the liberal religious heritage in a way that will allow people within that lineage to move beyond denunciations to theological options that will help to sustain new liberative actions informed by new values. After showing how Thoreau’s pluralistic religious outlook includes restorative justice as outlined by Howard Zehr, bioregional-ecological sensitivity, and conflict transformation as described by John Paul Lederach, the chapter addresses specific aspects within Unitarian Universalism that need to change. It suggests abandoning pernicious aspects in its humanist tradition that will allow its members to think in non-anthropocentric terms, which will allow them to reverence and worship with the nonhuman world around them. It suggests reexamining and deconstructing the use of theological positions that support a distant, otherworldly God, which emphasizes reexamining William Ellery Channing and his continuing influence within the denomination. Lastly, it suggests explicitly including a theological assertion that addresses the trajectory of the denomination based on solidarity with all oppressed persons—human and nonhuman alike. Until

they make such alterations and seek a bioregionally oriented religious posture, it will be hard to move beyond the contentment and loquacity of denunciation to the altered values and praxis that this resistance necessitates. Through such conscious transformations and fidelity to new ways of thinking and being, Unitarian Universalists will be able to act more in concert with Indigenous values. While this chapter offers a very small beginning in the process of trying to be healing agents in a long legacy of environmental destruction and genocidal actions against Native Americans, it is the next needed step in this process of healing.

The upshot of this study is that it places the Christian Doctrine of Discovery in the foreground as a new interpretive lens for rereading Thoreau’s corpus. If Americans envision Thoreau as an American icon and a contributor to American identity, then this repositioning demands a different way of being American; it calls for a new non-oppressive national identity faithful to liberating all existence. By placing Thoreau within this context as a religious thinker, it also allows readers to see how the religious heritage that has gone into cultivating an American ethos is unhealthy not only for Native Americans and the natural world but for all involved—meaning the dominant white culture.

There is no doubt that Thoreau had blind spots, prejudices, and ways of thinking that may be hard to embrace today, but one thing is clear: He abhorred the violence and destruction brought upon all human and nonhuman existence because of politico-religious ideas diminishing the importance of certain aspects of creation. If anything should be clear by the end of this dissertation, it is this: Americans—who claim to live in one of the most religious nations on Earth—need to rethink what it means to be religious in order to lessen the maltreatment and disparagement traditional American religious sentiments have caused throughout colonization, the founding of the United States, and the country’s continued existence into the present.
Thoreau’s writings provide a viable, alternative way of being religious that poses a serious challenge to the consequences of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and all forms of a religion of subjection.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\) It is easy to see Thoreau’s relevance, for example, when we look at his influence on Gandhi’s religious, political outlook. See George Hendrick, “The Influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s Satyagraha,” The New England Quarterly 29, no. 4 (1956): 462-71.
CHAPTER ONE

THOREAU AND A WEEK:
ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL AND TRANSCENDENTAL SCRIPTURE WRITING

The fact is I am a mystic—a transcendentalist—and a natural philosopher to boot.

– Henry David Thoreau, 5 March 1853

Soon he was accepted into the loose circle of reformers and intellectuals who composed the “Hedge Club,” a group notable enough to attract public attention and a name: the “Transcendentalists.” Thoreau’s allegiance to the new philosophy was immediate and total, and the ideas he first encountered in 1837 shaped his thought for over ten years.

– Laura Dassow Walls, Seeing New Worlds

What has made Thoreau so interesting to me has been the fact that, accepting the ideas of Transcendentalism, he tested them by living them out in their practical issue. Thus, it seems to me that he can tell us better than any of his contemporaries what it meant to live a transcendental life.

– Sherman Paul, The Shores of America

Introduction

This chapter seeks to answer one question: What are the conditions that allow us to define A Week as “Transcendental scripture writing”? To answer this question, I begin with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “organic intellectual” to redefine Thoreau and his role within New England’s Transcendentalist movement. Examination of this concept leads to a description of “Transcendentalism” and what it meant to be a “Transcendentalist.” Following this explication will be an examination of why one would describe Thoreau as an organic intellectual within the

---

movement and in what ways he thought of himself as a religious figure. The last task will be an examination of Thoreau’s *A Week* for supporting evidence that buttresses this reasoning. With these parts of the argument in place, the conclusion will be evident: Thoreau was an organic intellectual within the Transcendentalist religious movement, and he sought to disseminate a version of the group’s religious ideas through *A Week* to awaken those contemporaneous with him and to awaken future generations to the value of the group’s religious insights.\(^5\)

In the chapters that follow, this reframing of Thoreau as an organic intellectual and *A Week* as Transcendental scripture writing will allow for a sustained examination of Thoreau’s concept of religion in his first book. Instead of concentrating on Thoreau as a wordsmith and creator of classic texts in American literature or only as a propagator of civil disobedience and political dissent, the argument for Thoreau as a religious thinker adds texture to these views while foregrounding the importance of religion and religious practices for Thoreau. By identifying him as an organic intellectual and as a religious thinker and by identifying *A Week* as Transcendental scripture writing, one can begin to see how he displaces the concept of religion by taking it beyond institutions, creeds, and dogmas as he resituates religion outdoors and aligns it with nature. In doing so, Thoreau aligns the concept of religion with Indigenous cultures making it a site for solidarity with the oppressed. Thoreau does not base religion on power and institutional authority; instead, he founds it on what society has excluded and debased: Native Americans and the natural environment. To do so, however, Thoreau focuses on the personal aspects of religious experience, and this repositions religion in a pluralistic realm as each person is to connect directly with the divine. This allows him to argue for religious freedom for all people as he turns religion into a site of healing, conflict transformation, and sustained peace.

---

\(^5\) For more on Thoreau’s goal of awakening himself, his readers, and society, see Bingham, *Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination*, 100-02.
Without reframing Thoreau as a religious thinker and without reexamining his texts as religious artifacts originating from within the Transcendentalist movement, Thoreau’s understanding of religion in *A Week* would remain mostly obscured.

**A Guiding Trope: Gramsci’s “Organic Intellectual”**

“Organic intellectual” is a concept found in the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) who was an Italian Marxist theorist. He helped to establish the Italian Communist Party; he was an active participant and leader of the workers’ resistance movement in Turin, Italy; and he was a severe critic of Benito Mussolini and Italian fascism. Gramsci based his theoretical insights and analyses on lived experiences and his practical roles as a political journalist and activist; everyday concerns, theory, and practice intersected in Gramsci’s life and thought. Because of his resistance to Mussolini and fascism, Gramsci was arrested on 8 November 1926 and remained imprisoned until his sentence ended on 21 April 1937. He died six days later from a cerebral hemorrhage.

During his imprisonment, Gramsci penned his famous *Prison Notebooks*, a collection of posthumously published writings on various cultural, social, religious, and political topics. From this text, scholars have gleaned theoretical and methodological insights and have deployed them in fields ranging from cultural studies and history to politics and visual studies. Gramsci’s writings have become a useful source for concepts that support analyses in the overlapping realms of culture, politics, and society. As his theoretical insights have supported critical

---

examinations in other fields on various topics, Gramsci’s concept of the “organic intellectual” as a counter-hegemonic figure will help to examine and elucidate Thoreau’s position as a religious thinker struggling for cultural, political, and religious transformations in nineteenth-century America.\(^9\)

This reformulation of Thoreau through Gramsci’s organic intellectual is based on Cornel West’s descriptions of Ralph Waldo Emerson as an organic intellectual and the American pragmatist tradition being composed of organic intellectuals who participate “in the life of the mind who revel in ideas and relate ideas to action by means of creating, constituting, or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes.”\(^10\) West locates the error in many interpretations of Emerson in their failure to see him as an organic intellectual: “Yet they do not go far enough; that is, they do not examine the role and function of Emerson as an organic intellectual primarily preoccupied with the crisis of a moribund religious tradition, a nascent industrial order, and, most important, a postcolonial and imperialist nation unsure of itself and unsettled about its future.”\(^11\) West deploys the leitmotif of an organic intellectual in his novel concept concluding his study on American pragmatism, which he calls “prophetic pragmatism.”\(^12\) He describes the political and religious nature of prophetic pragmatism based on the role of an organic intellectual: “This political dimension of prophetic pragmatism as practiced within the Christian tradition impels one to be an organic intellectual, that is one who revels in the life of the mind yet relates ideas to collective praxis.”\(^13\) This alternative description of Emerson as an organic intellectual allows West to argue for elements of Emerson’s life and

\(^9\) In a similar way, Shawn Chandler Bingham has identified Thoreau as a “public intellectual.” He has also pointed out that Thoreau and Gramsci had similar concerns Bingham, *Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination*, 101, 13.  
writings other scholars have overlooked; it also allows him to generate a new concept that has been a recurring theme in his philosophical and theological writings.

By analogy, this chapter uses West’s alternative view but applies it to Thoreau. As Emerson was Thoreau’s close friend, mentor, and inspiration for a good portion of Thoreau’s early adult life and as both of them identified themselves as Transcendentalists, the application of the interpretive lens of the organic intellectual to Thoreau is appropriate. A difference from West’s interpretive framework arises because in this chapter the concept of an organic intellectual will be used to situate and explicate Thoreau’s position within New England’s Transcendentalist movement but not within the American pragmatist tradition and its evasion of philosophy as West emphasizes.

In developing the concept “organic intellectual” that West would deploy in his own study of Emerson and the pragmatists, Gramsci also developed the symbiotic concept “hegemony,” which is an admixture produced by the confluence of ideas ranging from the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, Karl Marx, Benedetto Croce, Vladimir Ilich Lenin to Gramsci’s linguistic studies and the contemporary uses of the term in Italian socialist newspapers. The historical moment and its struggles guided Gramsci’s deployment of the concept and its nuances as he tried to

---


Against common sense, the counter-hegemonic intellectual tries to cultivate “good sense,” which is a well-developed philosophical view of the world that seeks the spontaneous consent of the hearers and leads to transformational actions and sustains political change.\footnote{For Gramsci, the study of intellectuals, both traditional and organic, is an important part of his political writings. Intellectuals, for Gramsci, are always political as they maintain hegemony or are part of a counter-hegemonic process. Landy, “Culture and Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci,” 53.} This educational process cultivates “an intellectual and moral reformation.”\footnote{Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 395. Fulton, “Religion and Politics in Gramsci,” 199. The role of education is central to Gramsci’s theoretical outlook. Landy, “Culture and Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci,” 66. The reason intellectuals became so important for Gramsci is that he had to address how to motivate and transform the apathy he encountered. The intellectual could transform this apathy and motivate people to transformational actions. Bates, “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,” 354-61. Landy, “Culture and Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci,” 55. Gramsci argues that all education and knowledge is political as it shapes the people and the discourses that will shape civil society and its functioning. Boone W. Shear, “Gramsci, Intellectuals, and Academic Practice Today,” Rethinking Marxism 20, no. 1 (2008): 64-65.} It is here that we can see the place of rhetoric in Gramsci’s conception of hegemony as he seeks to persuade people to accept his articulated “philosophy of praxis” or socialist outlook.\footnote{Fontana, “The Democratic Philosopher,” 97-123.} Gramsci is addressing how to win consent that addresses both the audience’s feelings and a deeper awareness and analysis of
the socio-historical context in which the language is used. As with the rhetorical situation as discerned in rhetorical studies, Gramsci’s counter-hegemonic speaker stands in a position of “intellectual and moral leadership” in the attempt to guide the people in their common historical, geographical, economic, and political circumstances.

Ethos enters Gramsci’s counter-hegemonic practice at this point. Within a specific historical context, the counter-hegemonic figure needs to understand the context in which his or her language takes shape and the hearers who will judge not only his or her message but also the speaker’s moral leadership and credibility. Contra the rhetorical tradition that does not celebrate truth, Gramsci envisioned the rhetorical features of his counter-hegemony as possessing a particularity that could expand in scope into a more universal position, that is, a common concern that transcends local concerns. Instead of stopping with the purely skeptical position within rhetoric based on the locality and specificity of a particular language, its tropes, and commonplace ideas, Gramsci incorporates a Platonic element into his counter-hegemonic view that concentrates on a quality within the counter-hegemonic articulation that can go beyond particularities and skepticism.

Gramsci’s achievement is his ability to productively hold in tension the nuanced meanings of the Greek term logos, which means “speech and language” at a particular place and time but also reason and “trans-national knowledge” at a more universal level. In this way, and through the rhetorical heritage from Greece, Gramsci is able to think dialectically about the

---

25 Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 418-19. Jones, Antonio Gramsci, 55. This places Gramsci’s concept of hegemony within the realm of rhetoric and its persistent concern with the interdependence between speaker and audience.


27 Gramsci bases this on the theological emphasis on original sin; he thought this emphasized the personal to the detriment of a more social concern and awareness. Fulton, “Religion and Politics in Gramsci,” 201-02. For Gramsci, all concerns returned to history; a supposed ahistorical account of an essential human trait (sinfulness and a fallen nature) was absurd to Gramsci. Also see Fontana, “The Democratic Philosopher: Rhetoric as Hegemony in Gramsci,” 98. This more universal concern is similar to the Transcendentalist outlook. See Alan D. Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 141.
particular and the universal in order to effect social transformation.\(^\text{28}\) Counter-hegemony allows Gramsci to pay attention to local conflicts and interests while asserting something more universal and more pertinent to the interests of people beyond the site of the counter-hegemonic struggle.\(^\text{29}\)

It is in this use of persuasion and leadership that the Greek root of hegemony becomes clear,\(^\text{30}\) for the Greek root of hegemony is \(\text{hēgemonia}\), which arises from a Greek noun and verb, that is, \(\text{hēgemōn}\) and \(\text{hēgeisthai}\), respectively. The first refers to a leader, and the second refers to leading; using this terminology in \textit{Politics}, Aristotle focused on leadership in opposition to despotism, and he advocated ruling that focused on the needs of the people with the intent to make them self-governing.\(^\text{31}\) In this way, the Greeks were to be self-governing, and their political organization would come into contact with other political entities. They would enter into relations where one state would guide and win the consent of another state. They would be “mutually consenting states” or “consenting allies” avoiding “domination and coercion.”\(^\text{32}\)

This winning of consent occurs as part of the continuous internal struggle in society between various sites of hegemony and counter-hegemony.\(^\text{33}\) In these contested realms, organic intellectuals wage a battle to awaken people to different ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting that reveal how one group’s struggle actually has common concerns with larger national and global communities. The organic intellectual does not seek to gain a new world through warfare;


\(^{29}\) Fontana, “The Democratic Philosopher,” 98.

\(^{30}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{31}\) Aristotle sets this opposition within the slave-master binary. Fontana, “Logos and Kratos,” 315-16. Raymond Williams describes how hegemony in Gramsci concentrates on consent, yet he also argues that even in its original usage, hegemony lacked the necessary link with imperialism that emerged later. See Raymond Williams, “Hegemony,” in \textit{Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 144-46.


instead, she or he seeks to win an oppressed group and the larger community over to her or his position through analysis and persuasion, or counter-hegemony.

This organic intellectual is different from other intellectuals.34 Based on his Italian context, Gramsci sets them against priests and traditional intellectuals. Organic intellectuals emerge within a specific group and realize the specificity of their concerns or the political nature of their emergence, but the traditional intellectuals are professional scholars and ecclesiastical figures. Traditional intellectuals forget how they arose from, and are still connected to, certain class configurations and interests; in their comfortable status, they have forgotten the historicity of their emergence as part of a leading group within society.35 Against this forgetfulness, organic intellectuals are aware of their historicity, and they seek to struggle against and undermine the domination of the state and the consent previously won and maintained in civil society.36

The organic intellectual as a counter-hegemonic figure ideally takes on a prophetic role as a leader of an organizing group who seeks to remake society in order to make it more egalitarian and aware of interests that cut across social and national boundaries. Organic intellectuals seek to offer a critique of the status quo that addresses the specific needs of a local community and the interests of others at the national and international levels. Through critique and persuasion, organic intellectuals seek to transform the daily life of people and the larger social logic that allows for domination and oppression, and this can occur because of Gramsci’s positive view of humanity, namely, all people have intellectual capability and philosophize about the world. The organic intellectual, then, can target this capacity in a more systematic way to

34 Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 82-93.
36 We can imagine Thoreau, then, as a counter-hegemonic figure struggling against what Gramsci terms the “religion of the people,” which are the “beliefs, morals, and practices” of the people in New England. Thoreau is challenging the assumptions that New Englanders used “naturally” each and everyday. They both are combating “common sense” (“common consciousness” or the “commonality of experience”), which is associated with habit, custom, and unreflective interactions with others and one’s environs. Gramsci and Thoreau point to “common sense” as a naïve spontaneity leading to conformity and uncritical living. See Fulton, “Religion and Politics in Gramsci,” 203-06. Landy, “Culture and Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci,” 57-58.
address each person’s capability to reach a level of autonomy within social relations, so the
person can spontaneously consent to the organic intellectual’s message, worldview, and
leadership. In this way, the organic intellectual functions within a specific context and takes on a
certain oppositional role against the status quo to transform civil society. The organic
intellectual, in the end, is a leader in many spheres: politics, morality, philosophy, and culture.

Both oppressive and non-oppressive groups can create organic intellectuals however; an
organic intellectual is not necessarily a person against oppressive social structures. Gramsci
reveals how traditional intellectuals were once organic intellectuals who helped to secure the
assent of people to certain class interests; it is with this realization that he sees how oppression is
more than coercion or the threat of physical harm. With the idea of the intellectual and consent,
Gramsci reveals a concern for how the oppressed come to accept and sustain their own
oppression through the acceptance of certain forms of thought and social relations. The
important point in Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual, then, concerns the practical
component of the organic intellectual’s role. The organic intellectual engages not only in thought
but also in the practical processes of getting his or her ideas out to the larger world to engage
people within their everyday milieu to cultivate and transform their consciousness.

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an
exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in
practical life, as constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple
orator . . . One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing
towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer “ideologically” the
traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more
efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own
organic intellectuals.

37 Fulton, “Religion and Politics in Gramsci,” 204-05.
38 Landy, “Culture and Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci,” 55. This betrayal of their interests is also a concern for Enrique
40 Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 10.
What the organic intellectual is attempting to do, then, is to address the current hegemonic position and the ideologies that are in place, which traditional intellectuals have articulated and helped to establish and sustain from an apparently disinterested perspective. As the organic intellectual criticizes and assimilates some of their ideas and values, this process creates a bridge that leads to the organic intellectual’s articulation of new ideas, ways of life, and ways of thinking. Instead of leaving a vacuum or a void after deconstructing the hegemonic position, the organic intellectual, as a counter-hegemonic figure, fills in that space with an alternative critical awareness and vision that changes the horizon of expectation and what is possible for subaltern classes.

In Gramsci’s vision, the ideal organic intellectual is one who elaborates a “philosophy of praxis” or “Marxist praxis” where theory and practice merge gaining educated, critical acceptance for the betterment of society and each person. The ideal organic intellectual puts forth a Marxist understanding of the world that seeks both to persuade and to educate the people to make informed decisions, and their informed decisions will always lead to different views, interpretations, and new elaborations that alter aspects of the counter-hegemonic view. Yet, as this counter-hegemonic view wins greater assent, it becomes the new hegemony. But as the “philosophy of praxis,” Gramsci envisioned a more equalitarian society freer from the

---

41 Landy, “Culture and Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci,” 59, 62, 64.
45 Gramsci sought a liberating counter-hegemony marked by co-operation, inspiration, education, and conscious commitment from the people spontaneously. Fulton, “Religion and Politics in Gramsci,” 199.
domination and oppression capitalism had nurtured in Italy. Gramsci, therefore, took Marx’s "Theses on Feuerbach" seriously and holds a position harmonious with Marx’s eleventh thesis: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change the world.”

Gramsci and Thoreau held different positions on what a better society would look like, but both sought social change from current oppressive conditions, the awakening of the masses, and the use of persuasion and social critique. The most obvious upshot of this use of Gramsci’s theoretical apparatus is that it reminds the reader of the political nature of religion—especially for Thoreau. By using his theoretical formulation and drawing out its salient points, Gramsci’s ideas remind the reader that social movements or religious movements are political in nature. His ideas remind the reader to pay attention to the fact that while Thoreau wanted to cultivate a better self more in harmony with the natural world and one’s conscience, Thoreau also envisioned that self as a transformative agent within society. The Gramscian idea of the organic intellectual helps to erect a bridge that links the private realm of religion with the public sphere and the political and social consequences of religion. This forces the reader to address what counter-hegemonic conditions Thoreau was trying to create. There is another positive result, however, that comes with Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual’s counter-hegemonic struggles.

In his assessment of the limits of Gramsci’s social analyses and the political ideas in his article “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” Frank Wilderson addresses the conceptual limitations of Gramsci’s ideas for addressing “black invisibility and namelessness” within the capitalist framework in the West—especially in the United States. His argument is that Gramsci’s ideas are limited because they do not address the terror imposed on black bodies from slavery to the

---

current prison system in the United States. His argument is based on Gramsci’s struggle for hegemony within civil society. Wilderson claims that slaves are outside of civil society and cannot rightly contend for leadership and counter-hegemony because they are invisible excrements terrorized by the capitalist system. Capitalism, in Wilderson’s argument, was based on terrorized black bodies, and the worker’s struggle for equality in Marxist and Gramscian theories does not take into account this invisible aspect allowing capitalism to emerge and to exist. Marx and Gramsci fail to address race and the racial component in capitalism.

This criticism is important for this study because it redirects attention to the fact that Thoreau was a white male within U.S. civil society; his counter-hegemonic acts could occur because he was already within the structured world of democracy and freedom established by the U.S. Constitution and was represented by the American legal structure. In other words, Thoreau was counted as a person and represented by state and federal legislation. His counter-hegemony was possible because he was not an invisible being who was part of an excluded, terrorized community. While Wilderson concentrates on the slave, by analogy, this argument extends to the Native American body that similarly was excluded, maimed, and killed to help found the United States and to support a capitalist economy. What this does in terms of this dissertation’s argument is it reminds the reader that Thoreau was not speaking for, or attempting to speak for, Native Americans. He was struggling from a counter-hegemonic position as a white male, a graduate from Harvard College, and as a friend in a community with social prestige in Concord, Massachusetts. The cultural politics of his religious outlook valued Native American culture as he sought to remind white culture of its abuses of and hostility toward Indigenous peoples and nature, but Thoreau advocated a counter-hegemonic position that primarily would liberate the dominant white culture from its perceptual, political, and religious limitations, which would then
lead to more freedom and respect for Native Americans and also shift America’s consciousness toward environmental conservation.⁴⁸

This positioning is important because it helps to emphasize the separateness of Native American communities from the legal structure of the United States. This is significant because in early U.S. Indian policies, Indigenous peoples were given an autonomous standing beyond the framework of the U.S. government. Their communities were supposed to be autonomous nations not under the jurisdiction of the United States. The U.S. and the Indian nations were to be “brothers” who would not interfere with each other’s activities. Thoreau, as an organic intellectual who was participating in a counter-hegemonic struggle within U.S. civil society, addressed an audience primarily within the same civil society. He was not, and should never be seen as, a spokesperson for those de jure outside the control of, but affected by, U.S. law and culture.

Some scholars, especially Robert F. Sayre,⁴⁹ have argued that Thoreau romanticized Native Americans, but this view of Thoreau as an organic intellectual helps to challenge this argument and helps to distinguish Thoreau from other contemporaneous Transcendentalists, especially his close friend Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Thoreau wrote in his journal on 19 March 1842, “I find it good to remember the eternity behind me as well as the eternity before. Wherever I go I tread in the tracks of the Indian. I pick up the bolt which he has but just dropped at my feet. And if I consider destiny I am on his trail.”⁵⁰ In this passage and others, Thoreau indicates how Indigenous peoples existed before

---

⁴⁸ It can be argued that Thoreau was cognizant of the processes of “whiteness”; he saw how being “white” is an historical process that people learn in specific times and places. He is teaching readers in some way, then, how to undo their “whiteness.” For more on the learning process associated with being “white,” see Thandeka, Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1999).


British settlers arrived, but more importantly, Thoreau identifies with Native Americans because he sees within their culture positive relations with nature. As he argues in this passage, Thoreau aligns himself with Native Americans. Their destiny and his unite. This is not simply tolerance for an “other”; this is solidarity with the “other,” and this makes Thoreau a different religious thinker. As an organic intellectual, through “wildness” and “savageness,” Thoreau’s counter-hegemonic position deconstructed white culture and its myths to make room for solidarity with Native Americans and the natural environment.

When compared with Emerson, this approach is quite different. In his letter to President Martin Van Buren on 23 April 1838 criticizing Cherokee Removal, Emerson does not align himself with the Indigenous population and its culture; what is present is esteem for white culture and a vision of Native Americans as children in need of development:

Sir, my communication respects the sinister rumors that fill this part of the country concerning the Cherokee people. The interest always felt in the aboriginal population—an interest naturally growing as that decays—has been heightened in regard to this tribe. Even to our distant State, some good rumor of their worth and civility has arrived. We have learned with joy their improvement in social arts. We have read their newspapers. We have seen some of them in our schools and colleges. In common with the great body of the American People, we have witnessed with sympathy the painful endeavors of these red men to redeem their own race from the doom of eternal inferiority, and to borrow and domesticate in the tribe the inventions and customs of the Caucasian race.

What is immediately clear is that Emerson’s is not a position that values aspects of Indigenous culture; instead, the U.S. should preserve Indigenous peoples because of their ability to “improve” and to take on the qualities of the Caucasian race. In Emerson’s description, there is a clear devaluation of Native American cultures that places them in an inferior position. Civilizing Indigenous peoples is positive in Emerson’s eyes.

---

Thoreau as an organic intellectual within the Transcendentalist movement does not seek to domesticate Native Americans. His counter-hegemonic approach is to free whites to live in a way that values the contributions of Indigenous peoples. Thoreau, unlike Emerson, seeks to liberate whites from their cultural, political, and religious limitations to become more like the “other” whom white society had oppressed and attempted to exterminate. By using Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual as an interpretive lens, this realignment will become clearer throughout this dissertation, which makes this reassessment of Thoreau’s A Week so crucial. As Wilderson asserts, “[In Marxist and Gramscian analyses] the worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself.”

Similarly, through solidarity with Native Americans, Thoreau values Indigenous communities and sees how Indigenous bodies and history challenge the violent beginnings initiating and sustaining the “democratic” experiment of the United States, which was codified in the Constitution. Thoreau’s counter-hegemonic position raises questions about the legitimacy of America’s founding and its democratic experiment as he associates them with the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny.

Transcendentalism: A Counter-Hegemonic Movement

In nineteenth-century New England, a name emerged to identify a group of men and women with alternative religious ideas and values, ways of being, and social aims.

“Transcendentalist” is the name the group borrowed and adapted from Immanuel Kant’s philosophical terminology establishing a distinction between the “transcendental” or a priori

52 Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx” 231.
conditions for knowledge and experience and the “transcendent,” which Kant defined as being beyond knowledge and experience. In a January 1842 lecture at the Masonic Temple in Boston, Massachusetts, Emerson described New England’s Transcendentalism as “Idealism” and associated it with Kant’s philosophy:

It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day Transcendental.

The Transcendentalists established a philosophical position countering the hegemony of John Locke’s empirical, materialist philosophy in Calvinist and Unitarian circles. Those who called themselves Transcendentalists turned to Kant, largely received through the writings and interpretations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, because Kant provided a framework for intuitive insights that went beyond sense experience to a more universal truth. There was something beyond our sense experience that was universal and eternal in character.

---

54 Frank Shuffelton, “Puritanism,” in The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petruelionis, and Laura Dassow Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 38. It should be added here, however, that Kant was not the only German to influence the Transcendentalists. The German Idealist philosophy played an important role in Transcendentalist thinking, especially with the incorporation of the “Not-Me” into their writing, which is examined in Chapter Three of this dissertation. See Christopher Newfield, “Not-Me,” in Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 141-42.

55 Emerson, Essays and Lectures, 198-99.

56 Laura Dassow Walls places Transcendentalist resistance against John Locke, but also Dugald Stewart and William Paley. She acknowledges some overlap in ideas, but the Transcendentalists were going down an “Idealist” path instead of a “nominalist” or “realist” one. Walls, Seeing New Worlds, 16-24. Also see Bingham, Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination, 17-20. Cameron Thompson, “John Locke and New England Transcendentalism,” The New England Quarterly 35, no. 4 (1962): 435-57. I want to be clear that because I used the Marxist ideas of Antonio Gramsci, I am not asserting that Thoreau was a materialist philosopher. Thoreau was clearly more open to matter than other Transcendentalists, but he held onto his idealist leanings too in a way that allowed him to harmonize the two positions.

57 A. Robert Caponigri, “Individual, Civil Society, and State in American Transcendentalism,” in Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism, ed. Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1982), 542-44. There was one serious exception, Orestes Brownson. He gravitated toward eclecticism and thought the answer lay in synthesizing Kant’s idealism and Locke’s empiricism. See David M. Robinson, Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 12-15. I avoid using Brownson as a model for Transcendentalism because he was marginalized by leading
Such a belief led to Theodore Parker’s scandalous 1841 sermon called “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity”; it established the transient nature of Christian doctrines, polity, theology, and the many historical manifestations of Christianity in particular times and places—such as New England’s Calvinist and Unitarian Christianities: “In actual Christianity—that is, in that portion of Christianity which is preached and believed—there seems to have been, ever since the time of its earthly founder, two elements, the one transient, the other permanent. The one is the thought, the folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notions, the impiety of [humans]; the other, the eternal truth of God.” The Transcendentalists were seeking something beyond the confines of contexts, social organizations, and particular identities.

This something was an egalitarian, intuitive awareness of the divine present in all situations and all people—a divine force sustaining all life and all creation. The Transcendentalists were aware of how this positive valuation of universal, egalitarian intuition undermined unjust social constructs, such as race, class, and gender. Their Transcendental idealism, therefore, articulated a view of all people standing on equal ground spiritually with commensurate dignity before the divine.

This loose collection of people had various aims. First, they chose a specific philosophical position linked with the philosophy of Kant, but Kantian philosophy and other German philosophy entered the United States and the Transcendentalists’ thought through writers like Coleridge. This is an important point because the Transcendentalists also valued the writings of the British Romantics, which included not only Coleridge but also William Wordsworth. With this close association with British Romantics, scholarly writing on New Transcendentalists. Robinson classifies Emerson and Brownson as two formative influences on Transcendentalists, but Emerson and others saw him as too radical in his call for socialism and workers’ revolts.

England Transcendentalism often describes literary figures from this group as part of the flourishing of Romantic thought in the United States. What is also clear is the Transcendentalists were concerned with religious matters; they sought religious truths that were true for all people and all times, yet the Transcendentalists also discerned the intersection between religious truths and social reform, which led the Transcendentalists to support such politically-driven social reforms as abolition, educational reform, labor reform, and women’s rights. They not only wanted to reform local communities but what it meant to be a person living in the United States; their aim, then, was also national reform and the creation of a new national ethos in a postcolonial age. This means that the transformation of society and the nation were always important to the Transcendentalists and remained in the foreground of their religious thinking.61

The mixture of these descriptions has allowed scholars to define Transcendentalism as a literary, philosophical, religious, and social movement, or any combination of the above, as different scholars emphasize, include, exclude, and synthesize various facts, definitions, and interpretations.62 Yet, it is the religious dimension that remained central for these reformers and writers.63 The most coherent way to see this collection of people is as a religious movement in response to the limitations of New England’s orthodox Calvinism and orthodox Unitarianism. As New England’s Calvinists and Unitarians believed religion was essential for a strong, moral society, the Transcendentalists accepted this assumption, but just what religion should look like

was up for debate. In the Transcendentalists’ articulation of a new religious outlook, education, literature, politics, and society had to change. Their concern for literary, political, and social reform was an outgrowth of their religious revolt and reform.

One of the clearest ways to understand this Transcendentalist religious revolt is to place it in historical context within New England’s religious struggle for hegemony between orthodox Calvinists and the emerging liberal Christians, who eventually accepted the term “Unitarian” as their official name between 1815 and 1825. At the turn of the century, Christian hegemony in New England remained largely uncontested. The state-supported Congregational system in New England was the officially recognized form of Christianity established in 1648 in “The Cambridge Platform,” and this framework came to be called the “Standing Order.” This initially established who could belong to a congregation; it also established how the larger community of citizens, known as the parish, would acquire a minister, and it established a taxation system in support of the minister as a moral leader in society. In this way, religious and civic concerns became interconnected. At the start of the 1800s, both orthodox Calvinists and liberal Christians still maintained the long-standing tradition of pulpit exchanges. They saw themselves belonging to a broad Christian family. The Christian family extended to Harvard

---


College, which the Puritans established to educate and maintain a learned ministry. Both orthodox Calvinists and liberal Christians served together on the college’s boards and served as overseers to maintain the college’s proper functioning. Beginning in 1805, however, Harvard College had two vacant positions; one was the Hollis Professor of Divinity, which David Tappan, a moderate Calvinist had held before his death, and the second was the vacant position of the presidency of the college. The candidates elected to fill these positions were liberal in theology, and this precipitated the end of the Standing Order.

From 1805 to 1835, the orthodox Calvinists and liberal Christians battled each other for hegemony. During these years, the tradition of pulpit exchanges ended with the exclusion of liberal Christians from the pulpits of the orthodox Calvinists. With liberal control of Harvard College established, the orthodox Christians under Jedidiah Morse’s influence withdrew and established Andover Seminary in 1808 to support the teaching of proper Christian doctrines and to strengthen the bonds between proper Christians. Through the leadership of William Ellery Channing, the liberal Christians took on the once derogatory term “Unitarian” and resisted Calvinist theological doctrines with clarity and ardor.

Two moments signal this transition toward becoming “Unitarian” in name and abandoning the title “liberal Christian.” The first was Channing’s letter in 1815 to distinguish which form of Unitarianism they identified with. He placed New England’s Unitarianism within a larger Arian and Arminian theological position, which means that they saw Jesus as truly subordinate to God and not actually God. This was their renouncing of Trinitarian theology. This association allowed them to deny the relevance of Calvinism because of its pessimistic view of God and humanity. Humanity was not depraved, and God was a loving father—not a cruel

---

being predestining people to hell from birth. In his 1815 letter, Channing made it clear that the majority of Unitarians in New England did not belong to the British Unitarian position of Joseph Priestley, nor did they align themselves with the radical theological position of Faustus Socinus. Both denied the divinity of Jesus pointing to Jesus being a mere human. New England’s liberal Christians believed Jesus to be somewhere between God and humanity in stature.

The most important moment came when Channing preached “Unitarian Christianity” in Baltimore, Maryland in 1819. Channing clearly laid out the Unitarian theological position in an ordination sermon lasting about ninety minutes as he emphasized various points important to Unitarian identity, such as the valuation of reason in religion and biblical interpretation, the loving nature of a unified God, the separateness of Jesus from God, the morally elevated position of Jesus as a leader above common humanity, and the need for tolerance in matters of religion. Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity” became one of the most widely circulated and published sermons in United States religious history, and even leaders in England and continental Europe honored Channing’s theological articulation and character.

By 1815 and 1819, then, the liberal Christians were moving toward the formation of a new denomination, which they established in 1825: the American Unitarian Association. By this time, Unitarianism was the dominant position in and around Boston. Harriet Beecher Stowe described Boston during the period between 1826 and 1832:

Calvinism or Orthodoxy was the despised and persecuted form of faith. It was the dethroned royal family wandering like a permitted mendicant in the city where it once had held court, and Unitarianism reigned in its stead.

All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarian. All the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians. All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches. The judges on the bench were Unitarian, giving decisions by which the peculiar features of church organization, so carefully ordained by the Pilgrim Fathers, had been nullified. The church, as consisting, according to their belief, in

---

regenerate people, had been ignored, and all the power had passed into the hands of the congregation. This power had been used by the majorities to settle ministers of the fashionable and reigning type in many of the towns of Eastern Massachusetts. The dominant majority entered at once into possession of churches and church property, leaving the orthodox minority to go out into schoolhouses or town halls, and build their churches the best they could. Old foundations established by the Pilgrim Fathers for the perpetuation and teaching of their own views in theology were seized upon and appropriated to the support of opposing views. A fund given for preaching an annual lecture on the Trinity was employed for preaching an annual attack upon it, and the Hollis professorship of divinity at Cambridge was employed for the furnishing of a class of ministers whose sole distinctive idea was declared warfare with the ideas and intentions of the donor.\(^6^8\)

Stowe’s letter rightly indicates the growing control Unitarianism gained in and around Boston through the 1820s and 1830s.\(^6^9\) Unitarian congregations had more people with greater wealth, and the orthodox Calvinist congregations’ increasing membership was not from the wealthy ranks but from those migrating from the country to the city.\(^7^0\) A distinct class division was present. Within eastern Massachusetts, Unitarians increasingly became part of and gained control over the economic, political, and legislative aspects of society.

Control of Harvard College was the first step that allowed Unitarians to gain control over education and theological training, but Unitarians also gained control of the courts, which led to the loss of property for the Calvinists. The conflict over the First Church of Dedham is a landmark case because it allowed the Unitarians to maintain control of church property after orthodox Calvinists withdrew from the larger church community. The case began in 1818 and lasted until Chief Justice Isaac Parker delivered the court’s decision in February 1821. He gave control of the property to those members of the parish who remained connected to the church building and its property. Unitarian scholar Conrad Wright indicates how Parker’s decision was


slanted because of his allegiance to Unitarianism and his membership within the liberal Brattle Street Church:

Parker’s mind-set predisposed him to interpret the historical record in a way the orthodox properly protested, and which we in turn recognize as distorted beyond all belief. Part of the explanation may be that he was a member of the Brattle Street Church in Boston, which he offered as a happy example of the ecclesiology he favored . . . . The result was that when Parker encountered constitutional provisions, legislative enactments, and judicial precedents, he saw them through Brattle Street lenses.  

Wright concludes with a clear condemnation of the Unitarian misuse of power:

The line of argument Judge Parker adopted had surfaced in earlier litigation, but the Court had never accepted it; Parker must bear much blame for not rejecting it out of hand. The larger Unitarian community bears some responsibility for smugly accepting as law a position that many of them must have known full well was unsound as well as of baneful consequence.

It is unquestionable that allegiances and the webs of power in and around Boston had shifted into Unitarian hands.

Stowe’s position coincides with Channing’s interpretation of Unitarianism in the 1830s. He came to define the phenomenon as “Unitarian Orthodoxy,” and Channing articulately explained this problem in a letter on 10 September 1841 to his friend, Rev. James Martineau, who was a minister in Liverpool, England:

Old Unitarianism must undergo important modifications or developments. Thus I have felt for years. Though an advance on previous systems, and bearing some better fruits, it does not work deeply, it does not strike living springs in the soul. This is perfectly consistent with the profound piety of individuals of the body. But it cannot quicken and regenerate the world. No matter how reasonable it may be, if it is without power. Its history is singular. It began as a protest against the rejection of reason,—against mental slavery. It pledged itself to progress, as its life and end; but it has gradually grown stationary, and now we have a Unitarian Orthodoxy. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at or deplored, for all reforming bodies seem doomed to stop, in order to keep the ground, much or little, which they have gained. They become conservative, and out of them must

spring new reformers, to be persecuted generally by the old. With these views, I watch all new movements with great interest.\textsuperscript{73}

Channing’s letter emphasizes many important historical points about Unitarianism in New England. First, through its establishment as a separate denomination in 1825 and through the formal governing body of the American Unitarian Association, Unitarianism had come to mean something quite different from its early theological dissenting position. By the 1830s, the denominational apparatus was actively engaged in social reform and mission movements within and outside of the United States. Through its emphasis on reason and the dignity of humanity, Unitarianism aligned itself with the merchants in Boston and the intelligentsia shaping America’s literary tradition. Channing was one of these leading intellectuals as his writings took on literary prestige—especially in the United Kingdom. As the tradition grew more powerful socially and politically, Unitarianism gradually became exclusionary in its tactics. As he deplored exclusion in matters of religion, Channing was unhappy with the growth of “Unitarian Orthodoxy.” He remained an old-school Unitarian resistant to the constraints of the new denominational apparatus. Channing was disappointed with the denomination’s movement from its previous liberal religious posture.

What is also telling is how Channing speaks of new reform movements springing from the old; here he is indicating his awareness of and attention to the counter-hegemonic religious movement of Transcendentalism. Channing would never accept the new reformers coming out of Unitarianism, for they were too radical in their religious outlook, which allowed several of them to undermine the centrality of Christianity and to move beyond Christianity as Channing

understood it.\textsuperscript{74} Sadly, this left him in a liminal position as he remained too liberal for the new orthodox Unitarianism but too conservative to take part in the Transcendentalist revolt.\textsuperscript{75} Within this context, and right at the end of the thirty-year struggle between the orthodox and the liberals, the new counter-hegemonic religious movement of Transcendentalism strongly emerged in 1836.

There were earlier rumblings and seismic shifts within Unitarianism that foreshadowed the more sustained, organized struggles against Unitarian orthodoxy that occurred in and after 1836. The first Transcendentalists had been or were Unitarian ministers. The four “founding” Transcendentalists were Emerson, Frederic Henry Hedge, George Putnam, and George Ripley.\textsuperscript{76} They could broadly agree with the orientation of the Unitarian denomination. For example, rejection of the Trinity was congenial because it lowered the status of Jesus within the Christian tradition and made it more possible for humanity to come closer to the life and example of Jesus. Unitarians and Transcendentalists alike did not value exclusion in religion; both wanted more tolerance and inclusion. Both held a higher view of humanity compared to traditional Calvinist theology that emphasized original sin, predestination, and hell. Both Unitarians and Transcendentalists emphasized human dignity and the ability of humanity to work toward their own salvation, which is clearest in Channing’s emphasis on the religious nature and effects of “self-culture” and Emerson’s leading idea of “self-reliance.”\textsuperscript{77}

---

\textsuperscript{74} See Channing’s letters from 6 July 1841 to August 1841 concerning Theodore Parker, belief in Christian miracles, and the repugnant nature of Transcendentalism. Channing and Channing, The Life of William Ellery Channing, 449-54.

\textsuperscript{75} Arthur I. Ladu, “Channing and Transcendentalism,” American Literature 11, no. 2 (1939): 129-37.


Underneath this agreement, however, the storms of dissent were forming and showed themselves in an abridged form on 9 September 1832 when Emerson resigned his pulpit and preached his final sermon at the Second Church in Boston, which has come to be entitled the “Lord’s Supper Sermon.”

Emerson had been unhappy with administering the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper; he had discussed the issue with his congregation and could no longer take part in the religious ceremony. He resigned as minister and spoke about the nature of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. Before laying out in clear detail the theological and historical evidence for denying the ceremony, Emerson preached, “Having recently paid particular attention to this subject, I was led to the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples; and further to the opinion that it is not expedient to celebrate it as we do.”

Since the orthodox position went against his conscience, Emerson could no longer maintain his position within the Unitarian Church. The Lord’s Supper is a transient component of Christianity, not part of its universal, eternal truth.

Close to the end of his sermon, Emerson described the nature of Christianity for the last time before his congregation when he said, “Freedom is the essence of Christianity.” Not only should Christianity, and religion in general, nurture freedom, Christianity should not sustain outdated modes or worship, transient customs, and problematic theological positions. For Emerson, Christianity, and religion in general, is about living life with principle, morality, and in accordance with one’s conscience, not the dictates of an institution. The antinomian trajectory that would later manifest itself in Transcendentalism as a whole and in Thoreau’s writings is clearly present in this sermon:

---

80 Ibid., 76.
If I understand the distinction of Christianity, the reason why it is to be preferred over all other systems and is divine is this, that it is a moral system; that it presents men with truths which are their own reason, and enjoins practices that are their own justification; that if miracles may be said to have been its evidence to the first Christians they are not its evidence to us . . . that every practice is Christian that praises itself and every practice unchristian which condemns itself . . . What I revere and obey in it is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest gives to my mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason, the persuasion and courage that come out of it to lead me upward and onward.  

Christianity concerns practices and ways of living that do not contradict one’s conscience or one’s reason. Certain traditions will grow stale and should be abandoned. To hold onto those observances undermines religion’s ability to take its members “upward and onward” in the religious life. This leads Emerson to the assertion, “Its institutions should be as flexible as the wants of [humanity]. That form out of which the life and suitableness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us.” When observances and modes of religious being no longer serve humanity, people should abandon them, so they do not become obstacles to a better religious life.

What are the factors that set the Transcendentalists so far apart from other more orthodox Unitarian members—even the more liberal William Ellery Channing? They held a different view of religion that unearthed a path allowing people to move beyond the hegemonic Christian beliefs held by liberal and conservative New England Christians. This challenge to the dominant Christian assumptions—such as the authority of the Bible, the miracles of Jesus, and the transcendent nature of God—led most orthodox Unitarians to exclude the Transcendentalists as a “latest form of infidelity.” Even while some Transcendentalists remained within the Unitarian ministry, the more orthodox Unitarian members shunned them, refused the customary pulpit

---

81 Emerson, “Sermon CLXII,” 76.
82 Ibid.
exchanges with them, and on one occasion asked Theodore Parker to leave the Unitarian ministry because he was not Christian enough. This means that both orthodox Calvinists and orthodox Unitarians saw the Transcendentalists as a decidedly new and dangerous religious phenomenon in America.

Transcendentalists maintained the more optimistic view of humanity elaborated in Unitarian theology. The Transcendentalists denied the Calvinist belief in inherent human depravity and predestination, beheld humanity with optimism, and believed that each person was able to work toward their own spiritual fulfillment. Unitarian sermons, such as Channing’s “Likeness to God” and “Self-Culture,”84 established the importance of human agency in matters of personal salvation and human spiritual progress, but the Transcendentalists went further. They did not subscribe simply to humanity being made in the image of God; they emphasized the divine within each person—becoming “part or particle of God.”85 To the extent that humans are divine themselves, they are able to cultivate their lives to allow that divinity to permeate their inner and outer lives.

This emphasis on the divine aspect of humanity had an important consequence for the religious life. People no longer needed the mediating support of ministers, texts, or traditions. While each of these could help if engaged in a proper way, none of them was necessary or sufficient to bring about spiritual transformation. The true moment of spiritual growth comes in unbidden, unmediated personal encounters with the sacred. While several Transcendentalists, such as James Freeman Clark,86 believed Jesus expressed the highest form of religion in his teachings, generally they believed every person—despite their religious affiliation—had the

85 Emerson, Essays and Lectures, 10.
ability to connect with God personally and to understand their own inward divinity. This meant that Christianity was no longer the authoritative religion. While Christianity expressed religious truth, it did so not as a new religious truth (a revealed religious truth through Jesus and the Bible) but as one religious manifestation among many with the same access to universal, eternal truths.

The consequence of this is that people had to be freed from constraints to allow the divine within them to flourish. As A. Robert Caponigri has shown, within Transcendentalism—especially the Transcendentalism of Orestes Brownson, Emerson, and Thoreau—the mediating component of tradition and civil society was undone. As Channing expressed self-culture in a way that would conserve and strengthen civil society, the Transcendentalists made it unnecessary and an inhibiting factor in spiritual development. Through civil society’s imposition of common assumptions, traditions, and peer pressure, the civil order—and here one’s congregation and church order too—acted as an inhibiting factor. Society came to stand between the individual and the person’s reconnection with the divine. The Transcendentalists abandoned the usual idea of society and community because it played an inhibiting role and not a liberating one. They offered instead communion with other free individuals who sustained each person’s spontaneity—leaving each person to be their own authority in matters of religion.

Because of this more liberal, nonconformist posture—as Emerson said, “Whoso would be a [person] must be a nonconformist”—the Transcendentalists posed a challenge to religious authority, traditional social and hierarchical relations, and the legitimacy of the state. The Bible and Christianity received their authority in proportion to the individual’s spiritual response to the articulation of religious truths. This ultimately allowed Thoreau to choose “his” Buddha over

---

88 Emerson, Essays and Lectures, 261.
“their” Christ. Religious validity was measured by the inspiration it developed in the person, which meant each person would choose his or her own religious path. This effaced hierarchies in religion and society.

To make a person act, speak, or think in a specific way was to impose conformity, and such homogeneity undermined the spontaneity that was the cornerstone of Transcendentalist religious experiences. Transcendentalists wanted each person to become the supreme judge in matters of right and wrong. Nobody could impose moral judgments on another. Direct contact with a supreme law ordering the universe and pervading one’s inner life became a central religious idea for the Transcendentalists. The state and its policies, in theory, became obtrusive attempts to make people act morally. The state, then, violated its role as a form of expediency as it translated its expedient measures into moral imperatives through policies. The state became coercive in this way and inhibited spontaneous expressions and the person’s inherent ability for spiritual growth. What is clear, then, is that Transcendentalist religious ideas had implications for society and the state. Orthodox Unitarians and orthodox Calvinists alike saw the threat to Christianity and the place of the Christian religion as an organizing factor in society.

In 1950, Perry Miller described Transcendentalism in the following words:

... the Transcendental movement is most accurately to be defined as a religious demonstration. The real drive in the souls of the participants was a hunger of the spirit for values which Unitarianism had concluded were no longer estimable... Unless [the Transcendentalist] literature be read as fundamentally an expression of a religious radicalism in revolt against a rational conservatism, it will not be understood; if it is so interpreted, then the deeper undertone can be heard. Once it is heard, the literature becomes, even in its more fatuous reaches, a protest of the human spirit against emotional starvation.  

---

Forty-nine years later, David M. Robinson would make a similar observation, but he would add a slight nuance. Transcendentalism was a religious revolt, but it did not oppose all the tenets of Unitarianism; it rejected some aspects while advancing others.

If the theological diversity among these leading Transcendentalists suggests that the movement was less than cohesive, and I believe it does, it also reinforces the idea that theological issues were at the center of their concerns. These differences do not, of course, negate the shared concerns that established an intellectual sympathy among them and brought them together in a range of shared projects. They still understood themselves to be engaged in a common struggle to establish the legitimacy of a set of “new views” of religion, which stressed the authority of intuition over tradition and aspired to a pure or absolute religion, rooted in Christianity but aiming at a more universal vision of cultivating the spiritual potential of every individual.\textsuperscript{92}

Robinson is clear that Transcendentalism was primarily a religious movement that expanded into the larger social fabric urging broader reform. Eleven years later, Dean Grodzins asserts this understanding tersely: “Transcendentalism had many aspects—literary, political, philosophical—but it was at bottom a religious movement . . . When viewed in terms of its historical origins and development, however, it was a phase of American, or more precisely, New England, Unitarianism.”\textsuperscript{93} What this leads to is a serious reordering of life based on new religious ideas coming out of the established Unitarian denomination in New England. While they accepted and incorporated some aspects of Unitarianism, the Transcendentalists emphasized individual authority in religion. This led them to believe in continued revelation and expressions of that revelation in new terms in the present. The poet became the new prophet and allowed the movement to claim that eternal religious truths were constantly being expressed anew in each age. Tradition vanished as the poetic genius communicated a living religion freshly with each

\textsuperscript{92} Robinson, “‘A Religious Demonstration,’” 69.

\textsuperscript{93} Grodzins, “Unitarianism,” 51.
passing day.\textsuperscript{94} The Transcendentalists were articulating a counter-hegemonic religious doctrine expressed through their cultural products—especially their literature.

**Organic Intellectual Literature: Writing for the Gods**

As Steven Fink reveals, Thoreau struggled with the vocation of writing throughout much of his life—from the idea of earning a living as a writer to maintaining inspiration for writing.\textsuperscript{95} Beyond Emerson, few contemporary critics valued Thoreau’s written products. In response to Thoreau’s “The Service,” Theodore Parker, a prominent Transcendentalist Unitarian minister of the largest congregation in Boston, thought Thoreau’s writing was inadequate and an imitation of Emerson.\textsuperscript{96} James Freeman Clarke, another fellow Transcendentalist, thought “it poorly written.”\textsuperscript{97} Furthermore, Margaret Fuller, the editor of the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*, repeatedly rejected his writings.\textsuperscript{98} With the first volume, Fuller had accepted his essay “Aulus Persius Flaccus” and his poem “Sympathy.” Her early acceptance was not the norm; she would only accept four more poems and none of his prose writings. She would complain that his writing was too rugged and too painful to read. In her rejection of “The Service” for publication in *The Dial*, she wrote the following words to Thoreau:

\begin{quote}
...the thoughts seem to me so out of their natural order, that I cannot read through it without pain. I never once feel myself in a stream of thought, but seem to hear the grating of tools in the mosaic. It is true, as Mr. E[ms]er|son] says, that essays not to be compared with this have found their way into the *Dial*. But then they are more unassuming in their tone, and have an air of quiet good-breeding which induces us to permit their presence. Yours is so rugged that it ought to be commanding.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace*, 26. Others listening to his lectures had similar complaints at times that Thoreau imitated Emerson too much. See Fink, “Thoreau and His Audience,” 79-80.
\textsuperscript{97} Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace*, 26.
Fuller thought, and Emerson agreed, that Thoreau’s writing needed more refining; they believed Thoreau’s writings were not attentive to his audience. While the Transcendentalists held firm to the belief in the primacy of intuition and inspiration, they also were able to see that one’s inspiration and intuition needed to be communicated in a way that would carry that message to the larger world, so they had to work out a balance between being true to their intuition and inspiration, but they also had to be aware of how they communicated them to others outside of the Transcendentalist realm. Thoreau, then, was not adequately expressing his ideas to a larger audience beyond his Transcendentalist friends. While they did not advocate degrading one’s message to meet the masses, the Transcendentalists did want to communicate it to sympathetic minds outside of Boston and Concord, but Thoreau was missing the mark. Thoreau was envisioned as the less talented writer within the Transcendentalist community. He would not reduce his message; instead, he tried to maintain his writings’ integrity as perfect offerings to the “gods.”

Struggles existed within the Transcendentalist community over how to be true to one’s visions while writing for a larger audience, and Thoreau shared this concern to some extent. He did not come to the same conclusion that others did. Instead of believing he should lower his writing for others to accept it and understand it, Thoreau believed that he needed to raise others to the level of his intuitive insights. His inspiration and intuition needed to be conveyed in the appropriate language and images in which they came to him. He saw his task, then, as one of conveying his message in its grand state without diminishing it for others and their comprehension. Readers, instead, would have to struggle with his writings; they would have to be active, critical readers striving for elevation. The assumption Thoreau held was that he was writing for the “gods”; his writing was, first and foremost, a gift to the gods, and if people
wanted to prosper from that writing, they would have to work hard for its message; they would have to improve themselves.\textsuperscript{100} This perspective challenged the outlook of both Emerson and Fuller.

Thoreau, like Emerson, struggled with the idea of literary composition in his journals. Both Emerson and Thoreau valued inspiration and the spontaneity a journal nurtured. Emerson has come to be known for his compositional approach that wove together journal entries; instead of strict logical arguments in his essays and lectures, Emerson’s writings convey moments when one leaps from one thought to the next. He was seeking inspiration and provocation, not logic and pedantry. Thoreau chose the same approach, yet he does not seem to have mastered the process as well as Emerson did as Emerson reached increasingly larger audiences.

While it is common to paint him as coming to the writing profession through Emerson and imitating his mentor, this view of Thoreau is inaccurate as Thoreau clearly began contemplating the writing process while at Harvard College. On 17 January 1835, Thoreau wrote an essay on the importance of keeping a journal. In the first paragraph, he already describes a Transcendentalist view of journal keeping by associating it with spontaneous, lofty thoughts: “. . . it is that ideas often suggest themselves to us spontaneously, as it were, far surpassing in beauty those which arise in the mind upon applying ourselves to any particular subject.”\textsuperscript{101} This ability to log one’s inspired thoughts should be accompanied by introspection that allows a person to differentiate one’s original thoughts from the opinions and falsehoods that enter one’s mind throughout the day: “Most of us are apt to neglect the study of our own characters, thoughts, and feelings, and for the purpose of forming our own minds, look to others, who should merely be

\textsuperscript{100} This is why Thoreau frowned on the common fiction of his time. That was for entertainment, yet he saw writing not as a form of entertainment but as an aid for self-betterment. Harding, “Thoreau’s Ideas,” 131.

considered as different editions of the same great work.” Instead of originality, people turn toward a more passive path of conformity and reliance on others. Thoreau concludes his essay by valuing “reflection,” “expression,” and self-improvement. Composition is associated with the cultivation of the self, critical thinking, the winnowing out of opinion, and awareness of spontaneous, original thoughts.

Thoreau’s emphasis on spontaneity led to the problem of how to weave spontaneous thoughts together while maintaining their integrity. During his time of rejection from The Dial, he addressed this problem on 6 February 1841 in his journal:

When I select one here and another there and strive to join sundered thoughts, I make but a partial heap after all. Nature strews her nuts and flowers broadcast, and never collects them into heaps. A man does not tell us all he has thought upon truth or beauty at a sitting—but from his last thought upon truth or beauty at a sitting . . . Sometimes a single and casual thought rises naturally and inevitably with a queenly majesty and escort like the stars in the east. Fate has surely enshrined it in this hour and circumstances for some purpose. What she has joined together let not man put asunder. Shall I transplant the primrose by the river’s brim—to set it beside its sister on the mountain? This was the soil it grew in, this the hour it bloomed in. If sun wind and rain came here to cherish and expand it, shall not we come here to pluck it? Shall we require it to grow in a conservatory for our convenience?

Thoreau is trying to understand the consequences of extracting spontaneous ideas from their original context or soil. He places this within organic imagery that emphasizes the processes of nature and the natural arising of vegetation. By extending this natural imagery to the writing process, he is engaging the problem of transplanting a thought from his journals into an essay, and Thoreau makes it clear that such a transplantation is, in many ways, creating an unnatural or artificial setting for others who come to the essay.

---

102 Thoreau, Early Essays and Miscellanies, 9.
Incidentally, this is part of the problem Fuller was identifying in Thoreau’s essay “The Service.” Fuller assumed writing should have an organic unity to it, and Thoreau’s ideas did not produce the “stream of thought” or flow of ideas that should give a text its character. Thoreau would come to challenge this perfect organic unity; he would maintain that writing should contain a certain level of jarring that undermines the reader’s assumptions and prejudices. He would come to use a different, less peaceful organic imagery by turning to the swells of waves and the disruption of tidal waves. In response to Fuller’s rejection, Thoreau offers a novel approach to literary production in a journal entry from 22 January 1841, much of which would make its way into A Week.\textsuperscript{106}

I hear it complained of some modern books of genius, that they are irregular, and have no flow, but we should consider that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river, and is the effect of a celestial influence, or sort of ground swell, it may be, and not of any declivity in its channel, each wave rising higher than the former, and partially subsiding back on it. But the river flows, because it runs down hill, and descends faster, as it flows more rapidly. The one obeys the earthly attraction, the other the heavenly attraction. The one runs smoothly because it gravitates toward the earth alone, the other irregularly because it gravitates toward the heavens as well.

The reader who has been accustomed to expend all his energy in the launching—as if he were to float down stream for the whole voyage—may well complain of nauseating ground swells, and choppings of the sea when his frail shore craft gets amidst the breakers of the ocean stream—which flows as much to sun and moon, as lesser streams to it—If he would appreciate the true flow that is in these books, he must expect to see it rise from the page like an exhalation—and wash away the brains of most like burr-millstones. They flow not from right to left, or from left to right, but to higher levels, above and behind the reader.\textsuperscript{107}

Contra Emerson and Fuller who wanted more organic unity as a more gentle flow in a text, Thoreau turned to another natural image, waves. This reveals his understanding of writing as a product meant to disorient readers, shake them up, and “nauseate” them. These are not small waves, however, but “tidal waves.” These are Tsunamis resulting, generally, from alterations in

\textsuperscript{106} Thoreau, A Week, 102-03.

the structure of the ground through earthquakes or volcanic activity. This organic imagery is quite different from Fuller’s desire to gently glide down a stream. As Thoreau points out, waves are more than the simple gravitational attraction of rivers that seek the lowest point; instead, waves are gravitationally in tension—simultaneously attracted to the earth and heaven. What Fuller was missing was how the flow of Thoreau’s thought was not simply seeking to move toward the earth and the people inhabiting it, but he was moving his writing toward heaven too. This is significant as Thoreau’s writing was constantly oriented first to the heavens and then people; for this reason, people had to move beyond their expectations of easy, flowing writing and get more accustomed to struggling with the violent swells of thoughts and insights that would lift the reader heavenward.

The divine component of Thoreau’s writing was the most important for him. He sought to be a prophetic writer composing primarily for the gods with the hope that people would struggle with his writings to elevate themselves to a higher state of being. Thoreau identified thoughts as offerings for the gods on 13 January 1841:

We should offer up our perfect thoughts to the gods daily—our writing should be hymns and psalms. Who keeps a journal is purveyor for the Gods. There are two sides to every sentence; the one is contiguous to me, but the other faces the gods, and no man ever fronted it. When I utter a thought I launch a vessel which never sails in my haven more, but goes sheer off into the deep. Consequently it demands a godlike insight—a fronting view, to read what was greatly written.

As he places these offerings to the gods in Christian terms, such as “hymns” and “psalms,” Thoreau reveals the difficulty with understanding these Janus-faced sentences. First, his

---

108 The Transcendentalists often deployed the Puritan role of prophet-martyr in their writings. Along these lines, Thoreau is seen as ascetic and prophet originating from interpretations of his life and writings. To be a prophet was to have a transformative experience that led to a new awareness of the world, which is then shared with others in an attempt to correct the wrongs in society or to point to future possibilities for a community. Shuffelton, “Puritanism,” 45-47.

109 A passage in A Week bears a resemblance to this passage: “Instead of other sacrifice, we might offer up our perfect (τελεία) thoughts to the gods daily, in hymns or psalms.” Thoreau, A Week, 96.

110 Laura Dassow Walls associates these sentences with a “Janus vision” that displays Thoreau’s love for contradiction. Walls, Seeing New Worlds, 49.
italicization of “perfect” makes it clear that the ideas being offered are not incomplete, deficient, or defective offerings. The spontaneous thoughts going to the gods are offerings that should be perfect, complete, and without blemish. The lower form of reading comes from the person who seeks to have the sentence descend to their level, so Thoreau is giving an implicit criticism of Emerson and Fuller. The above passages reveal his objection to their desire to have him lower his offering to the gods, so people can understand them. As he understood their suggestions, Thoreau is to simplify his writing and reduce his writings’ loftiness. Instead, Thoreau believes people need to improve themselves, so they can understand his writings. As his spontaneous, intuitive thoughts are the most perfect ones he will construct and offer to the gods, Thoreau will not reduce them, or make them less perfect, for his readership. Not only is writing a gift to the gods, but this assertion makes it clear that writing is necessarily meant to be edifying for the readers as it forces them to rise to a higher level. They are to rise toward the heavens on the swelling waves of his thought and transcend common sense.

This reveals the two-fold religious significance of writing for Thoreau. As he struggled with rejection within and beyond the Transcendentalist circle, Thoreau had to articulate more clearly what he imagined writing to be. His conclusion was that writing should be organic, but not the organicism of quiet, peaceful flows; writing needed a level of ruggedness to it that would force people out of their comfort zones. Writing should disorient people, but in this process, it should also elevate them. This is the first religious component of Thoreau’s view of writing: All writing should elevate the reader toward the heavens and the gods as it makes them struggle to understand the godly view in his writing. This means that as a writer, Thoreau’s audience is actually the gods, not humanity. His sentences will confound people who simply seek a facile interpretation.
Thoreau would not condescend to the masses because he expected them to rise to the occasion of his awareness and inspiration. On 24 March 1842, Thoreau wrote, “Those authors are successful who do not write down to others.” Instead of reducing his message, Thoreau sought to leave it as it was, so it could disturb the reader, provoke and inspire the reader, to see things differently, and poetry was the highest form of this expression.

The poet was a prophet, a religious figure, hero, and healer. For Thoreau, “Poetry is the mysticism of mankind.” “There is no doubt that the loftiest written wisdom is . . . in form as well as substance, poetry.” In the next paragraph, Thoreau asserts, “Yet poetry, though the last and finest result, is a natural fruit.” Writing should be a gift to the gods naturally arising in one’s life that should come forth in poetic strains as a mysticism for all humankind—if humanity will rise to the challenge.

In his eulogy, Emerson sums up Thoreau’s religious view and offers a good conclusion to this section: “His poetry might be bad or good; he no doubt wanted a lyric facility and technical skill; but he had the source of poetry in his spiritual perception.” Emerson also said of Thoreau, “Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or thought.” A little later Emerson said in his eulogy:

---

111 Thoreau, 1837-1846. 1: Journal, 345.
112 Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 140-41. Robert Sullivan comments on how Thoreau’s goal in writing was to “inspire” and “change” the reader. Sullivan, The Thoreau You Don’t Know, 6.
113 Thoreau, A Week, 328.
114 Ibid., 91.
115 Ibid. Thoreau’s organic view of poetry metaphorically associated with fruits helps to display how his outlook comes close to North American indigenous views. Catherine L. Albanese writes, “Although Indians have certainly been aware of the vicissitudes of the seasons and the uncertainties of the weather, overall they have found a harmony in nature that, historically, they chose to imitate in practical ways. This meant everything from taking cues from nature in the construction of housing and bodily adornment to living out convictions that Western Europeans would regard as ethical directives.” Catherine L. Albanese, Reconsidering Nature Religion (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 5.
116 For more on poetry and Thoreau, see Robinson, Natural Life, 33-40.
118 Ibid., xxxv.
Thoreau was sincerity itself, and might fortify the convictions of prophets in the ethical laws by his holy living. It was an affirmative experience which refused to be set aside. A truth-speaker he, capable of the most deep and strict conversation; a physician to the wounds of any soul; a friend, knowing not only the secret of friendship, but almost worshiped by those few persons who resorted to him as their confessor and prophet, and knew the deep value of his mind and great heart. He thought that without religion and devotion of some kind nothing great was ever accomplished; and he thought that the bigoted sectarian had better keep this in mind.\textsuperscript{119}

All life’s activities and thoughts should be rooted in a religious sentiment and bear the fruit of this religious life.\textsuperscript{120} Thoreau’s writings may be biting and sarcastic at points, but this is his prophetic voice.\textsuperscript{121} Despite the irony and difficulty, his writings are thoroughly religious in nature as they emerge from a desire to express his Transcendentalist insights and reverence for all creation. His writings should be seen as religious artifacts, gifts to the gods, that demand readers to rise up out of their common condition within the opinions and bigotry of humanity to confront the godly side of his thought. \textit{A Week} is a thoroughly counter-hegemonic religious text giving expression to his Transcendentalist understanding of the divine, existence, nature, and humanity in 1849.

**Thoreau as a Religious Leader: H.G.O. Blake**

It was not only through his writings that Thoreau would inspire others; he inspired them as a religious leader. Harrison Gray Otis Blake (1816-1898) graduated from Harvard College in 1835, and he remained connected with the institution as he pursued his studies through Harvard Divinity School until his graduation in 1838; Thoreau had graduated from Harvard College in

\textsuperscript{119} Emerson, “Biographical Sketch,” xxxv.

\textsuperscript{120} Bradley P. Dean wrote, “Yet Thoreau himself clearly regarded the spiritual dimension of his writings—and, indeed, of his life—as vitally important.” See Henry David Thoreau, Bradley P. Dean, and H. G. O. Blake, \textit{Letters to a Spiritual Seeker} (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 11.

\textsuperscript{121} Thoreau was a critic of society who saw what humanity could become, so he desired to nudge people to live a better life. Harding, “Thoreau’s Ideas,” 132. Shuffelton, “Puritanism,” 45, 47-48.
Although they attended the same college, the two never became friends when they were students. Blake and Thoreau, however, had a common bond through their friendship with Emerson; in fact, Blake was a member of the graduating class that heard Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” on 15 July 1838, which inspired Blake greatly in matters of religion. Blake also made his way to Concord on numerous occasions from nearby Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts, so Thoreau likely had met Blake on various occasions through Emerson, especially when Thoreau lived in Emerson’s house from April 1841 until May 1843 when Thoreau left for Staten Island to tutor William Emerson’s children. For years, Blake had no interest in Thoreau. Blake communicated this near invisibility of Thoreau in his own words:

I was introduced to him first by Mr. Emerson more than forty years ago [in the 1840s], though I had known him by sight before at college. I recall nothing of that first interview . . . My first real introduction was from the reading of an article of his in the Dial on ‘Aulus Persius Flaccus,’ which appears now in the Week. That led to my first writing to him . . . Our correspondence continued for more than twelve years, and we visited each other at times, he coming here to Worcester, commonly to read something in public, or being on his way to read somewhere else.

Blake and Thoreau knew of each other and had made each other’s acquaintance, but it was not until March 1848 when the two would engage in an intimate spiritual friendship that would last until at least 3 May 1861, the date of the last extant letter between the two.

---


124 William Emerson was Ralph Waldo Emerson’s brother. For more on this period of Thoreau’s life and friendship with Emerson, see Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 93-127.

The only surviving letter from Blake is his first to Thoreau. In this letter, Blake addresses the “haunting impression” he has of Thoreau associated with Thoreau’s “Aulus Persius Flaccus” and their personal meetings. The letter focuses on Thoreau’s connection with God, his retiring from society, and the ability to take part in the process of renunciation. What made a deep impression on Blake was Thoreau’s response to Blake’s question when he had been in Concord: “When I was last in Concord, you spoke of retiring farther from our civilization. I asked you if you would feel no longings for the society of your friends. Your reply was in substance, ‘No, I am nothing.’” This answer hooked Blake and left him contemplating what this meant for his and Thoreau’s life. He comments on this response and allows it to orient the rest of the letter requesting Thoreau to speak to him on spiritual matters: “That reply was memorable to me. It indicated a depth of resources, a completeness of renunciation, a poise and repose in the universe, which to me is almost inconceivable; which in you seemed domesticated, and to which I look up with veneration. I would know of that soul which can say ‘I am nothing.’ I would be roused by its words to a truer and purer life.” Blake respected the level of commitment and purity Thoreau displayed relating to his renunciation of society.

Through Thoreau, Blake began to feel closer to God and placed this awareness of a new closeness with God at the center of life; people should seek to enhance their relationship with God. This connection with God should be the primary occupation of life: “Upon me seems to be dawning with new significance the idea that God is here; that we have but to bow before Him in profound submission at every moment, and He will fill our souls with His presence. In this opening of the soul to God, all duties seem to centre; what else have we to do?”

---

126 Thoreau, Dean, and Blake, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, 24.
127 Ibid., 33.
128 Ibid., 34.
129 Ibid.
awareness, Blake turned to Thoreau with extreme reverence urging Thoreau to guide him:

“Speak to me in this hour as you are prompted . . .”\(^{130}\) He wanted Thoreau’s spontaneous, evolving insights about the religious life and humanity’s connection with God. He turned to Thoreau not because of a deep personal connection, but because of Thoreau’s grasp of spiritual matters and his ability to live life according to his religious convictions: “I honor you because you abstain from actions, and open your soul that you may be somewhat. Amid a world of noisy, shallow actors it is noble to stand aside and say, ‘I will simply be.’”\(^{131}\)

In Thoreau, Blake encountered a person who could extract himself from the commonness of society and its degrading features; for Thoreau to be, he was to live a sincere life dedicated to a closeness with God and nature. For Blake, Thoreau was advocating a new life and a new freshness: “If I understand rightly the significance of your life, this is it: You would sunder yourself from society, from the spell of institutions, customs, conventionalities, that you may lead a fresh, simple life with God. Instead of breathing a new life into the old forms, you would have a new life without and within. There is something sublime to me in this attitude,—far as I may be from it myself . . . .”\(^{132}\) Blake describes perfectly the overarching themes of Thoreau’s life and his writings. Thoreau did withdraw from society, but he did not do so because he was a curmudgeon; he did so because he sought to “lead a fresh, simple life with God.” Thoreau did not seek to bring his views of God and religion into the old forms of society; Thoreau did not seek to reshape the institutions and breathe new life into them. Instead, he sought to transform society and to make it completely new. This emphasis on God and Thoreau’s spiritual

---

\(^{130}\) Thoreau, Dean, and Blake, \textit{Letters to a Spiritual Seeker}, 34.

\(^{131}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{132}\) \textit{Ibid.}
sensibilities oriented their entire correspondence; their letters were less about friendship and more about what is crucial to living a good life.\textsuperscript{133}

In his first letter to Blake on 27 March 1848, Thoreau lays out his ideas and sets the trajectory of the later letters.

I do believe that the outward and the inward life correspond . . . To set about living a true life is to go [on] a journey to a distant country, gradually to find ourselves surrounded by new scenes and men; and as long as the old are around me, I know that I am not in any true sense living a new or a better life. The outward is only the outside of that which is within . . . Circumstances are not rigid and unyielding, but our habits are rigid. We are apt to speak vaguely sometimes, as if a divine life were to be grafted on to or built over this present as a suitable foundation . . . Change is change. No new life occupies the old bodies;—they decay. \textit{It} is born, and grows, and flourishes. Men very pathetically inform the old, accept and wear it . . . I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest man thinks he must attend to in a day. When a mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all encumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run . . . I am simply what I am, or I begin to be that. \textit{I live in the present . . . If} you would convince a man that he does wrong do right . . . Do what you love . . . Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of much life so. Aim above morality. Be not \textit{simply} good—be good for something . . . . Let nothing come between you and the light. Respect men as brothers only. When you travel to the celestial city, carry no letter of introduction. When you knock ask to see God—none of the servants . . . . Perhaps you have some oracles for me.\textsuperscript{134}

Over the following year, Thoreau would only write two more letters to Blake before he published \textit{A Week}, and this first letter parallels the concerns in his first book—whether through similar or identical phrasing or images. In this letter, Thoreau establishes the importance of viewing life through the idea of correspondence, which means that one thing could help you interpret another by analogy. In this letter, Thoreau makes it clear how important both an inward and external journey are to a spiritual seeker, which incidentally hints at the allegorical nature of \textit{A Week}. In order to have a quality life externally, a person needs to transform their inner world; inner and

\textsuperscript{133} Thoreau’s letters to Blake have been described as “friendly sermons from a minister.” Sullivan, \textit{The Thoreau You Don’t Know}, 282.

\textsuperscript{134} Thoreau, Dean, and Blake, \textit{Letters to a Spiritual Seeker}, 35-39.
outer transformation must coincide. Part of the problem, however, is that habits and customs
create a rigidity that people find hard to escape. Thoreau is advising Blake not to seek slight
reforms; instead, Blake should seek radical transformations that make all things new. This
necessitates simplifying life to its lowest terms as a mathematician simplifies an equation; this
allows the person to understand what is important for life or extraneous and a hindrance to living
in a direct relationship with God. To be the best person possible is to connect with God directly;
it is to do anything for which you have passionate enthusiasm, and it is to guard your intimate
relationship with God earnestly.

This correspondence was about oracular utterances to help Blake and Thoreau live better
lives. Thoreau was concerned with communicating what he had learned about the spiritual life
during his thirty years of existence. It was not about personalities, but it was about how both men
could connect with something beyond themselves that would allow them to transcend ego,
personality, and the constraints of space and time. Both men were seeking something eternally
rejuvenating; they were seeking an intimate connection with God free from the limitations of
institutions, creeds, and mediating personalities.¹³⁵

By the 1850s, the Blake-Thoreau correspondence expanded beyond the personal letters as
they became public documents enjoyed by Blake and his friends in Worcester.¹³⁶ Besides Blake,
there were six other men, three who were ministers, who would gather to read and discuss
Thoreau’s letters. Blake sent out invitations to his friends at the arrival of Thoreau’s letters: “Mr.
H. G. O. Blake presents his compliments. The pleasure of your company is requested at breakfast
tomorrow at his home, No. 3 Bowdoin Street, when he will read extracts from Mr. Thoreau’s

¹³⁵ Thoreau, Dean, and Blake, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, 21.
¹³⁶ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 18.
latest letter.” These letters, however, were only one form of spiritual instruction for these seven men. Thoreau also lectured nine times in Worcester, and he often stayed in Blake’s home as he was passing through the region or lecturing in the town. Both Thoreauvian scholars Bradley P. Dean and Walter Harding address Blake as Thoreau’s spiritual “disciple.” Harding addresses the significance of their relationship with the following words: “[Blake] was unquestionably one of Thoreau’s most ardent admirers and most devoted disciples . . . . Blake’s discipleship must have done much to sustain and encourage Thoreau through those long years when little other concrete evidence of fame came to him.”

Thoreau had taken on a role as a spiritual leader, and from Blake’s later description of this correspondence, it is clear that he sought not so much Thoreau’s friendship as Thoreau’s religious insights and wisdom.

Our relation, as I look back on it, seems almost an impersonal one . . . . His personal appearance did not interest me particularly, except as the associate of his spirit . . . . When together, we had little inclination to talk of personal matters. His aim was directed so steadily and earnestly towards what is essential in our experience, that beyond all others of whom I have known, he made but a single impression on me. Geniality, versatility, personal familiarity are, or course, agreeable in those about us, and seem necessary in human intercourse, but I did not miss them in Thoreau, who was, while living, and is still in my recollection and in what he has left to us, such an effectual witness to what is highest and most precious in life.

Blake was more concerned with Thoreau’s life and his pursuit of the highest aims for life; Blake’s concerns were moral and religious in nature. Their friendship was, in some ways, cold or impersonal, but this is not because neither cared for the other. It was the result of two people who were seeking the most important aspects in life; the impersonal nature that marked their

---

friendship arose from their sincerity and dedication to the struggle to live the best life possible. Blake came to see clearly Thoreau’s wisdom and devotion to higher living, and Thoreau’s life was framed around a “vision of life as a pilgrimage toward the fountainhead of truth,” and the two cared enough about each other to be friends dedicated to this spiritual pilgrimage. The impersonal nature was not a deficient component in their friendship but a sign of how urgent their time was together. They sought to be more than friends in the common meaning of the word; instead, they elevated friendship to mutual aid in the desire to live the best possible spiritual life here and now. Thoreau, therefore, had become a religious, moral leader for others.

_A Week: Manifesting the Qualities of the “Unnamed”_

Following the argument and examples in the work of Phyllida Anne Kent in this section, it is clear that Thoreau’s first book became a gift to the gods and expressed his understanding of the divine or “Unnamed”—which makes _A Week_ a culminating product of his counter-hegemonic religious thinking up to 1849.

In “Monday,” Thoreau makes clear what he sees as the important qualities of the divine. Unlike others who turn to God and emphasize a personal divinity that displays omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, Thoreau announces five qualities of the “Unnamed.” These are possibility, buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, and variety. This discernment has important implications for daily life; if humans are to worship the divine and to construct this world in God’s image, then each day should be filled with these qualities or should manifest them in differing intensities. This is exactly what Thoreau does in _A Week_. Each chapter in some

---

142 Thoreau, Dean, and Blake, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, 17.
143 This section is based on the work by Phyllida Anne Kent. See Phyllida Anne Kent, “A Study of the Structure of Thoreau’s _Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers_” (Master’s Thesis, Carleton University, 1968).
144 Kent, “A Study of the Structure of Thoreau’s _Week_,” 53-70.
way discloses one or several of these attributes. In this way, readers can engage *A Week* as a narrative emphasizing the qualities of the Unnamed in daily life, which can then reorient readers to see these qualities in their own lives. He is writing a new myth for an American audience.\textsuperscript{145} He is the new poet-prophet moving readers into a new religious sensibility.

“Concord River” is a serious contemplation about Thoreau’s local environs that focuses on the region’s history, antagonisms between Native Americans and settlers, and how both groups are situated within and connected to the natural environment.\textsuperscript{146} It goes beyond a simple recounting of his local history and contextual placement; it is also about meditating upon the divine force within creation. Thoreau informs the reader about the sacred in nature, a perennial force that remains forever young and divine. This sacred element is not found in the Bible or a church; it is encountered “in the wind and rain.” If we look closely at the world around us and the common components, the perennial spring of life is present. This opening chapter instructs the reader, first and foremost, to pay attention to the divine permeating the common and often overlooked or devalued aspects of life. The natural world is filled with hierophanies if we know how to look.

In the next chapter, “Saturday,” Thoreau concentrates on the quality of possibility.\textsuperscript{147} He does this by dedicating most of the chapter to the diversity of fish in the Concord River by associating this with what he calls “the fish principle.” This principle reveals how life and new creations are uncontainable. Miraculously, fish appear where they should not. Any liquid medium becomes a potential site for fish to inhabit. Despite human obstacles, the fish principle cannot be undermined. There is a vitality that continues to confront, undermine, and evade

\begin{flushright}


\end{flushright}
obstructions that attempt to stagnate creation. This means that divinity is concerned with new options; it is about alternatives. The divine, therefore, supports new life instead of the diminishment of potentiality.

In “Tuesday,” Thoreau turns his attention to buoyancy.\(^{148}\) This is clearest in his trip up Saddle-Back Mountain that leaves him above the clouds and rain on the following morning. As he stands on the roof of a small observatory, he watches the sun rise with clouds stretched out below him in all directions. He has risen above the rain and the obscured light to see what appears to be a new world. As one can normally see five states from the top of Saddle-Back Mountain, his sense of buoyancy on top of the mountain undoes the political distinctions below as all he can see is clouds in all directions—stretching like a new land before him. While he indicates the divine in the common aspects of nature and while he emphasizes the possibility resulting from vitality, here Thoreau is indicating that people should not remain immersed in the common ways of seeing. People need to rise or float above the common distinctions demarcating the spaces we inhabit. The idea of buoyancy also alludes to the fact that he and his brother are floating on the rivers’ waters; they are not sinking and drowning. This indicates an optimistic component in the quality of the Unnamed. Buoyancy is to not be weighed down by common culture but to float in new directions and to encounter the world in novel and exciting ways. To manifest this quality in one’s life is to not be overwhelmed with life but to rise above the deleterious aspects of life and to find new inspiration.

In “Wednesday,” Thoreau turns to freedom, and he uses his long essay on friendship to manifest this quality of the Unnamed.\(^{149}\) He indicates an ironic aspect of friendship, which is the fact that it brings people together but without merging them into one being. Proper friendship can


only be maintained through proper distances. Once two people become too familiar with each other, their friendship will falter because familiarity breeds a lack of honesty and critical awareness. Friendship should force each person to be the best they can be; each friend should hold the other person to the highest standards. In doing so, each friend realizes that the other person has their own destiny and path; this means that each recognizes the differences present in the relationship. To become too close is to diminish this difference, and the merging of lives leads to forgetfulness that each friend remains their own person. Familiarity takes away freedom as it constrains the friends on one common path negating each person’s differences. Friendship, then, manifests the divine quality of freedom as it aims to bring people together in a relationship that maintains each person’s singularity. The freedom within Thoreau’s idealistic vision of friendship means that it leaves each person free to live out a specific life geared toward each person’s particular inclinations.

In “Thursday,” Thoreau turns to flexibility. In doing so, he addresses the difficulties in life. To live fully in this world, to embrace the materiality of who we are and our historicity, is to encounter struggles. The difficulties we encounter in life cannot be met with rigidness; versatility in the face of challenges is the way to flourish in life. As he discusses this attribute, Thoreau makes it clear that part of this flexibility emerges in an attitude toward life that concentrates on learning from everything we encounter. In this way, life becomes a perpetual living forward in the present. This is clearest in his discussion of the wise man: “The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time . . . He must try his fortune again to-day as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution . . . All the world is forward to prompt him who gets up to live without his creed in his pocket.”

---

becomes an experiment in living in the moment without scripts; it is facing each encounter as the situation dictates without depending on preestablished, routinized responses. All life prompts people to live in the present in a future driven way. A lack of flexibility is a symptom of dependency on previous answers to future situations. Instead, the divine quality of flexibility urges people to live in the present, to encounter the world for themselves, and to respond in extemporaneous ways.

In “Friday,” the context changes; autumn has arrived, and Thoreau’s vision of the world alters. This change signals variety, the final attribute of the Unnamed.\(^{152}\) They had departed and traveled mostly in the atmosphere of summer weather, but in the middle of the night, a new wind came and stirred the forest floor and trees. Upon awakening and traveling, the outlook on the world had changed. All creation had a new tint to it. This is not all, however, for the brothers travel back through the same country but in the opposite direction. While rowing and steering the boat as they departed from Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau and his brother sat facing backward with Concord in their vision. Now on their return home, their gaze is oriented toward the land they went to visit, and this provides a different outlook on the land they pass. Both autumn and their orientation in the boat provide a different perspective. To change one aspect of the complex relations of life changes everything. By returning home in autumn instead of summer and by returning home facing in the opposite direction from when they departed, the brothers are engaging an endless variety in life and relations. Variety unfreezes expectations and interpretive lenses, so the person can see the possibilities in life.

Each of these qualities is highly interdependent with the others. For example, variety can disclose new possibilities, and to take part in those new possibilities will necessitate a level of flexibility and freedom. These qualities unite in different ways depending on the situation, but

Thoreau makes it clear that they are present each day in his journey and in the reader’s life if proper attention is given to one’s surroundings. *A Week*, therefore, is not a simple literary creation intent on entertaining readers but a serious interaction with life that respects the presence of the divine all around us. Kent is right in arguing that this makes *A Week* a text focused on the discernment of the divine in the common features of life as each part of the book seeks the miraculous in the common. In the end, the binary between the sacred and the profane collapses. If people lived more reverently, they would see how the profane is sacred or how the sacred informs and sustains the profane. The Unnamed is not separate from humanity and nature—but hauntingly close and united with our world. Our lives unfold within and are part of the divine. To be religious is not only to experience these qualities around us and within the world, but also to make our lives models of these qualities.

**Conclusion: Alcott’s Assessment of *A Week***

Walter Hesford reconstructed Alcott’s journal entries on Thoreau’s *A Week*, and on 16 March 1847, about six months before Thoreau would leave Walden Pond, Alcott’s journal entry reveals how he visited Thoreau and spent the evening with him in his cabin.153 Thoreau had brought out his manuscript of *A Week* and read various passages. Later that evening, Alcott went home and wrote favorably in his journal about Thoreau’s first book after some sleep. His concluding paragraph offers great praise for the aspiring author as he places Thoreau’s writing side by side with Emerson’s: “I came home at midnight through the woody snowpaths, and slept with the pleasing dream that presently the press would place on my shelves, a second beside my

---

153 This section is based on the reconstructive work of Alcott’s journals by Walter Hesford and his commentary on Alcott’s assessments of Thoreau’s *A Week* found in these sections. All quotes come from Walter Hesford, “Alcott’s Criticism of *A Week*,” *Resources for American Literary Study* 6 (1976): 81-84. Also see James Playsted Wood, “Mr. Thoreau Writes a Book,” *The New Colophon* 1 (1948): 368.
first volume, also written by my townsman, and give me two books to be proud of—‘Emerson’s Poems and Thoreau’s ‘Week.”’

Alcott did not share his praise with Thoreau until 13 September 1849, roughly five and a half months after *A Week* was published; his assessment of *A Week* is an insightful evaluation that helps to justify repositioning Thoreau’s first book as Transcendental scripture writing and reframing Thoreau as an organic intellectual from a fellow Transcendentalist’s pen.

Alcott observed his friend’s respect for nature as he saw *A Week* “inspiring a natural piety for nature and natural things,” but he also saw it belonging to a very specific region and literature arising organically from New England. It was a book smelling like the forest of New England. Thoreau had written with nature in mind and made it seem as though “the rocks, and animals, and woods, and the green earth had spoken in good earnest again.” Thoreau’s book is “purely American, fragrant with the lives of New England woods and streams, and could have been written nowhere else.” Alcott means that Thoreau’s *A Week* is a local text geared toward the specificity of New England and engaged with that region’s particularity. It is a contextually based book within the interconnected levels of Thoreau’s environs: New England territory, colonial history, nature, and the formation of a North American literary identity.

*A Week* also emerges as a critique of American history. Alcott indicates how the text addresses the relevance of Native Americans for Thoreau and how he indicates the tragic fate of Indigenous peoples. Alcott interprets *A Week* as a book fully attuned to nature and able to hear nature’s cries, yet what is interesting is that Alcott identifies nature’s cries as sobs for the maltreatment of Native Americans: The rocks, animals, and woods “declare their grief and shame at the bereavement of their red brethren, and the wrongs these have endured from their...”

---

154 Hesford, “Alcott’s Criticism of *A Week*,” 84.
155 All the quotes in this paragraph are found on the same page. Ibid., 83.
oppressors the whites.” Alcott then places Thoreau’s book organically in the land and outside of America’s civilizing processes; he says of *A Week* that “the thoughts and sentiments, for the most part, are indiginous [*sic*] and green.”156 Thoreau’s book comes from the land and takes its position with nature, and as nature mourns for the maltreatment of Indigenous peoples, *A Week* honors them by listening attentively to nature and expressing nature’s solidarity with the struggles of Natives Americans against Euro-American oppression. Thoreau, therefore, confronts local forms of suffering associated with the maltreatment of nature and Indigenous communities.

Alcott clearly sees that *A Week* is not a neutral text but a politically engaged book as it tries to change society. He characterizes Thoreau as “the prick rather to drive dunce, dumb, fanatic, and lunatic, towards . . . sense and sanity.”157 He describes Thoreau as pushing people to “get something done once in the world before trumpet and doomsday,” so Thoreau is not simply offering an excursion. He is giving readers a book aware of the need for cultural and political change and the need for individual people to assert themselves and to do something worthwhile. He has “a brave and constant heart,” and this places Thoreau in a heroic position;158 the hero is one who struggles and acts without regard for the potential harms that may befall him or her. Thoreau speaks to his readers about what he heard from nature without fear of retribution.

Alcott does not envision this as an elite book for select readers; instead, he places it among the people of New England as a whole. He describes it as a text that “seems likely to become a popular book with our people here, winning at once the reader’s fancy and his heart.”159 Not only is the book a contextualized account, a local critique of American practices

---

156 Hesford, “Alcott’s Criticism of *A Week,***” 83.
158 Bob Pepperman Taylor argues, “*A Week* is written to inspire us to two heroic tasks: to face up to the truths of our past, and to recapture a moral inspiration from that past upon which we can build the courage and commitment to reform our contemporary society.” Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America’s Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 33.
159 Hesford, “Alcott’s Criticism of *A Week,***” 83.
and the concomitant suffering, but it is also a book expected to speak to the people and to win their spontaneous consent. One can clearly argue, then, that Alcott has identified Thoreau’s text as a counter-hegemonic book speaking about the sufferings of the marginalized human and nonhuman peoples in the region; Thoreau does this while simultaneously attempting to win New Englanders to his side. Hesford is right in claiming that Thoreau seeks “to travel a holy road and lead others to follow his way.”\textsuperscript{160} In Alcott’s assessment of Thoreau’s first book, then, one catches glimpses of the argument in this dissertation. The following chapters will describe and examine what Alcott calls “the wrongs” the Native Americans “have endured from their oppressors the whites” and how Thoreau responds to these wrongs in \textit{A Week} with his own novel outlook on what it means to be religious.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{160} Hesford, “Alcott’s Criticism of A Week,” 82.}
CHAPTER TWO

RECONTEXTUALIZING NEW ENGLAND’S “RELIGION OF SUBJUGATION”:
THE PEPETUATION OF THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

One revelation has been made to the Indian, another to the white man. I have much to learn of the Indian, nothing of the missionary . . . all that would tempt me to teach the Indian my religion would be his promise to teach me his.
– Henry David Thoreau, The Maine Woods

Some institutions—most institutions, indeed, have had a divine origin. But of most that we see prevailing in society nothing but the form, the shell, is left—the life is extinct—and there is nothing divine in them.
– Henry David Thoreau, 19 August 1851

The effect of a good government is to make life more valuable—of a bad government to make it less valuable.
– Henry David Thoreau, 16 June 1854

Introduction

By the time he published A Week, Thoreau was sensitive to the unfavorable trajectory of Euro-American Christian relations with Indigenous peoples and the natural environment. These relations were violent and devalued Indigenous life and the natural world. Such Christian Euro-American actions were abhorrent to Thoreau, and he used A Week to address the oppression,

domination, and destruction sustaining American emigration and the founding of the United
States.\(^5\) By concentrating on New England’s religious history and America’s founding, *A Week*
addresses what scholars identify as the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and its presence in the
construction of the United States.

Thoreau studied texts on American history, Native Americans, and Christopher
Columbus.\(^6\) He was familiar with the “collisions” between Europeans and Native Americans and
was acquainted with the violent battles these collisions sustained.\(^7\) To set the stage for this
chapter, a few examples of these clashes and oppressive actions follow, which establishes the
backdrop for the Puritan violence Thoreau makes explicit in his first book.

Columbus’ recounting of his initial contact with the Arawaks in the Caribbean is
indicative of this aggressive course. As they saw Columbus and his men, the Arawaks offered
gifts, such as parrots, spears, and glass beads, yet Columbus would write in his log the following
words: “As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the
natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there
is in these parts.”\(^8\) Similarly, in his report to Spain, Columbus expressed how naively giving the
Indigenous people were, and he told his superiors that he would bring back as much gold and as
many slaves as they desired.\(^9\)

---


Hernando Cortés approached Indigenous populations in Honduras with a similar attitude, which he expressed in his letter to Emperor Charles V on 23 October 1525:

If, on the contrary, the said Indians prove to be rebellious and disobedient, my people are directed to wage war upon them and make them slaves, in order that there may not remain in this land any thing or living creature that does not acknowledge your Majesty as a master, and is of use to the royal service; for, by making slaves of those barbarous nations—who live entirely in the condition of savages—I firmly believe that your Majesty will be served, and the Spaniards greatly benefited, as they will dig out gold, and perchance some of them, by living among us, will be converted and saved.  

The accounts of Columbus and Cortés are examples of how European explorers diminished the humanity of Indigenous peoples and saw them as inferior to and in the service of Christian civilization.  

There would be similar collisions in New England as Christian Pilgrims and Puritans entered a region with approximately 75,000 to 150,000 Indigenous peoples living in different communities or clans. As settlement and trade in the Connecticut region increased, the British sought to control commerce and the territory; they displaced Native Americans from their lands as a result. Eventually, war ensued with the Pequots from September 1636 to 26 May 1637, and the war left hundreds of Pequots dead after a British raid. William Bradford, Governor of the Plymouth Colony, described the British attack in the following words: “It is believed that there

---

12 Furthermore, estimates for Native American populations in North America at the end of the fifteenth century range from 7,000,000 to 8,000,000 people. The 1890 census records a Native American population of 250,000 people. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, North American Indians: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16, 28. In the Eastern Woodlands area extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the St. Lawrence region, the Mississippi River, and the Gulf of Mexico, approximately 500,000 Native Americans lived in the region. Charles L. Cohen, “Indian History and Culture: From 1500 to 1800,” in The Oxford Companion to United States History, ed. Paul S. Boyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 372.  
were about 400 killed. It was a fearful sight to see them frying in the fire, with streams of blood quenching it; the smell was horrible, but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they [the British raiders] gave praise to God Who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemy, and give them so speedy a victory over such a proud and insulting foe.”¹⁴ These disputes over land and trade culminated with the Hartford Treaty (1638), which left the remaining Pequots to be “divided as slaves or tributaries among the English and their Indian allies,” and this aided the establishment of Connecticut as colonial territory and allowed the English to declare the Pequots “extinct.”¹⁵

Unfortunately, conflicts such as these would continue to occur; Indigenous peoples have encountered severe maltreatment throughout United States history, and this is clear with the Indian Removal Act (1830) and the forced migrations of Native Americans throughout the 1830s—around the time when Thoreau and his brother took their river trip. The forced removal of Cherokees, which lasted from 1838 to 1839 and is known as the “Trail of Tears,” “reduced their population by over 30 percent” with approximately 4,000 Cherokees dying in the process.¹⁶

With his love for Native American cultures and history, Thoreau was aware of this violent past, and *A Week* counters this hegemony based on Christian-heathen dualisms supporting the devaluing and mistreatment of Native Americans. In the end and aptly timed, *A Week* would take its final form during the development, elaboration, and deployment of the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” which was a culminating point for this domination as expressed

---


by John L. O’Sullivan and enacted in the U.S. war with Mexico (1846-48)—a war that Thoreau clearly denounced in *A Week* and his essay “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849).  

*A Week* carefully describes and censures the worldview behind the maltreatment of Native Americans as it articulates the damaging effects of a religion of subjugation not only on Indigenous peoples but also on nature and, ironically, on those who advocated a religion of subjugation. To show this, I will first describe the hegemonic idea behind this maltreatment, which is the “Christian Doctrine of Discovery” and its later, local re-articulation through the concept of “Manifest Destiny.” Following this explication, this chapter will concentrate on the

---


New England region before settlement. This will help to establish the scene the Puritan settlers encountered when they emigrated to the region. Next, I will focus on Edward Johnson and his *Wonder-Working Providence*, which Thoreau quotes early in *A Week*; this text provides Thoreau with a historical worldview to challenge, complicate, and undermine. This section elaborates Johnson’s ideas, which leads to a section on Puritanism and Calvinism. These combined sections offer a specific example of Puritan thought and a broader picture of Thoreau’s Puritan heritage, which helps to establish the central tenets that went into the worldview Thoreau was combating with his first book. I then turn to New England after settlement disclosing the ecological damage caused by European settlers and their worldview. Resulting from the juxtaposing of these sections, I then elaborate what is meant by the term “religion of subjugation.” The conclusion will define Thoreau’s outlook on institutionalized religion in the region and the use of coercive state powers as a “religious dystopia.” In the end, this dystopia is what he was fighting against and why Thoreau offered a new religious outlook.

*A Week* offers a liberating view of religion that seeks to mitigate the harmful effects of institutional Christianity in the New England region. This, in other words, is his assessment of where much of humanity is—at least in New England and the rest of America, and he uses this critical analysis as his starting point. Chapters Three and Four describe how Thoreau tries to lead his readers out of this religious dystopia by offering a new religious option and by articulating practices to cultivate new religious sensibilities.
The Historical Foundations for a Religion of Subjugation: The Christian Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny

The 1400s and 1500s were a time of technological, political, and cultural change in Europe. Seafaring tools, such as navigational equipment, helped to direct travelers more accurately, and better shipbuilding made longer sea expeditions possible and safer. During these centuries, political relations and structures changed with the emergence of nations as political entities, the spread of Protestant Christianity, and the diminishment of Catholicism’s dominance in certain regions. Along with these changes, mariners began to engage in the acquisition and trading of African bodies that sustained centuries of chattel slavery, which linked Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America in burgeoning capitalist enterprises largely based on cotton, rum, and sugar trading. Concomitantly, a strong desire for wealth, power, and prominence supported interest in acquiring distant lands as strategic points for trade, settlement, and the propagation of European culture—especially Christian religious values and doctrines.

As George Tindall and David Shi reveal, this was the age of Christian exploration, the collection of data, and a new understanding of Europe’s placement in the world. Portugal took a leading role; by 1422, its ships were off the coast of Africa mapping its shores, and by 1482, their vessels were sailing down the Congo River. Other nations sought to compete, which led to Spain’s support for Columbus’ voyages across the Atlantic Ocean to the unexpected destination of the Caribbean as he set out for the wealth of South and Southeast Asia in 1492, 1493, 1498, and 1502. England, France, and Italy supported maritime explorations in the race for

---

21 This paragraph takes its overall scope from Tindall and Shi, America, 15-23.
dominance. John Cabot, aided by King Henry VII, encountered the northern coast of North America around present-day Newfoundland in 1497. Two years later, Italy successfully joined the sea expeditions as Amerigo Vespucci encountered South America. Decades later from 1524 to 1542, France increased its presence in the Atlantic Ocean, especially with its seafarers’ travels to, explorations of, and settlement in the St. Lawrence River region. These “discovered” lands led to new portrayals of the world as European mapmakers and mariners realized they were dealing with previously unknown continents and vast geographical regions.

These new lands, however, already had inhabitants. Contemporary scholarly consensus places the emergence of Homo sapiens in Africa approximately 200,000 years ago. Some scholars conjecture that these early peoples eventually grew in number and migrated to different regions, especially the lands within the modern borders of Europe and Asia. Approximately 12,000 to 20,000 years ago, some academics think, nomadic peoples made their way through Asia and across the Bering Sea on exposed land made accessible by the Ice Age. Eventually, these peoples made their way to the northern reaches of North America and to the southernmost portions of South America. Other scholars have found evidence in North and South America to suggest that various peoples from Europe and Asia may have made their way to the two continents as early as 40,000 years ago. What is clear is that the explorers encountered new peoples with their own traditions, cultures, and religious structures. Some of the established cultures were those of the Aztecs and the Incas in Middle and South America, the Arawaks in the Bahamas, the Pueblo-Hohokam in the Southwest, the Powhatans in Virginia, and the Pequots in

---

Connecticut. The lands were not vacant as these peoples variously constructed nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary lifestyles nurtured within specific geographical regions, nourished by specific foods, and ordered by familial, political arrangements.26

Instead of accepting the diversity and independence of the various non-European communities, however, a unifying theme gave Catholic and Protestant explorers and conquerors a common goal; they sought to subjugate Indigenous peoples through military power, by converting them to the Christian religion, and by instilling in them European values.27 Since the Indigenous peoples were non-Christians, however, the discovering European, Christian nations deployed religion to support their claims to the “discovered” lands, which engendered each nation’s claim to political sovereignty over the newly encountered territories and the non-Christian peoples in the regions. This meant that international law and religion justified the explorations, conquests, and settlements that occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Steven T. Newcomb describes this process in the following way:

The nations of Christendom did not separate law and religion when they discovered non-Christian lands. Christians looked upon non-Christians as enemies of the faith, and thus saw themselves as providentially assigned, in the spirit of a crusade, to locate and wage war against the infidel. Thus, discovery and conquest were tied together. Consequently, “conquest” meant the establishment of dominion over land and people by force of arms in order to extend the boundaries of “Christendom and the dominions of Christian kings at the expense of infidels and pagans.”28

Scholars currently label this process of discovery and conquest—buttressed by religion, theology, and international law—the “Christian Doctrine of Discovery,” which is an imperialistic

framework that still affects and is a template for current international law and jurisprudence in the United States.  

As shown in the work of Robert J. Miller and Newcomb, the Christian Doctrine of Discovery has several historical layers to it. First, there is the early religious justification of the doctrine found in the Crusades from 1096 to 1271 C.E. A second component is the Council of Constance in 1414, which sustains and is supported by later papal pronouncements in the 1400s. Despite its separation from the Catholic Church beginning in 1534 with the Supremacy of the Crown Act of King Henry VIII, England continued to adhere to many of the religious and legal justifications directing European, Christian international law. The British deployed this religious and legal trajectory to legitimate the colonization and the founding of the United States, and U.S. citizens found new justification in Chief Justice John Marshall’s legal opinion concerning Johnson v. McIntosh in 1823 and the new nationalistic phraseology of “Manifest Destiny,” which emerged from the pen of John L. O’Sullivan in an editorial for the United States Magazine and Democratic Review in 1845. From colonization, Lewis and Clark’s expedition, and the Louisiana Purchase to past and current Federal Indian policies, the Mexican-American

War, and the construction of national parks in the United States, Christian religious ideas have merged with legislation to support the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the dispossession of their homelands, and the attempted cultural and political assimilation or extermination of non-Christian peoples without European lines of descent.

While the justification for dominion over peoples not following the God of the Bible clearly predates the Christian Age of Discovery beginning in the fifteenth century, the following portions will begin with papal justifications beginning in the fourteenth century; the aim is to show theologico-legal authorization for the subjugation of non-Christian peoples. I will show how Christian rulers supported Christian explorers in their discovery, exploration, and subjugation of new lands and peoples. This will help to disclose the assumptions behind the subjugating practices that led the Puritans and Thoreau’s New England region to the attempted “extermination” of Native Americans. The legal sanctions for the subjugation of Native Americans cannot be isolated from their Christian theological presuppositions.

In what is now known as the “Catholic Church,” popes have issued important directives in what are labeled “papal bulls.” These papal proclamations were authoritative and influential immediately preceding and during the Christian Age of Discovery. On 18 November 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued his papal bull *Unam sanctam* (“one holy,” that is, the One Holy Church), which outlined the significance of the unity of the Catholic Church; this text also establishes the seminal theological assumptions for an adversarial relationship with non-Christian peoples. Pope Boniface VIII asserted, “Furthermore, we declare, we proclaim, we define, that it is

35 Steven T. Newcomb argues that the adjective needs to be “Christian” because the use of the term “European Age of Discovery” hides the religious motivation and justification for discovery, conquest, and a specific form of international law. Newcomb, “The Evidence of Christian Nationalism in Federal Indian Law,” 306-09.
absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”

He is advancing the idea that the Catholic Church holds supreme power with all humanity subject to the pope’s authority; to be under the pope’s authority, one must also be within and a member of the Catholic Church. Salvation only comes to those belonging to Christ and the Church. To gain salvation, one was to submit himself or herself to the head of the Church and accept that the pope was in a direct line of succession from St. Peter. Theologically, therefore, the supreme religion is the Christian religion, and all those beyond its boundaries are condemned to damnation. To support non-Christians would be an inherently illogical, unspiritual act; to support non-Christians would be to work against Christ’s message to share his good news with the world: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”

Pope Boniface VIII, then, established the theological principles affirming the supremacy of the Christian religion while sanctioning the popes’ and the Catholic Church’s pronouncements.

The assumed supremacy of Christianity would be clearest during the formative years of the Christian Age of Discovery with the papal bulls and the declarations of Christian monarchs supporting the discovery, exploration, and subjugation of heathen lands and peoples. Pope Nicholas V issued Romanus pontifex (the Roman pontiff) on 8 January 1455; here he supported Alfonso, the king of Portugal, in seizing and subduing Saracens (Muslims) and other non-Christians because they were “enemies”.

The Roman pontiff, successor of the key-bearer of the heavenly kingdom and vicar of Jesus Christ, contemplating with a father’s mind all the several climes of the world and

---

39 Mark 16:15-16. NRSV.
the characteristics of all the nations dwelling in them and seeking and desiring the salvation of all, wholesomely ordains and disposes upon careful deliberation those things which he sees will be agreeable to the Divine Majesty and by which he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls. This we believe will more certainly come to pass, through the aid of the Lord, if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who, like athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith, as we know by the evidence of facts, not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us, and subject them to their own temporal dominion, sparing no labor and expense, in order that those kings and princes, relieved of all obstacles, may be the more animated to the prosecution of so salutary and laudable a work.41

In seeking divine salvation for the souls entrusted to him, Pope Nicholas V theologically supported the “legal” taking of land and the subduing of all non-Christians. Saracens, infidels, and other enemies of Christ could be reduced to perpetual slavery and their lands and goods seized to support the Christian religion; King Alfonso was authorized

\[
\ldots\text{to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit}.\]

42

Pope Boniface VIII and Pope Nicholas V agree; special privilege is granted to those within the Catholic Christian religious tradition. These Christians work for their salvation under the direction of the pope who gives theological justification to seize land and property and to subjugate the enemies of Christ by making them perpetual slaves.

Similarly, Pope Alexander VI issued Inter caetera II (“among other”) on 4 May 1493, which gave Ferdinand, Isabella, and Christopher Columbus the right to discover and to take

42 Mills, Taylor, and Graham, Colonial Latin America, 39.
possession of non-Christian lands in order to spread the Catholic faith to unbelievers.\textsuperscript{43} I quote this papal bull at length.

Alexander, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to the illustrious sovereigns, our very dear son in Christ, Ferdinand, king, and our very dear daughter in Christ, Isabella, queen of Castile, Leon, Aragon, Sicily, and Granada, health and apostolic benediction. Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself. Wherefore inasmuch as by the favor of divine clemency, we, though of insufficient merits, have been called to this Holy See of Peter, recognizing that as true Catholic kings and princes, such as we have known you always to be, and as your illustrious deeds already known to almost the whole world declare, you not only eagerly desire but with every effort, zeal, and diligence, without regard to hardships, expenses, dangers, with the shedding even of your blood, are laboring to that end; recognizing also that you have long since dedicated to this purpose your whole soul and all your endeavors—as witnessed in these times with so much glory to the Divine Name in your recovery of the kingdom of Granada from the yoke of the Saracens—we therefore are rightly led, and hold it as our duty, to grant you even of our own accord and in your favor those things whereby with effort each day more hearty you may be enabled for the honor of God himself and the spread of the Christian rule to carry forward your holy and praiseworthy purpose so pleasing to immortal God . . . you, with the wish to fulfill your desire, chose our beloved son, Christopher Columbus, a man assuredly worthy and of the highest recommendations and fitted for so great an undertaking, whom you furnished with ships and men equipped for like designs, not without the greatest hardships, dangers, and expenses, to make diligent quest for these remote and unknown mainlands and islands through the sea, where hitherto no one had sailed; and they at length, with divine aid and with the utmost diligence sailing in the ocean sea, discovered certain very remote islands and even mainlands that hitherto had not been discovered by others . . . we, of our own accord . . . give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, forever, together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdictions, and appurtenances, all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south . . . With this proviso however that none of the islands and mainlands, found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered . . . be in the actual possession of any Christian king or prince . . .\textsuperscript{44}

Here Alexander V praises Ferdinand, Isabella, and Columbus for their service to the Catholic Christian tradition. He praises the risks they have taken to spread Christ’s message. Discovery is


\textsuperscript{44} Davenport, ed., \textit{European Treaties}, 76-77.
not only associated with the spreading of the faith to the inhabitants occupying those non-
Christian lands, but it is also associated with subjugation. One supreme religion guided
exploration, occupation, and the seizure of lands. All discovered non-Christian lands would be
placed in perpetual dominion of Ferdinand and Isabella’s heirs. In the papal bulls of Boniface
VIII, Nicholas V, and Alexander VI, legal jurisdiction, approved non-Christian subjugation, and
seizure of land are based on the religious, theological distinctions between Christian and heathen.

Similar pronouncements and ideas emerged from England, France, Holland, and
Sweden. Because of limited space, however, I will not engage these pronouncements directly;
instead, I will briefly turn to the case of Johnson v. McIntosh (1823) and the idea of Manifest
Destiny. After this, I will fill in the gaps with specific historical, religious information about New
England before settlement, New England during Puritan colonization, and the region after
Christian settlement. This establishes a clear trajectory linking Christianity, subjugation,
intolerance, and exclusion in America—the qualities Thoreau countered with his idea of “wild,”
“untamed,” and “uncivilized” religion.

Johnson v. McIntosh is a nineteenth-century Supreme Court case addressing who can
purchase lands legally from Native Americans. The dispute emerged as William McIntosh
purchased 11,560 acres of land from the United States government, but Thomas Johnson had
already bequeathed portions of that land to Joshua Johnson and Thomas J. Graham in 1819. He
had purchased them directly from the Illinois and Piankeshaw Nations between 1773 and 1775.
The Supreme Court had to decide if Indigenous nations could sell or deed their lands to private
individuals as they desired. As Newcomb observes, “This question regarding the power of [an

45 Miller, “The Doctrine of Discovery in American Indian Law,” 15-21. Miller, Native America, Discovered and Conquered, 17-
23.
46 Miller, “The Doctrine of Discovery in American Indian Law,” 62-69. Miller, Native America, Discovered and Conquered, 50-
Indigenous] nation to dispose of its own lands, at its own will, to persons of its own choosing, was an inquiry into more than just the nature of its title; it was an inquiry into the very nature of that nation’s sovereignty and dominion.\textsuperscript{47}

In writing his opinion for the Supreme Court, Chief Justice John Marshall navigated a delicate issue in such a way as to allow the U.S. government the right to maintain dominion over Indigenous lands and sovereignty over Indigenous nations. Marshall based this on a distinction between civilized and uncivilized peoples:

The United States, then, have unequivocally acceded to that great and broad rule by which its civilized inhabitants now hold this country . . . They maintain, as all others have maintained, that discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or by conquest; and gave also a right to such a degree of sovereignty as the circumstances of the people would allow them to exercise.\textsuperscript{48}

Similarly, on 25 November 1946, Supreme Court Justice Stanley Reed clarified and upheld Marshall’s legal opinion based on Christian discovery and the right of conquest in his opinion on

\textit{United States v. Alcea Band of Tillamooks}: \textsuperscript{49}

This distinction between rights from recognized occupancy and from Indian title springs from the theory under which the European nations took possession of the lands of the American aborigines. This theory was that discovery by the Christian nations gave them sovereignty over and title to the lands discovered. While Indians were permitted to occupy these lands under their Indian title, the conquering nations asserted the right to extinguish that Indian title without legal responsibility to compensate the Indian for his loss. It is not for the courts of the conqueror to question the propriety or validity of such an assertion of power.\textsuperscript{50}

Clearly, for the Supreme Court, Indian nations are uncivilized, and this uncivilized basis is predicated on the ideas of Christian discovery and the superiority of Christian civilization.\textsuperscript{50} This means that Christian nations, as civilized, more advanced nations, hold ultimate sovereignty; this

\textsuperscript{47} Newcomb, “The Evidence of Christian Nationalism in Federal Indian Law,” 320.

\textsuperscript{48} National Indian Law Library and United States, \textit{Landmark Indian Law Cases} (Buffalo: W.S. Hein, 2002), 18.


\textsuperscript{50} Newcomb, “The Evidence of Christian Nationalism in Federal Indian Law,” 320-21.
negated the sovereignty of Native American nations. Property laws, therefore, were to be determined according to the dominant paradigms established by Christian discovery and the laws of the United States—both of which superseded and diminished Indigenous occupancy of, ownership of, and sovereignty over lands within the boundaries of the United States.

Marshall readily used Christian theologico-legal practices from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to justify case law in nineteenth-century America. It was in this 1823 opinion that religion and U.S. jurisprudence subtly merged to maintain the supremacy of Christian settlement in North America in a secularized fashion. Robert J. Miller clearly articulates what the Supreme Court’s ruling in 1823 meant for Native Americans:

In fact, Marshall stated that the case was an easy one. In light of the Discovery rule, the Court’s answer to the issue was obvious: the purchase of land directly from Indian Nations by private individuals did not transfer a title “which can be sustained in the Courts of the United States.” Consequently, the private land speculators lost out in their decades-long battle for the right to buy Indian lands directly from the Indian Nations. The Doctrine of Discovery had triumphed over any claim of exclusive real property rights or natural rights for Native Americans and their tribal governments.

Steven T. Newcomb summarizes Marshall’s opinion in the following way: “Thus, Marshall’s language may be interpreted as simply another way of stating that discovery gave Christian people dominion (i.e., a right of subjugation) over non-Christian lands.”

By the time the term “Manifest Destiny” came into use in 1845, the United States was already functioning on the values of this concept based on Christian discovery and conquest. From settlement to the emergence of America and from the Constitution to John Marshall’s opinion, the supremacy of Christian nations over non-Christian peoples was accepted; it is in the term “Manifest Destiny” that this trajectory would take on a clearly American route and

52 Miller, Native America, Discovered and Conquered, 52.
character.\textsuperscript{54} John L. O’Sullivan wrote that the United States had “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of [America’s] yearly multiplying millions.”\textsuperscript{55} Later in the same year, O’Sullivan would use the concept of Manifest Destiny in association with the principles of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery to justify the United States’ claim to Oregon territory, which led to the following conclusion: “The God of nature and of nations has marked it for our own; and with His blessing we will firmly maintain the incontestable rights He has given, and fearlessly perform the high duties He has imposed.”\textsuperscript{56} Miller makes the following observation: “It sounds like he was making the Divine Right of Kings argument used for centuries by European monarchies to maintain their thrones. It is also reminiscent of the development of the Doctrine of Discovery and the exercise of the Church’s power and the rights of European monarchs to control the lands of non-Christian, non-European peoples in the alleged service of the Christian God.”\textsuperscript{57} In the end, Manifest Destiny had three underlying claims: (1) there was something special about the United States and its citizens, (2) the United States had a mandate to transform the world in the image of America, and (3) God supported this act providentially.\textsuperscript{58} These underlying assumptions became popular in mainstream American culture, in Congress, and in U.S. foreign policy. It helped to lend legitimacy to the U.S. war with Mexico, and it also supported the attempted remaking of Native American culture through cultural assimilation.

It was within these conditions that would lead to the coining of the term “Manifest Destiny” that Thoreau was writing \textit{A Week}. Readers know that in his letter to H.G.O. Blake, Thoreau denounced Manifest Destiny. In “Resistance to Civil Government” and \textit{A Week},

\textsuperscript{54} Miller, \textit{Native America, Discovered and Conquered}, 115.
\textsuperscript{55} As quoted in \textit{Ibid.}, 118.
\textsuperscript{56} As quoted in Miller, \textit{Native America, Discovered and Conquered}, 119.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, 120.
Thoreau also denounced America’s war with Mexico and the holding of slaves. It is also clear in other writings, such as his Indian Notebooks, that Thoreau respected and wanted to learn more about Native American life and their interactions with missionaries and discovering nations. Thoreau knew about and denounced not only Manifest Destiny but also the Christian tenets of discovery that justified the concept of Manifest Destiny, which he clearly challenges in A Week.59 Through his disciplined readings of American history, texts on Columbus’ voyages, and books on European explorations of the “New World,” Thoreau encountered the religious justifications that Chief Justice John Marshall described as the British claim to North America when Marshall wrote:

No one of the powers of Europe gave its full assent to this principle [of Christian Discovery], more unequivocally than England. The documents upon this subject are ample and complete. So early as the year 1496, her monarch granted a commission to the Cabots, to discover countries then unknown to Christian people, and to take possession of them in the name of the king of England. Two years afterwards, Cabot proceeded on this voyage, and discovered the continent of North America, along which he sailed as far south as Virginia. To this discovery the English trace their title.60

Not only did the English trace their title to North America through the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, but the Puritans in Thoreau’s New England perpetuated this doctrine. It was this ethos of Christian supremacy that led Thoreau to posit a new form of religion to counter New England’s religion of subjugation.

**New England before Settlement**

As Richard Brown and Jack Tager make clear, North America was different from the world with which the British were familiar. Many of the settlers coming to New England and the East Coast, such as the Jamestown settlers, the Pilgrims, and the Puritans, were from within or

59 Taylor, “Thoreau’s American Founding,” 99-123.
around cities. They had concerns that were communal in nature; that is, their endeavors were dependent upon British culture and the establishment of settled, non-nomadic villages. For example, it is said of the Jamestown settlers that they “were mostly soldiers and gentlemen-adventurers; among the handful of tradesmen were a goldsmith and a perfumer. The purpose of overseas expansion was trade and the extraction of gold, silver, spice, and perfumes. Initially, American ventures were manifestations of the exuberant hopes of Renaissance courtiers and merchants eager to enrich themselves with glory and gold.”\(^61\) William Bradford and John Winthrop had other aims, however, as both were concerned with more godly matters; Bradford sought to leave the Netherlands because the Dutch were too tolerant and not religious enough, and Winthrop’s “chief concern was making a secure and pious life for himself and his family.”\(^62\) While agricultural production was still important in Britain, city life was beginning its trajectory toward ascendency. Permanent dwellings were conventional, and the increasing populations of England and Wales were already totaling approximately 4.5 million people at the start of the seventeenth century. For Bradford and Winthrop, New England was not just a “new world” or an “undiscovered world”; it was a profoundly different, unfamiliar domain, and they would not find themselves comfortably coexisting in the natural environment like the others who had entered the region thousands of years before British ships anchored offshore.\(^63\)

Two-hundred million years ago, the New England region had a much warmer climate that sustained dinosaurs and tropical vegetation, but an ice age lasting one million years arrived leading to a thick layer of ice covering the entire New England territory, which has been described as being almost two miles in depth. Approximately 15,000 years ago, this ice receded


\(^{62}\) Ibid., 15-16.

\(^{63}\) Lawrence Buell identifies the colonization of North America in a twofold way: (1) ecological colonization through “disease and invasive plant forms” and (2) the subjugation of “indigenous peoples by political and military means.” Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 6.
giving way to new surfaces, subsoil, and vegetation in New England. About 6,000 BCE, Paleo-Indians settled in New England and in the region around Concord and Walden Pond, but communities of settlers would emerge and disappear over thousands of years until around 1,000 BCE or the start of the Common Era when Algonkin language-speaking communities settled in the region and established themselves along the northeastern coast of North America. Over the years, up to and including the time of European colonization, a number of tribal groups controlled territories within what is now the state of Massachusetts: the Massachusett, Merrimac, Mohegan, Mohican, and Wampanoag. A similar diversity existed in the rest of New England with the Mahican, Minisink, Mohegan, Niantic, Pequot, and Quiripi in Connecticut territory; the Abenaki, Micmac, and Penobscot in Maine territory; the Abenaki and Pennacook in New Hampshire territory; the Narragansett, Niantic, and Wampanoag in Rhode Island territory; and the Abenaki, Mohican, and Massachusetts in Vermont territory. With at least 75,000 people living in the region, the forests of New England were neither undiscovered nor devoid of human life in the seventeenth century.

To these British settlers, however, the region seemed as such. What they were familiar with was a less harmonious relationship with the natural environment. Although the Indigenous peoples in New England left traces of their existence, they were more subtle and “untamed” than the British settlers were used to. Many of the tribes were semi-sedentary communities

---

agriculturally dependent on four crops: beans, corn, pumpkins, and squash. They supplemented their diets with fish, which they also used to fertilize their fields; they appear to have moved approximately every seven years, which helped to avoid soil depletion and allowed them to find better regions with a vaster, more readily accessible wood supply. By moving around, the forest regenerated itself. Natives also burned the undergrowth in the forests, however, to keep the forest floor clearer and better suited for grazing herd animals that Indigenous peoples hunted; this simultaneously helped nut producing trees to be free from competition with undergrowth, which allowed for better nut production. In the end, they were able to maximize the forest’s vitality and their natural surroundings without deforesting the New England region and without severely transforming it and leaving undesirable traces of their presence wherever they went. Their relationship with the natural environment left the woods in an apparent pristine condition for the British settlers who were accustomed to more disruptive agricultural activities and deforestation.

This less cultivated land led European settlers and the U.S. government in later years to conclude that the territories were *terra nullius* ("nobody’s land"). In his *History of the Plymouth Settlement*, William Bradford describes America in such language while simultaneously describing the inferiority of Indigenous peoples: “The place [the settlers] fixed their thoughts upon was somewhere in those vast and unpeopled countries of America, which were fruitful and fit for habitation, though devoid of all civilized inhabitants and given over to

---


Mark Fiege asserts, “Unworked, unimproved land was *vacuum domicilium*, land into which the colonists could move. By demography, desire, and belief, the colonists were primed to displace Natives.” Fiege, *The Republic of Nature*, 31. Of course, the Puritan worldview was premised on what “unimproved land” meant, which was quite different from indigenous views. Also see Silva, “Miraculous Plagues,” 255-59.
savages, who range up and down, differing little from the wild beasts themselves."\textsuperscript{73}

Interpretations of this type and encounters with healthy, apparently “unpeopled” forests eventually justified the appropriation of land for settlement, commercial interests, and even the creation of national parks.

There is a significant religious difference underlying Native American views of the natural world and the Christian Puritan religious view of the natural world. As shown by Oren Lyons and George Tinker, Indigenous peoples expressed a concern for the present that intersects with the future,\textsuperscript{74} yet this is not an emphasis on time as one finds in European and Euro-American societies, which is associated with history and keeping track of dates. Their concerns with the future were associated with their desire to live in harmony and balance in the present, which would allow for a better future for later generations. Furthermore, Indigenous views were coupled with an emphasis on nature and place, not institutions and doctrines. This means that Native Americans cultivated a religious reverence for sacred places in nature, and they cultivated a sense of connection with specific bioregional locations based on their people’s existence in that locale and often based on their responsibility for seven generations to come.

Native Americans also collectively held a different view of the natural world from the Europeans who would emigrate to North America. For example, nature was “peopled” with human and non-human beings who deserved respect, and this was the consequence of their relational view of the world. Instead of seeing animals as inferior or as objects, Native Americans saw them as relatives and spoke of them as “brothers” and “sisters.”\textsuperscript{75} Respect and responsibility, therefore, are not intended for humans only; instead, the natural world is peopled

\textsuperscript{73} Bradford, \textit{Bradford’s History of the Plymouth Settlement}, 21.
\textsuperscript{75} Tinker, “An American Indian Cultural Universe,” 196-201.
with manifold life forms that must be cared for. Relations, respect, and responsibility are three cornerstones in North American Indigenous cultures and their interactions with the natural world and their dwelling places.

In *Nature Religion in America*, Catherine L. Albanese summarizes this view:

As this relational view suggests, the well-being of Amerindian peoples depended in large measure on a correspondence between themselves and what they held sacred. The material world was a holy place; and so harmony with nature beings and natural forms was the controlling ethic, reciprocity the recognized mode of interaction. Ritual functioned to restore a lost harmony, like a great balancing act bringing the people back to right relation with the world.\(^76\)

Albanese offers another important observation; she asserts, “What we, today, would call an ecological perspective came, for the most part, easily—if unselfconsciously—among traditional tribal peoples.”\(^77\) Lyons presents readers with an example of this ecological awareness: “We were instructed to give thanks for All That Sustains Us.”\(^78\) This is followed by his awareness of their gratitude for the “Law of Life”: “Thus, we created great ceremonies of thanksgiving for the life-giving forces of the Natural World; as long as we carried out our ceremonies, life would continue. We were told that ‘The Seed is The Law.’ Indeed, it is The Law of Life. It is The Law of Regeneration.”\(^79\)

The values of relatedness, respect, responsibility, harmony, and balance in relation to the natural world and all people (human and non-human), however, were not part of the religious worldview of New England’s Christian settlers. In fact, while Native Americans felt at home in the natural world and interconnected with all creation, Puritans generally expressed something quite different: Nature was a wild, fallen, dangerous place that needed to be tamed, divided,

\(^78\) Lyons, “Keepers of Life,” 42.
\(^79\) *Ibid.*, 43.
owned, and occupied to transform it into a “New Eden.” This is the difference between harmony with the natural world and mastery and destruction of the natural environment and Indigenous life intersecting with it. In Thoreau’s eyes, the principles and values that scholars define as the Christian Doctrine of Discovery led to a two-fold destruction: the attempted elimination of Native Americans and the attempted taming of nature.81

Edward Johnson and His Wonder-Working Providence

In the introductory chapter “Concord River,” Thoreau offers a contemplative account of the river’s history, its character, and the life in and around the slowly flowing waters. This pensive process generates his resolution to give his life over to the river: “at last I resolved to launch myself on its bosom, and float whither it would bear me.”82 His fate depends on the flow of the river, yet to get to this resolution, Thoreau moves through a recounting of his environs and his rootedness in a local history interdependent with the rest of the world.83 He begins with the

---


81 Dean David Grodzins makes it clear that readers and scholars need to remember that the Transcendentalists lived in a natural world that had been significantly altered as a result of European emigration to the New England region. When the Transcendentalists speak about “nature,” they are speaking of a seriously transformed environment from what it was when the first Europeans entered North America. Dean David Grodzins, “Nature,” in Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 132-34.

82 Thoreau, A Week, 13.

83 It is interesting to note that Thoreau was coming of age during a time of radical change in perception relating to the natural world, so his contemplation can be seen as a way of navigating the changing views of nature and humanity’s place within the natural world. Before sustained industrialization, the Puritans and other Europeans continued to fear nature and its processes; they sought to transcend nature, and strong religious beliefs helped to accomplish this transcendence. With industrial development and the refining of capitalist trade, people gained a level of control over nature never experienced before, and this led to nature being more obsolete in the people’s lives. While both views continued to disparage the natural world, the Puritans had remained connected to the natural world—they were more rooted in the natural world—as they feared its untamed aspects. After sustained industrialization, however, people were less rooted in nature but continued to disparage it. Technology slowly helped to alienate people from their bioregional environments and the processes of nature. Harold Fromm, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map,” in The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 30-39. William E. Cain relates a similar situation, but his account has Boston elites trying to nurture intimacy with nature after the rise of industry and technology. As those with money and power
naming of the river and the difference between the Native American designation for the waters, the “Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River,” and the British designation, the “Concord River.”

He prefers the Indigenous name because it more appropriately fits the character of the river, and he makes it clear that the word “concord” does not rightly fit the entire history of British settlement in the region since the blood of the revolution and conflicts with Native Americans have disrupted the peace and harmony for the British emigrants. In this chapter, Thoreau also describes how the river expands and contracts throughout the seasons; as his contemplation expands, Thoreau describes animal and plant life, and he describes the relationship the river has with other famous rivers, such as the Ganges and the Nile; he also associates the Concord River with the mythology of the Xanthus or Scamander.

Woven into this reflective moment, however, is Edward Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence. Thoreau wants to “see how matters looked to him” in “New England from 1628 to 1652.” The themes in Johnson’s text establish the sentiments of a religion of subjugation that Thoreau will move readers away from as he moves them toward religion as preservative care.

supported technology and market expansion, they ironically turned to nature and built homes in the countryside. William E. Cain, “Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862: A Brief Biography,” in A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30-31. Both Fromm and Cain are indicating serious changes in social conditions that altered relations with the natural world. As “agricultural capitalism” expanded, farms and farmers changed drastically as they moved from general subsistence production to farming for the market. This also altered the family and the work structure as less children worked on the farm, which led farmers to employ people from outside the family (such as cheap migrant labor). This desire for increased production led to a highly rationalized, planned approach to farming based on consumption and demand from outside of Concord. See Robert A. Gross, “Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau’s Concord,” The Journal of American History 69, no. 1 (1982): 42-61.

The stories Thoreau includes from Johnson’s book concern the founding of the first churches in Concord and Sudbury. These coincide with the emergence of both towns as proper political entities, but Johnson also emphasizes the intersection of both towns with the Concord River and the difficulties each town had because of the natural environment. Johnson says of Concord, “Allwifes and shad in their season come up to this town, but salmon and dace cannot come up, by reason of the rocky falls, which causeth their meadows to lie much covered with water, the which these people, together with their neighbor town, have several times essayed to cut through but cannot, yet it may be turned another way with an hundred pound charge as it appeared.” With this quote, Thoreau gives the reader a clear intersection between church, town, and nature; contrary to the attempts of Native Americans to live balanced lives within and a part of nature, Thoreau gives us towns established within a natural environment that the people then try to shape to their desires, which displaces nature as home and nurturer as the Puritans establish Christ’s church as the mother and nurturer of the people.

Instead of building the towns and farms in areas better suited to their needs, the towns’ settlers consider diverting the river with explosives. This is the emergence of an initial attitude aimed at subjugating nature for the settlers’ needs. Thoreau then quotes Johnson’s comments on the founding of Sudbury and the damage it endures because of floods: “…it lying very low is much indamaged with land floods, insomuch that when the summer proves wet they lose part of

---

90 Thoreau, A Week, 10-11.
91 Ibid., 10. Also see Johnson, Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence, 110.
92 Rosenmeier, “‘They Shall No Longer Grieve’,” 5-6.
their hay; yet are they so sufficiently provided that they take in cattle of other towns in winter. 93

The inability of settlers to judge properly the limits of nature and to rightly read it and its
seasonal fluctuations are recurring themes throughout A Week. Johnson, therefore, provides an
apt place to begin looking for clues relating to why settlers were not at home in nature. This
helps to lay the groundwork for what a religion of subjugation looks like and how it intersects
with the values present in the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. In fact, Johnson’s Puritan
historical writing expresses unambiguous support for the principles of this doctrine. 94

Uncertainty exists about Johnson’s arrival in New England, but it seems likely that he
came with John Winthrop and the others in 1630. He went back to England in 1631 for
approximately five years and returned to New England in 1636 during the contentious period of
the “Antinomian Crisis.” 95 He was an important leader and helped to found Woburn,
Massachusetts, which is eleven miles north of Boston and was settled in 1640. Johnson came to
be known as the “Father of Woburn” and began writing his Wonder-Working Providence in 1649
and published it in late 1653 and early 1654; it is “the first general history of New England.” 96 In
it, he links the founding of New England with a desire to enjoy a pure life based on worshipping
Jesus and following his teachings:

But these forsooke a fruitfull Land, stately Buildings, goodly Gardens, Orchards, yea,
deare Friends, and neere relations, to goe to a desart Wildernes, thousands of leagues
by Sea, both turbulent and dangerous; also many have travelled to see famous Cities,
strong Fortifications, etc. in hope to enjoy a settled habitation, where riches are attained
with ease. But here the onely encouragements were the laborious breaking up of bushy
ground, with the continued toyl of erecting houses, for themselves and cattell, in this

93 Thoreau, A Week, 11. Also see Johnson, Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence, 195-96.
95 Rosenmeier, “‘They Shall No Longer Grieve,’” 4-5. The Antinomian Crisis lasted from 1636 to 1638 in New England and was
largely contained within the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Baird Tipson, “New England Puritanism,” in Encyclopedia of the
American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York:
Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 475-77.
howling desart; all which they underwent, with much cheerfulnesse, that they might enjoy Christ and his Ordinances in their primitive purity.97

Unlike other emigrants who departed from England or other European nations, the Puritans who entered New England had a divine agenda98 as they sought purity in the “New World.” They departed and left behind their country and loved ones; they left behind the certainty of settled life in Britain.99 They risked the dangers of the waters—alluding to the watery abyss God hovers over in Genesis, but in this danger, they had courage. They continued to have that courage as they settled in a “howling desart,” which implies the Israelites wandering in the woods for forty years after escaping from Egypt.100

The term “desart” is important in the above paragraph. Oxford English Dictionary indicates this word comes from the ecclesiastical Latin word dēsertus, which means “abandoned, deserted, left waste.”101 Instead of the conditions contemporary uses of the word allude to, such as arid, sandy lands, Johnson indicates a place that is “uninhabited and desolate.” Yet this land is not simply empty; it is also a hostile, “howling,” chaotic land.102 This word refers to Deuteronomy 23:10, and in Johnson’s passage, it enhances the word “wilderness” and indicates a place with a level of danger, wildness, and the presence of beasts.103 Instead of encountering this wilderness with melancholy, they toiled with positive spirits; in breaking and tilling the land,

cultivating it, the settlers slowly began the process of taming the howling desert.\textsuperscript{104} They wanted to civilize it, which they saw as God’s will.\textsuperscript{105} Their presence gave them the right to settle, possess, and cultivate or Christianize the barbarous, “uncultivated” land.\textsuperscript{106} It was only through God’s help and will, however, that they would “turn a wilderness into a garden.”\textsuperscript{107}

This cultivation of land and the building of a new and improved England in North America, however, would not be easy. The Puritans saw themselves combating difficult times as they fought the “Antichrist” and all those opposing Jesus and his godly reign on earth.\textsuperscript{108} The metaphorical language of being “Christ’s soldiers,” therefore, was taken literally and incorporated into daily life and practices.\textsuperscript{109} The Puritan mission to North America was a battle, both spiritually and physically, according to Johnson:

And all you, who are or shall be shipped for this worke, thynke it not enough that you enjoy the truth, but you must hate every false way and know you are called to be faithful Souldiers of Christ, not onely to assist in building up his Churches, but also in pulling downe the Kingdome of Anti-Christ, then sure you are not set up for tollerating times, nor shall any of you be content with this that you are set at liberty, but take up your Armes, and march manly on till all opposers of Christs Kingly power be abolished . . . be not danted at your small number, for every common Souldier in Christs Campe shall be


\textsuperscript{106} Cotton Mather imagined transforming “American geography into ‘Christianography.”’ As quoted in Fiege, \textit{The Republic of Nature}, 30. Finch, “Puritans,” 1314. Johnson imagined “the New World as a battleground for the forces of Good and Evil.” Gallagher, “The \textit{Wonder-Working Providence} as Spiritual Biography,” 78, 81-82. It is struggle and hardship that keeps them true soldiers of Christ; an easy life leads to sin or backsliding. Arch, “The Edifying History of Edward Johnson’s \textit{Wonder-Working Providence},” 51-52. Also see Gallagher, “An Overview of Edward Johnson’s \textit{Wonder-Working Providence},” 36. From a Puritan perspective, the difference between them and the Native Americans was the fact that indigenous peoples did not “cultivate land”; this is “an essential component of the Native American” character. They, therefore, are “savage” from the Latin root \textit{silvaticus}, which means to be part of the wilderness or woods. This negative use of “savage,” then means that natives did not cultivate the land. Therefore, they did not own it or possess it in a European fashion. Silva, “Miraculous Plagues,” 257-58.

\textsuperscript{107} Gallagher, “An Overview of Edward Johnson’s \textit{Wonder-Working Providence},” 47. The garden trope was important to the Puritans and Johnson. Silva, “Miraculous Plagues,” 254-55. It obviously implies the garden in Eden from which Adam and Eve were ejected. Similarly, John Winthrop turned to Genesis 1:28 for justification for turning the wilderness into a garden as this Bible passage speaks of subduing the earth. He interpreted this as God’s mandate justifying Puritan dominion over new lands. Merchant, “The New England Wilderness Transformed,” 27.


as David, who slew the great Goliah, and his Davids shall be as the Angels of the Lord, who slew 185000 in the Assyrian Army.\textsuperscript{110}

Johnson was captain of Woburn’s militia and served in a military capacity for thirty years, and the language of battle builds on his reputation as a military leader,\textsuperscript{111} but he is also acting here in a prophetic role as he urges New Englanders to live a religious life.\textsuperscript{112} In this way, Johnson merges religion, war, and the welfare of society. He attempts to create a collective identity for all New Englanders as they toil to form the New Jerusalem,\textsuperscript{113} all the members of New England are engaged in a common struggle for the future where Christ will reign supreme and New England will have collective salvation.\textsuperscript{114} Johnson does not question the election of New England and its people, and he was intent on undermining “the alarming trend during the 1640s and 1650s of colonists returning to England.”\textsuperscript{115} While they may be small in number, Johnson believed, the settlers need not fear the future, for Christ will protect them;\textsuperscript{116} they will be able to kill great numbers of those supporting the Anti-Christ.\textsuperscript{117}

Another important point is the assertion that they are not living in tolerant times.\textsuperscript{118} There was no room for tolerance when the second coming of Christ was at stake.\textsuperscript{119} There was no room

\textsuperscript{111} Perry, “Autobiographical Role-Playing,” 295.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 296-97.
for dissent; there was a right way and a wrong way: conformity to orthodox beliefs while silencing heterodox dissent through strong civil and ecclesiastical authority. Johnson wanted the community to see things through dualistic categories where any dissent was a threat to the divine mission of the New Englanders. The Puritans were convinced that wrong and right behavior could alienate God from their community leading to chastisement or God’s grace, and God punishes those who deviate from “his” path. “As the modern version of ancient Israel” that wandered over the dangerous waters of the Atlantic Ocean and as settlers left to tame a new, wild land, God must have been on their side; they must have done what was right because they made it to the “New World” safely. Tolerance could undermine the entire divine plan.

This military language and the intolerance Johnson advocates manifested themselves in the conquest of the Indians with Christ’s protection. He describes this in the sixth chapter, which is titled “Of the Gratiuous Goodnesse of the Lord Christ, in Saving His New England People, from the Hand of the Barbarous Indians.” Johnson focuses on the Pequot war described by William Bradford above in the opening of this chapter. He describes the process in which New Englanders built an alliance with the Narragansett Indians to preclude their alliance with the Pequots. Johnson describes an event where the Pequots stood before the English and “blasphemed the Lord”; this ensured their defeat: “Thus by their horrible pride they fitted themselves for destruction. The English hearing this report, were now full assured that the Lord

---

121 Arch, “The Edifying History of Edward Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence,” 48-50. This is where theological accounts of New England epidemics is important. Disease and death took on theological significance, and these interpretations of epidemics are crucial to understanding the history of the colonization of North America. Silva, “Miraculous Plagues,” 249-70.
would deliver them into their hands to execute his righteous judgement upon these blasphemous murtherers, and therefore raised fresh Souldiers for the warre . . . “128 Their duty is to obliterate those against their God, and the Indians’ blasphemy is enough to show the division between the two communities: Indigenous sinfulness and Puritan holiness. It was not enough to live peaceably with the Indians in separate communities ensuring the Puritan settlements remained orthodox in their worship of God while letting others practice their own religion. Instead, it was about subjugating those who dissented from the divine plan.129

Winning the battle with the Pequots proved it a holy war;130 winning the battle showed Johnson that Christ was on their side, and the Puritans were in harmony with Christ and had won his favor.131 He concludes the chapter with the following words:

The Lord in mercy toward his poore Churches having thus destroyed these bloudy barbarous Indians, he returns his people to safety to their vessels, where they take account of their prisoners: the Squawes and some young youths they brought home with them, and finding the men to be deeply guilty of the cries they undertooke the warre for, they brought away onely their heads as a token of their glory. By this means the Lord strook a trembling terror into all the Indians round about, even to this very day.132

Theologically, Jesus favored his people and helped them to overcome the “barbarous Indians.”133 This was not all as their religious view, with an emphasis on intolerance, allowed Johnson to justify the Puritans’ reward of decapitating some of the blasphemous Indians. Christ becomes a warrior leader in Johnson’s history who sustains warfare, dismemberment of Indian bodies, and the striking of “trembling terror” into blasphemous Indians and their communities. This narrative

129 Rosenmeier, “‘They Shall No Longer Grieve,’” 12.
131 For Johnson, God was completely active in history and weakened the natives before the Puritans arrived. Gallagher, “The Wonder-Working Providence as Spiritual Biography,” 77, 84. Also see Arch, “The Edifying History of Edward Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence,” 48. This is why Johnson uses different verb tenses in telling his history of New England. The past is reserved for the acts of fallen humanity, but the present is used when writing about God and Christ because of their eternal salvific works in the world. See Brumm, “Edward Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence and the Puritan Conception of History,” 140-51. Johnson also believed that the epidemics that decimated native populations was a sign of divine providence. Johnson saw “Christ as the prime agent behind the epidemics.” Harm to their opposition justified the belief that they were doing God’s will. Silva, “Miraculous Plagues: Epidemiology on New England’s Colonial Landscape,” 252.
makes clear how the Puritan religious worldview and style is thought to be superior and the only viable religious approach.

Johnson, then, was using a historical narrative to establish the theological importance of God in the “New World.” He not only justified the planting of the new establishments with theological arguments, but he also justified these settlements with war in the name of Christ. In a section on discipline, Johnson instructs the readers how the people are to behave and prepare for their struggle for Christ and his message:

You shall with all diligence provide against the Malignant adversaries of the truth, for assure your selves the time is at hand wherein Antichrist will muster up all his Farces, and make war with the People of God: but it shall be to his utter overthrow. See then you store your selves with all sorts of weapons for war, furbriッシュ up your Swords, Rapiers, and all other piercing weapons. As for great Artillery, seeing present meanes falls short, waite on the Lord Christ, and hee will stir up friends to provide for you: and in the meane time spare not to lay out your coyne for Powder, Bullets, Match, Armes of all sorts, and all kinde of Instruments for War: and although it may now seeme a thing incredible, you shall see in that Wildernesse, whither you are going, Troopes of stout Horsemens marshalled, and therefore fayle not to ship lusty Mares along with you, and see that with all dilligence you incourage every Souldier-like Spirit among you, for the Lord Christ intends to atchieve greater matters by this little handfull then the World is aware of; wherefore you shall seeke and set up men of valour to lead and direct every Souldier among you, and with all diligence to instruct them from time to time.\textsuperscript{134}

The internal spiritual battle had a corresponding outer battle against all those hostile to Christ’s message. This readiness for warfare was to be waged not only against those clearly outside of the Church, such as Native Americans, Muslims, or heathens in general, but it was a war against those degenerate Christians subverting the true message of Christ, such as Anabaptists, Antinomians, and Catholics all of which Johnson equated with “the great Whore,” Babylon.\textsuperscript{135} This mission of planting God’s settlements in the “New World” had serious implications for those outside the confines of the authoritative Puritan worldview, such as Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and the Quakers.

\textsuperscript{134} Johnson, \textit{Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence}, 33.
\textsuperscript{135} Rosenmeier, “‘They Shall No Longer Grieve’: The Song of Songs and Edward Johnson’s \textit{Wonder-Working Providence},” 14.
Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence*, then, provides an initial starting point for Thoreau to establish a hegemonic theological, historical account of Concord, Sudbury, New England, and New England’s Puritan heritage, which leads to a relevant insight for the rest of *A Week*. Thoreau did not incorporate Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence* into the book haphazardly; instead, the initial conflicts with nature and Native Americans accompanying the establishment of towns and churches are part of a larger process of subjugation that is crucial to Thoreau’s opposition to a religion of subjugation. As he was a historian with “a religious obligation” to the present, Johnson’s themes of subjugation, intolerance, conflicts with nature and Indigenous peoples, and only one true religion are foils for Thoreau’s first book. Thoreau will offer the reader a religion based on “buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, variety, possibility”—all of which take place at the level of personal experience without the domination of doctrines and institutional structures. These religious qualities will frame the following two chapters, but now it is time to examine carefully the Calvinist, Puritan framework buttressing Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence* that *A Week* challenges.

**Puritanism Considered: Calvinism, Religion, and Civil Society**

The best place to start is with the theological ideas of John Calvin, which the New England Puritan settlers deployed in their new context. Calvin held a clear dualistic view of

---

137 Mark Fiege makes a good point as he is discussing early life in Massachusetts and the witch trials. People generally overlook the emergence of the witch trials and their link to the natural environment. Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*, 26-28. The power of magic and their religious worldview was highly connected to nature and its mysterious powers. Also see Finch, “Puritans,” 1314.
140 Kent, “A Study of the Structure of Thoreau’s *Week*,”.
humanity. He divided the person into spirit and matter or soul and body, and on this basis, Calvin
developed his political thinking leading to a twofold realm of governance: The church and civil
institutions should work together harmoniously. The church would cultivate and nurture the soul,
and the civil institutions would maintain proper actions in society. In Chapter 20 in Book Four of
his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin makes it clear that freedom gained through Christ
does not undermine civil authority. In fact, the opposite is true; the two should work together.

But as we lately taught that . . . government is distinct from the spiritual and internal
kingdom of Christ, so we ought to know that they are not adverse to each other. The
former, in some measure, begins the heavenly kingdom in us, even now upon earth, and
is in this mortal and evanescent life commences immortal and incorruptible blessedness,
while to the latter it is assigned, so long as we live among men, to foster and maintain the
external worship of God, to defend sound doctrine and the condition of the church, to
adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to conciliate us
to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquility . . . civil government . . . Its object
is not merely, life [bread and water, light and air], to enable men to breathe, eat, drink,
and be warmed (though it certainly includes all these, while it enables them to live
together); this, I say, is not its only object, but it is, that no idolatry, no blasphemy against
the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offenses to religion, break out
and be disseminated among the people that the public quiet be not disturbed, that every
man’s property be kept secure, that men may carry on innocent commerce with each
other, that honesty and modesty be cultivated; in short that a public form of religion may

Calvin is arguing for a dualistic form of legislating bodies designed to control and funnel
preserve the foundations of life, but it is to do much more than that. Civil government will
prevent language and actions deemed a threat to God and to church doctrines. The church and
civil society will overlap as people are expected to act out their religious values in civil society.
Religion and civil government should lead to people who will seek proper forms of commerce,
and in their peaceful actions, people will acquire property; the civil government will protect

\footnote{For Calvin’s emphasis on sinfulness and Adam, see Stoever, “The Calvinist Theological Tradition,” 1039-40.}
property and wealth by maintaining outward peace that should mirror inward peace. Church and government are different for Calvin, but they overlap and should mutually reinforce one another.

Calvin proceeds to describe three aspects that make up civil government: the magistrate, the laws, and the people. God approves of and recommends magistrates; Calvin addresses how the Bible calls magistrates “gods.”\textsuperscript{144} He says that “they have a commission from God, that they are invested with divine authority, and, in fact, represent the person of God, as whose substitutes they in a manner act.”\textsuperscript{145} The Bible is the guiding authority for Calvin; through biblical precedents, Calvin describes the function of the magistrate as “not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honorable, of all stations in mortal life.”\textsuperscript{146} These civil servants minister to the people, help nurture pious living, and protect Christianity’s health.

This places a heavy burden on magistrates as they act as “ambassadors of God.”\textsuperscript{147} As they serve in a divinely ordained role, they are responsible to God for any abuses they may commit as rulers. As Calvin argues, if God takes the sins of a person seriously, then God will take the sins of a ruler even more seriously in the final judgment. This works both ways, however, for those who will disgrace the magistrate and his rule; in doing so, they are simultaneously insulting God. Calvin holds both ruler and ruled to a high standard and makes it clear that both should remember God as they deal with one another. To maintain this standard, Calvin values an aristocracy because it allows rulers to rule together and to inspire and chastise each other as needed; this avoids the tendency to tyranny in a monarchy and to sedition in popular governments. Calvin makes it clear, however, that even in defective forms, subjects must respect the ruler of civil society:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{144} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 971.
\item \textsuperscript{145} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{146} \textit{Ibid.}, 972.
\item \textsuperscript{147} \textit{Ibid.}, 973.
\end{itemize}
But if we have respect to the word of God, it will lead us farther, and make us subject not only to the authority of those princes who honestly and faithfully perform their duty toward us, but all princes, by whatever means they have so become, although there is nothing they less perform than the duty of princes. For though the Lord declares that a ruler to maintain our safety is the highest gift of his beneficence, and prescribes to rulers themselves their proper sphere, he at the same time declares, that of whatever description they may be, they derive their power from none but him. Those, indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of his beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their iniquity. Still all alike possess that sacred majesty with which he has invested lawful power . . . But let us insist at greater length in proving what does not so easily fall in with the views of men, that even an individual of the worst character, one most unworthy of all honor, if invested with public authority, receives that illustrious divine power which the Lord has by his word devolved on the ministers of his justice and judgment, and that, accordingly, insofar as public obedience is concerned, he is to be held in the same honor and reverence as the best of kings.148

After his long elaboration of how people must subject themselves to good and bad rulers, Calvin offers an exception; people should follow their rulers as long as they do not urge anything in contradiction to God’s word; that is, they shall not follow laws and act in a way that offends God. Subjects are to endure the brutalities of harsh rulers, but they shall not follow orders that lead them to violate God’s will in the world.

Religion and civil government intersect in Calvin’s writings. Each person is to respect government and treat it as a divine gift, and people are to endure injustices; but they are not to act unjustly themselves. This is not resistance to the government or to the laws, but a refraining from doing that which would be a sinful gesture in the sight of God. One can abstain from action to refrain from personally sinning but not to overthrow or undermine the sovereign’s power.149 In this way, people should be complete subjects to both church and civil government.150 Through this overlapping of religion and civil society, people are subject to outward authorities and admonishment in both realms.

148 Calvin, Institutes, 984-85.
149 The emphasis on abstaining from revolt is clear in Calvin’s rejection of John Knox’s support for “the right of subjects to overthrow tyrannical rulers.” Tipson, “Calvinist Heritage,” 456-57.
150 Many in England were satisfied with Calvinist theology’s conservative side and saw it as a way to ensure adherence to order in civil society. Ibid.
New England Calvinists, or Christian Puritans, maintained a symbiotic relationship between religion and civil government as elaborated above. They thought of the commonwealth they were establishing as God’s divine city on a hill to share its Christian light with the rest of the world, and they hoped that the new commonwealth would shine on England and purify the Church of England from the popish remnants keeping it from becoming a pure church. A number of their activities focused on making society more religious, and this can be seen in various aspects of New England society from its high literacy rate, which allowed the people to search the Bible for themselves, to the establishment of Harvard College to maintain a learned ministry for future generations. Society’s aim was to maintain pious actions, which would allow God’s favor to flourish in New England while trying to prevent backsliding and impious actions. It was to this end that the clergy and magistrates created the Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline (1648) as the guiding politico-religious document in New England.

The Cambridge Platform assumed that the New Testament validated congregational church polity; against other forms of church governance, the Puritan founders saw no evidence in the New Testament for bishops, presbyteries, and other misuses of authority in the various

---

151 This term came to be used regularly in 1620s England to classify people within the Church of England who held firm to Calvinist theology, which was a change in usage from its previous deployment to designate nonconformists of various stripes. See Tipson, “Calvinist Heritage,” 461. After the accession of Elizabeth to the throne in 1558, and around 1563 with the creation of the Thirty-nine Articles, she and others referred to “Puritans” as any Protestant who wanted to further remove Roman Catholic traces from the Church of England. See Edmund S. Morgan, “The Ideal of a Pure Church,” in Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 5-6. The New England Puritans, however, are also part of the tradition known as Reformed Protestantism, and they accepted the Confession and Catechism of the Westminster Assembly (1647). Stoever, “The Calvinist Theological Tradition,” 1039. For the split between British (and New England) Calvinists and the Church of England, see Tipson, “New England Puritanism,” 467-68.


Christian denominations. Instead, congregations were composed of elect individuals in harmony with Calvin’s theological position on predestination, but to form a congregation, those within a community would have to make a covenant with each other and with God. A congregation, therefore, did what it could to include the elect and to exclude those who were not God’s chosen few. Sinners, people of questionable conduct, and those without a spiritual transformation were not seen as the divinely called or visible saints. Puritans sought people who felt guilty about past sins and who had experienced a conversion experience, which Paul’s conversion event on the road to Damascus supported. While not all were expected to convey such a clear, miraculous happening, they were expected to be able to describe the moment when God worked “upon the soul” of the person allowing them to lead a transformed life devoted to God. The covenanted community, then, is a congregation of “visible saints.” Men who had given their conversion narrative before other members of the congregation, or women who had their stories conveyed by a male family member, were given the privilege of taking part in the Lord’s Supper. Non-regenerate people attending the church were excluded from this honor, which was part of the disciplining process.

Within these churches, in positions of authority, were “ministers, the ruling elders, and thedeacons.” There were ordained ministers who were divided into two groups, which were pastors and teachers. In theory, this distinction held firm, but in the world of seventeenth-century New England, the practicalities of colonial life challenged the idea elaborated in the Cambridge Platform. This meant that the “exhortation” and the administration of “a word of Wisdom” was

---

156 Morgan, “The Ideal of a Pure Church,” 6-11. Tipson, “Calvinist Heritage,” 452. In Book Four, Chapter 3, Section 8 of his Institutes, Calvin also describes the use of “bishop,” “presbyter” and “pastor” as names “indiscriminately given to those who govern churches,” which are words used synonymously in the New Testament. Calvin, Institutes, 704. While Calvin used such terms as “bishop” in his writings, the Puritans had difficulty accepting such centralized control because of the strict controls imposed on some of the Puritans in England. As such terms as “presbytery” and “bishop” were associated with centralized control, New England Puritans resisted them as they moved toward a congregational polity free from authority beyond the congregation and the parish. Tipson, “New England Puritanism,” 467-68.

157 Wright, Congregational Polity, 9.
not only performed by the ordained minister as teachers also performed the minister’s tasks. Furthermore, ministers often performed the teacher’s tasks, which focused on doctrines and administering knowledge. As for the ruling elders, they were lay positions within the congregation intended to aid the minister and teachers in uniting and directing the congregation. Finally, the deacon handled the funds of the church and received offerings made to the congregation. The minister was dependent upon the congregation as the congregation called a person to be its minister, and this calling of the minister was a private matter among the members of a particular congregation. No congregation held authority over another; instead, the autonomous congregations united voluntarily to support one another in performing God’s will.

As Perry Miller makes clear, New England’s Puritan society, however, was anything but democratic. John Winthrop, in fact, spoke of the inequalities in the world as ordained by God: “God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion.” A hierarchy among the people was natural and divine. Some needed to be governed, and others were natural leaders.

This does not mean, however, that the leaders could not make a mistake; in fact, the human constitution was such that erring was sure to occur. The emphasis on original sin and

---

158 Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 143.
159 Ibid., 4-6.
160 John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in *Puritanism and the American Experience*, ed. Michael McGiffert (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969), 27. This is part of Winthrop’s sermon most likely delivered on the Arbella. This follows Calvin’s elaboration of election and some people being given the necessary aid for salvation while others are left without aid for salvation. Election and predestination are necessarily non-egalitarian in nature and aid in creating social, religious, and political distinctions. For more on the elect and predestination, see Tipson, “Calvinist Heritage,” 454-55. Hence, in his writings, Calvin alludes to double predestination. Calvin, *Institutes*, 607. A similar hierarchy, or differentiation, is found in Calvin’s distinction between the visible and the invisible church; see Morgan, “The Ideal of a Pure Church,” 1-32. Furthermore, salvation is limited to Christians as Christ is the mediator who brings people back to God. Those who are saved, then, is quite limited; non-Christians are excluded, and a limited number of Christians within the visible church constitute the elect. This means that Calvin’s understanding of salvation and final peace is highly exclusionary and quite far from the inclusionary Universalist theological position that would emerge in eighteenth-century America. Also see Stoever, “The Calvinist Theological Tradition,” 1039-40. Salvation is entirely dependent on God through the movement from law to faith in Christ. Humans are saved through grace, not through their own agency.
depravity in Puritan New England made it inevitable that one’s sinful nature would at least tempt a person—if not lead them astray. Winthrop urged New Englanders to remember the human condition while simultaneously remembering that the magistrates and other officials were in a position divinely sanctioned:

. . . The great questions that have troubled the country, are about the authority of the magistrates and the liberty of the people. It is yourselves who have called us to this office, and being called by you, we have our authority from God, in way of an ordinance, such as hath the image of God eminently stamped upon it, the contempt and violation whereof hath been vindicated with examples of divine vengeance. I entreat you to consider, that when you choose magistrates, you take them from among yourselves, men subject to like passions as you are. Therefore when you see infirmities in us, you should reflect upon your own, and that would make you bear the more with us, and not be severe censurers of the failings of your magistrates, when you have continual experience of the like infirmities in yourselves and others.¹⁶¹

Winthrop’s explanation for the authority of the magistrates, their limitations, and the support of the people rest upon theological foundations; the Puritan idea of government—and the concomitant idea of taming and governing the natural world—was not secular in form. It was theological, and Puritan New England may not have been a theocracy as some have argued,¹⁶² but it was a political and social order rationalized and sustained through theological assumptions.¹⁶³

Contra the emphasis on secularization and the separation assumed by the binary between religion and government, Puritan New England lacked such assumptions. In his article “Painting Landscapes in America,” Mark S. Cladis describes the ambivalence in the United States around

the place of religion in American public space. The model that best fits the Puritan condition is what Cladis calls “religion over the public landscape,” which means “religion is necessary for the health of the public and political life,” and “religion is necessary to inculcate virtues that sustain a vital citizenry.”

This is clear above with Winthrop’s assertion that magistrates are divinely sanctioned. The religious life of the person should manifest itself in the private and public spheres. In his famous sermon, most likely delivered on the Arbella, Winthrop describes how the new settlers will be “as a City upon a hill” and how “[t]he eyes of all people are upon us” with a communal interdependence between one another and also between God:

Thus stands the case between God and us. We are entered into a Covenant with Him for this work . . . The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles . . . We have hereupon besought of Him favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles . . . the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a (sinful) people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a Covenant . . . . For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection . . . So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways . . . Soe that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God’s sake.

For Winthrop, then, settling New England was simultaneously a political act and a religious act, and success was premised on the covenant between the people and the covenant the people had


165 Cladis, “Painting Landscapes of Religion in America,” 879.

166 John Winthrop, “John Winthrop Outlines His Plan for a Godly Settlement, 1630,” in Major Problems in American Religious History, ed. Patrick Allitt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 61. Sacvan Bercovitch identifies how Winthrop’s early sermon lays out many of the themes that would find their way regularly into the politico-religious sermons called the “jeremiad,” which he humorously calls “the state-of-the-covenant address” because of the importance of sermons on political occasions in New England and because politics and the covenant with God were intertwined. The jeremiad was with the New England Puritans from the start. Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, 3-4.
with God. If they made it to North America and landed safely, that was a sign that God was on their side, and for them to succeed, they had to be careful not to violate that covenant. The best strategy was to focus on how to keep their covenant with God individually and as a civil society and how not to offend God individually and as a community. For Winthrop, the answer was a communal life where the fate of one and all were intertwined. The sin of one could lead to the end of the New England experiment, and not only was it possible for Winthrop and the settlers to become a laughingstock to the rest of the world, but they could bring negativity on God and all those trying to serve God. In the end, if they did not unite and mutually sustain each other in godly actions, they could become the source of ungodly actions and influence.

What they needed were tactics to ensure that they would not fail, and this is where a hierarchical, non-democratic, rigid society enters the picture. To sustain a commonwealth that would nurture awe for God and a simultaneous desire to serve God, a certain framework for the government and the religious communities had to be established that would pay attention to both the divine and profane realms of existence. The Puritans would address the following in maintaining their “city upon a hill.”

First, the theological concept of original sin was the underlying assumption upholding the rest of the framework. Calvinists and the New England Puritans focused on the inherent

---

168 For the importance of the covenant with God as a community and, more specifically, as a political unity, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 21-22.
170 Perry Miller offers a list of consequences for New England’s wayward ways in the second generation of settlers. The synod of 1679 created the following list: lack of godliness, pride, conflict between superiors and inferiors, heretics, swearing and sleeping in church, violating the Sabbath, loss of control and order in families, contention and division in society with legal cases on the rise, sinful sex, excessive drinking, lying, morality in business transactions declining, no desire for reform, and an absence of civic spirit. *Ibid.*, 7-8.
171 Sacvan Bercovitch identifies the lament over sin as a theme arising already with Jesus and Paul and present in every age after that. Christians interpreted history as revealing the sinful nature of humanity. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 7. Bercovitch identifies this negative view of humanity with Genesis 8:21 when, after the flood and smelling the pleasing odor of Noah’s burnt offering, God declares, “. . . for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” This may be true theologically for people
sinfulness in people. They associated this with Adam’s disobedience and his breaking of his covenant with God. The consequence of this was that all humanity after Adam was, and is, incapable of keeping God’s commandments or his laws. Nobody is free from sin; all fall short of upholding divine laws, which means that all people stand condemned before those laws and God as judge. This leads to the theological necessity for some other way for people to be saved, so they can enter heaven.

Jesus’ death on the cross was the manifestation of God’s mercy. As he was both human and divine, Jesus created a theological bridge between humanity and God. As he upheld God’s divine laws and lived a pure life dedicated to God in the human realm, Jesus stood as a sacrifice before God for humanity’s past, present, and future sins. Jesus provided the mercy that the laws did not have. Through Christ’s sacrifice, people now had an opening to be saved from their sinful lives. For New England’s Puritans, this redeeming feature was not for all people. God, as the sovereign of all creation, would not redeem everybody; some would go to heaven and others to hell. Those who were saved received that status not because of their own will and actions; they were only saved because of God’s grace, for people have a will that always leads to sin.

The underlying assumption, then, was that human wickedness was pervasive, and every attempt needed to be taken within the church and society to reduce the prevalence of impious thoughts, words, and deeds, but every saved person would remain in constant worry and uncertainty about whether they were elect or not—to not doubt was a sure sign that one’s sinful nature had deceived the person into believing that she or he actually had been saved. In other words, they constantly had to struggle to discern whether they had a false sense of security

---

like the New England Puritans, but his interpretation and emphasis on this passage excludes the more optimistic theological perspectives about humanity and God in the Unitarian and Universalist traditions.

concerning their salvation that would only end with death and damnation. They lived in “a climate of anxiety.”

Second, there was the need to keep all the regenerate together in a community of mutual aid. Their attempts exemplify a theological and practical tension between faith and works and also the regenerate and the unsaved. Separatist and non-separatist Puritans alike looked for what they called “historical faith.” This was a sign of the visible church, namely, submission to a congregation’s disciplinary guidelines, obedience to God, knowledge of and belief in Christian doctrines, and pious behavior. For separatist Puritans, these were needed qualities for a person to gain entrance into the church as a member. This often manifested itself in a question and answer period before the congregation to test the person’s knowledge and understanding of Christian doctrine. For the non-separatist Puritans in New England, they added another level of testing, which should have followed the historical faith; this was the “saving faith.” The saving faith allowed members into the invisible, eternal church. The New England Puritans, then, wanted to establish a church society as close as they could get to the invisible church, and they wanted to be as sure as they possibly could that their religious communities were as pure as they could be.

To do this, they created strict guidelines for establishing congregations and for allowing people to join a congregation. At least seven people were needed to establish a new congregation, and they could not do it on their own. Those who sought to establish a new congregation had to convince each other of their saintliness through personal testimony of their religious experiences and of their soundness on Christian doctrines; but they also had to convince other local churches and the colonial magistrates, so they would call local ministers and

---

174 Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, 23.
magistrates from the surrounding regions. The founding members would have to present their spiritual soundness to the ministers and the magistrates. Once they had shown a solid understanding of and belief in Christian doctrines, once they had communicated their saving faith and how the conversion process happened in and continued to affect their lives, and once they had answered all concerns and questions sufficiently, the group then became a new congregation.

People seeking to join a congregation went through a similar process. The person seeking membership approached an elder of the church, and the elder questioned the person to discern her or his sincerity and uprightness. Assuming all went well, the elder brought the person before the rest of the church members for examination concerning personal conduct and any religious experiences testifying to God’s saving work in her or his life.\(^\text{177}\) Assuming all went well, the person would accept the congregation’s policies and doctrines and would be voted in by the other members. The person and the church would accept the covenant that bound the new member to the community and the community to the new member.

Church membership, then, was voluntary. A person was not automatically a church member—as in England—because a person was born in the region, and a person was not a member by birth in a family in good standing with the church. Membership in Puritan New England’s congregations was sought as a result of God’s saving work, and this membership carried with it the privilege of taking part in the Lord’s Supper, voting within the church and civil society, holding office in civil society,\(^\text{178}\) and allowing one’s children to be baptized.

---

\(^{177}\) The singular practice of making prospective members convey God’s grace in their lives as a conversion experience became prevalent in New England between 1634 and 1636. Part of the reason for the emergence of this test appears to be against too much emphasis on behavior. The focus on God’s grace and the resulting increased faith allowed ministers to reassert faith and God’s activity in one’s life as the heart of the church, not works (and behavioral tests). The congregations are, therefore, founded on and organized around saving faith. See Morgan, “The New England System,” 99-104.

\(^{178}\) This was the case in the Massachusetts Bay colony and the New Haven colony, but the Connecticut colony remained more lax not restricting voting and public office to church membership. Ibid., 104-08.
Third, there was intolerance. Not only was the new test for membership more difficult—that is, not only did members have to persuade the congregation of the experience of God’s saving grace—but the New England Puritan congregations supported and often used church discipline to control bad behavior, doctrinal deviations, and hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{179} This indicates the emphasis on the communal nature of the congregations and New England Puritan society; collectively, they were oriented toward living saintly lives, and strict control was needed to limit deviance. To maintain harmony in the community, church discipline was needed, which meant that congregations could excommunicate members for unsound doctrines, impious behavior, and for not maintaining the doctrines and covenant of the congregation.

In trying to maintain a religious life, they tried to get parishioners to be extensively introspective and to pay attention for signs of saving grace or sin. The cultivation of anxiety over sin and the fear of not being saved was the focus of the community. As the wellbeing of the community was dependent on each person’s inward sacredness and her or his outward behavior, people were to monitor each other to prevent backsliding and the subsequent angering of God. Not only were the congregations concerned with laxity and unorthodox views, but so were the Puritan magistrates, which is clear in the mutual aid between ministers and magistrates in exiling both Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts; civil society’s intolerance is clear too in the execution of Quakers because of the Puritans’ distaste for Quakerism.

Perry Miller describes their communities in the following words, “The government of Massachusetts, and of Connecticut as well, was a dictatorship, and never pretended to be anything else; it was a dictatorship, not of a single tyrant, or of an economic class, or of a

political faction, but of the holy and regenerate.” Puritan New England was intolerant and believed in only one way to live the one truth of their specific form of the Christian religion. To challenge it was a threat to not only their religious outlook, but it was also a threat to the preservation of society as a whole.

Fourth, there was a socio-religious compact ruled by biblical laws and earthly laws, and the resulting covenant was necessarily exclusionary. The Bible was the central document for Puritan religious and civic life; they sought actions and ways of being that were in harmony with biblical role models, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul. The centrality of the Bible as a source for knowing God’s will meant that not only did church life revolve around the document, but civic leaders needed to conform their life, role in society, and policy to biblical dictates too. While the Puritans rejected a theology of works, they did believe that prayer, daily reflections, Bible readings, lay meetings in neighbors’ homes, and attendance of church services could help make the soul more receptive to God and open one’s life to receive God’s grace. This idea, then, led to the necessity to live a pious life and to shun actions deemed sinful. Each day should conclude with a reflective inventory of one’s actions to uncover any deeds that necessitated repentance. In this way, both daily private and public life were dominated by a desire to live more holy and in harmony with “literal” readings of the Bible, and this led to a symbiotic relationship between civil society and the state as both ecclesiastical and political authorities worked together to maintain a holy commonwealth. The desire to live good lives, then, was both a private and communal act as individual regeneration and communal

---

regeneration would be mutually reinforcing. As this religious ideal was to cultivate a regenerate society, it also formed clear divisions in the early Puritan years as not all members of the towns were full members in the churches; only those who could identify and relate an experience of regeneration and God’s indwelling grace would be allowed full membership and voting rights. This led to clear divisions between the elect and the unregenerate as approximately eighty percent remained unconverted.

Fifth, each Puritan takes part in a triple binding through covenantal theology. The concept of covenant played an important theological role in various texts throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Genesis 9, God makes a covenant with Noah; this declarative act occurs after the floodwaters have subsided, and it indicates God’s promise to remain mindful of creation and to never again destroy it. In chapters fifteen and seventeen, God makes more covenants; this time the central human character is Abraham. In the former, Abram performs a covenant ceremony that ratifies God’s promise to Abram concerning Abram’s descendants. In the latter chapter, God makes another covenant with Abram, but changes his name to Abraham, which changes the meaning of his name from “exalted ancestor” to “ancestor of a multitude.” The narratives concerning Noah, Abraham, and God reveal that a reciprocal agreement is made between the divine and humans. In the New Testament, and a foundation for Christian ceremonial observations, Jesus’ actions of breaking bread and sharing wine at his last meal with his disciples took the form of a covenant. In Matthew 26:28, Jesus says, “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” The symbolic

---


185 All references to the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.

use of wine for blood and the eventual spilling of Jesus’ blood on the cross became the needed blood to ratify the covenant between God and humanity through the mediation of the person of Jesus.187 This theological approach is present in Mark 14:22-26, Luke 22:15-20, 39, and First Corinthians 11:23-25.

Puritan church members took covenantal theology seriously and used it to form the foundation of their churches, and it formed promises at two levels. First, Puritans promised to one another to support each person’s life in God. Second, they made a communal promise to God to live a holy life and to do God’s will. This extended beyond the immediate community, however, as they needed other elect leaders from nearby to ratify their covenant with each other and with God. The covenant generated a sense of responsibility for each person and for the community as a whole and was intended to lead to solidarity and mutual support in bringing God’s will to earth. In this solidarity, however, it established clear boundaries between whom they would accept and whom they would reject. Antinomians, Baptists, and Quakers were all shunned for their alternative interpretations of Jesus’ message. Furthermore, Native Americans clearly fell outside of their boundaries as their culture and religious sensibilities were too different from their ideal Christian society. Indigenous peoples were not living their lives in Christ and devoted to the same Puritan God; in this way, they needed to be kept apart from Puritan society for fear that the Devil would enter the community. The ideal life, then, was one based on a Calvinist theology embedded within a tamed environment where nature and civil institutions supported the proper functioning of society and aided each person in living out a holy life. The regenerate were individually united to God, to one another, and as a community to God

while remaining committed to excluding and subjugating those who did not bear the marks of God’s indwelling grace.

**New England after Settlement**

Christian emigration to North America had devastating ecological consequences. Since 1866 when Ernst Haeckel, a zoologist, defined the term, “ecology” has become an increasingly important critical concept supporting examinations of how organic and inorganic components interact within specific regional limits. The focused concentration is on how different organisms engage their environment and the complex relationships they form with other organisms and nonliving entities; this entails addressing inorganic creations such as cultural products—especially religion and its effects. This leads to the intersection of ecology and religion. “In order to approach religion from an ecological angle,” Gustavo Benavides writes, “one needs to consider instances of adaptation as well as of maladaptation; indeed, given that adaptation is a process rather than a state, one must pay attention to the precariousness inherent in all social and ideological formations.” This section will concentrate on the Puritan’s maladaptation to their North American environs concomitant with the religious ideas addressed in the two previous sections, which led to drastic changes in the land through environmental alterations and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. This is the “tragedy of the commons,” a form of rationalized environmental exploitation performed in the best interest of

---

individuals while, ironically, collectively undermining long-term ecological interests and the welfare of the community as a whole.

As Carolyn Merchant reveals, in settling North America, British emigrants turned to the appropriation of land; this was based on the European idea of private property, which differed from Indigenous views of the land. Instead of simply accepting the right to hunt, fish, and plant crops on the land, the emigrants assumed ownership and took portions of the earth for both themselves and England.\(^\text{193}\) This established a different relationship with the land from what Native Americans had maintained as their semi-sedentary existence gave way to Euro-American sedentary communities, and the labeling of land as private property allowed the settlers to deplete and alter the natural landscape in the region while simultaneously restricting the land on which Indigenous peoples could dwell in their migratory patterns. As they cleared the woods, built their houses, and erected their fences, the Puritans deforested the land, built mills on the rivers,\(^\text{194}\) envisioned the natural world as a commodity, and began the process of permanent Indigenous displacement to smaller regions of habitation.

Puritan settlers needed to find ways to survive, and part of this survival process was through trade with England. Merchants had helped support emigration to North America, and in return, they expected some form of compensation for their investments, which came through sustained exportation of natural materials from the region.\(^\text{195}\) The settlers shipped fish, furs, and timber back to England, but timber was the most significant and apparently endless commodity on an expansive continent that seemed almost infinite and largely unpopulated. The need for timber cannot be underestimated as England used the wood to maintain its naval and commercial

\(^{194}\) By 1700, for example, there were already ninety sawmills on the coasts of New Hampshire and Maine. Merchant, “The New England Wilderness Transformed,” 29.
fleets in its attempts to extend its empire through colonization and trade. This formed a specific North American workforce of “forest laborers” who cut the trees, prepared the logs, transported the logs downstream, and others who gathered the wood, took it to the mills, and delivered it for cutting. Concord was largely deforested during Thoreau’s lifetime. When the Puritan settlers arrived, “about ninety percent of the land in New England was covered with an enormous variety of trees”\(^\text{196}\); this was almost reversed in later years as large portions of the woods had been cleared by Thoreau’s young adulthood making New England significantly different from what the Puritans had encountered upon their arrival.\(^\text{198}\)

The Puritan religious worldview imagined nature as filled with evil and danger, and they merged this with God’s command to subdue the earth; but, as Theodore Steinberg shows, they also came to see the land and its natural resources as commodities.\(^\text{199}\) “The thrust then of New England’s history in the decades leading up to the nineteenth century tended toward the expansion of natural resource use, toward the more thoroughgoing commodification of nature.”\(^\text{200}\) Charles Carroll adds that their desire for the otherworldly realm of heaven and for increased security “allowed them to prove their worth in this transitory, material world by conquering its natural forces,” and they changed the landscape quickly with simple tools like the axe.\(^\text{201}\)

Not only did they try to tame the land to expunge evil from their midst, they extensively cleared the forest for their cattle and sheep; these animals needed open land on which to graze. This was part of the reason for introducing English grasses and clover to the region.\(^\text{202}\) Upon

\(^{198}\) Ibid.
\(^{199}\) Steinberg, Nature Incorporated, 11.
\(^{200}\) Ibid., 13. The italics are found in the original text.
arrival in New England, each parcel of land approximately ten square miles in area could sustain two black bears, two mountain lions, two wolves, 200 turkeys, 400 deer, and 20,000 squirrels. The wolves posed a serious threat to the emigrants’ livestock and were exterminated in the region by the end of the 1700s. New Englanders also overhunted deer, and the use of land for livestock restricted the territory eventually leaving no trace of the white-tailed deer in the region by the time of the American Revolution. By Thoreau’s time, “the beaver, bear, mountain lion, wolverine, lynx, moose, and wild turkey also had vanished from southern New England.”

To survive the winters, New Englanders used wood as their source of energy for heating their homes and for cooking; from building their houses, fencing their property, cooking and heating, to exporting timber to Europe, cutting down trees was essential for survival. This left regions bereft of various species of trees, such as white cedars, white pines, chestnuts, hickories, and oaks. The railroad hastened New England’s use of timber for railway ties. Instead of cultivating a posture of reverence and responsibility for the natural world, the Puritans established a legacy of standing against the natural world and valuing it simply for what it could provide society. Whether their theological interpretation of God’s command to subdue the earth in Genesis is correct is largely a moot point; they tamed the wild, savage land quickly and left it dramatically changed by the time Thoreau and his brother took their trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.

As Steinberg reveals, their two-week trip in 1839 did not take them into an unaltered, pristine landscape. Thoreau rarely encountered such purity in nature as Euro-American settlement had left little of the natural world untouched, and the thousand-year residence of Native Americans in the region meant that they had also engaged with and changed the natural world. 

---

204 Ibid., 175.
205 Ibid., 175-76.
surroundings in the area—admittedly on a much smaller, more subtle scale. Their boat trip took them past mills and emerging factories, canal locks, and transport boats, so the brothers were in the midst of a space where nature and society interacted; they were at a liminal point near a more untamed wilderness while also being near burgeoning towns and cities.\textsuperscript{206} During their trip, they could hear the noise of workers; they could hear the towns at night with their barking dogs, and the brothers were kept awake by boisterous railway workers. This is not the site for a pastoral recounting but the locus for dialectical struggles between nature and society.

The Concord River is a slower river, so commerce did not take hold as it did on the Merrimack with its faster waters to power the mills. Lowell is an apt example. By 1839, Lowell had a population of approximately 20,000 people. The buildings were uniformly constructed along the river, and a dam diverted the Merrimack’s waters into small canal structures. Directed into the buildings, the water filled buckets on rotating wheels that created the needed hydraulic power to spin cotton and produce cloth.\textsuperscript{207} Twenty-eight mills composed this area with 150,000 spindles, 5,000 looms, and 8,000 employees who were mostly women. Every day, except Sunday, was filled with the noise of textile production near the intersection of the two rivers at the Middlesex Canal.\textsuperscript{208}

Moreover, the Lowell dam had raised the water level eighteen feet, and this altered the Merrimack River’s scenery. Before industrial development, Tyngsborough was the site of Wicasee Falls; by 1839, however, these falls no longer existed as the higher waters submerged the falls and made the brothers’ trip clear of the obstacle. While the elevated waters helped to create hydraulic power for the factories, the dams and canal locks also prevented some fish from

\textsuperscript{206} Steinberg, \textit{Nature Incorporated}, 1-17. \\
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 2-3. \\
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., 3.
migrating to the region, such as salmon and bass. The entire region in and around the rivers was in a process of industrial transformation.

The condition was similar upstream. Around Nashua, New Hampshire, there were five more textile mills, a three-mile long canal, and waterwheels for hydraulic power. Further north, the brothers had to pass through the Union Canal by Moore’s Falls and would later pass through the canal near Coos Falls and Amoskeag Canal. They eventually past by the nascent industrial city of Manchester, New Hampshire with construction workers disturbing the peace of nature with their hammers and labor. Here was another canal with one cotton mill in operation and another being built; at this juncture, another dam was being constructed too.

The trip, then, is not an attempt to return readers to a pristine, pastoral setting; Thoreau offers readers bioregional observations of wild, untamed life amidst dominant industrializing trends that were scarring and transforming the natural environment for profit. He discloses a deleterious process based on irreverence for nature that supported the subjugation of life in New England, and he associates this with Christian settlement and its early pernicious trajectory that devalued Indigenous life and the natural world.

**Religion of Subjugation in *A Week***

Thoreau was living during a time of substantial change in New England. The region had emerged from Puritan emigration, state-supported churches known as the Standing Order, and blue laws. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, orthodox Calvinist Christianity lost its dominance in a portion of New England as it ceded its control to liberal Christians who would become the Unitarian denomination, the liberal religious tradition from which the

---

210 Ibid., 5.
Transcendentalists would emerge. This liberal denomination could not escape the congealing tendencies of custom and doctrinaire positions, which led a leading Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, to complain and distance himself from the growing orthodoxy in the denomination. Unitarians had left behind the Calvinist orthodoxy and inserted their own conventionality into Boston and Concord, Massachusetts and other portions of New England and the Northeast by the 1830s. From Harvard College in Cambridge to the court benches in Boston, Unitarians maintained positions of power that allowed them to shape culture, law, and religion. One form of religious mastery, therefore, replaced another.

A similar displacement occurred in nature. Puritan dominance over nature gave way to capitalist, industrialized dominance over the natural world with no clearer image than that of the dam. In 1783, William Blackstone, a British jurist, made a telling comment about the inherent freedom of water as he wrote how it “is a moveable, wandering thing, and must of necessity continue common by the law of nature; so that I can only have a temporary, transient, usufructuary property therein.” Throughout the nineteenth century, Blackstone’s view increasingly moved to a marginal position as dams, mills, and canals vied for ownership and control of waterways. Industrial capitalists were seeking to control and dominate that which was inherently “a moveable, wandering thing.” Each aspect of the above history had the concomitant effect of permanently displacing Indigenous peoples from the watershed areas around the rivers on which they depended for sustenance. Their traditional regions of migration became nonexistent as Euro-American settlement dominated the region. Thoreau saw this disruption as a form of “extinction,” or “cultural genocide” in contemporary terms.

---

212 Thoreau, *A Week*, 6, 220.
region, left very little untouched; from Thoreau’s view, little seemed to exist that his society and nation would not attempt to subjugate.213

As Alan D. Hodder observes, the “... dam comes to serve as a kind of emblem [in A Week] of the violence perpetrated by Europeans against the harmonious aboriginal order. Everywhere along the riverbank, the brothers witness the signs and consequences of this decisive and, for some, deadly act.”214 Thoreau’s first book, and his corpus in general, came to challenge these subjugating, damming practices—specifically in the realm of religion and its consequences for the larger culture.215 He was not content with the theological and cultural damming practices in New England’s religious heritage. Instead of this heritage leading to buoyancy, Thoreau encountered burdensomeness. Instead of possibility, Thoreau met limitations. In the place of freedom, Thoreau experienced coercion. Rather than flexibility, Thoreau observed rigidity. Instead of variety, Thoreau encountered attempts to homogenize religion. His religious sensibilities recoiled from the narrowness of nineteenth-century interpretations of religion and its orthodox Christian hues in both the Calvinist and Unitarian strands. Contrary to religion providing people with an asylum from the world’s ills and an opportunity to encounter God without mediation, religion in the United States was a generator of spiritual and social unhealthiness. It sustained a form of domination and oppression that people willingly accepted under the false assumption that it was a beneficent force in society.

Society and religion displayed numerous propensities to weigh people down. Customs produced specific ways of acting, and these scripted behaviors—conscious and unconscious—

---

213 Carolyn Merchant establishes two phases of ecological revolution in North America. The first is the colonial ecological revolution, and the second is the capitalist ecological revolution. The first extended from the early 1600s to about 1776, and the second occurred from approximately 1776 to 1860. The forms of mastery described in this section are part of these ecological revolutions in North America. Merchant, Ecological Revolutions, 1-5.


created relationships where people encountered mediating guidelines more than intimacy with the person with whom they were engaged. Personal habits burdened people; people came to act habitually instead of following their passions and what inspired them. Life, then, became more mechanical, and the customs and habits created an equalizing effect where personhood and idiosyncrasies were effaced. Contrary to life being personal responses to one’s environment through deep engagement with its many nuances, life became the imposition of “common sense,” that is, a common way of experiencing, perceiving, interpreting, and acting in the world; this, for Thoreau, is an impoverished life and an unacceptable way of living.

This burden is clear in Thoreau’s recounting of a confrontation he had with a minister one Sunday as he walked to the mountains. Instead of allowing him to enjoy the natural holiness, the minister reproved Thoreau and imposed his religious ideas.

I was once reproved by a minister who was driving a poor beast to some meeting-house horse-shed among the hills of New Hampshire, because I was bending my steps to a mountain-top on the Sabbath, instead of a church, when I would have gone further than he to hear a true word spoken on that or any day. He declared that I was ‘breaking the Lord’s fourth commandment,’ and proceeded to enumerate, in a sepulchral tone, the disasters which had befallen him whenever he had done any ordinary work on the Sabbath. He really thought that a god was on the watch to trip up those men who followed any secular work on this day, and did not see that it was the evil conscience of the workers that did it.216

Such attempts to burden people with orthodox actions and outlooks, however, went beyond verbal pressure, for Thoreau also describes coercive material practices. “In the latter part of the seventeenth century, according to the historian of Dunstable, ‘Towns were directed to erect “a cage” near the meeting-house, and in this all offenders against the sanctity of the Sabbath were confined.’ Society has relaxed a little from its strictness.”217 The need for conformity contracted life’s options. His tales convey a weightiness to living in society with strict ideas of religion.

216 Thoreau, A Week, 75-76.
217 Ibid., 64.
Against Thoreau’s inclination to go to the mountains and enjoy the sacredness of the sunshine and against those who opted out of Sunday worship services for whatever reason, a burdensome apparatus of words, laws, and physical constraints were enacted establishing what was universally appropriate conduct for the citizens of New England in matters of religion. The established traditions had to be followed.

It was not simply the coerciveness that was so burdensome, however, but the fact that people honestly believed they had the only truth. They believed their religious posture to be the correct path.

Most people with whom I talk, men and women even of some originality and genius, have their scheme of the universe all cut and dried,—very dry, I assure you, to hear, dry enough to burn, dry-rotted and powder-post, methinks,—which they set up between you and them in the shortest intercourse; an ancient and tottering frame with all its boards blown off . . . Some to me seemingly very unimportant and unsubstantial things and relations, are for them everlastingly settled,—as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the like. These are like the everlasting hills to them. But in all my wanderings, I never came across that least vestige of authority for these things. They have not left so distinct a trace as the delicate flower of a remote geological period on the coal in my grate. The wisest man preaches no doctrines; he has no scheme; he sees no rafter, not even a cobweb, against the heavens. It is clear sky.\textsuperscript{218}

Such certitude was problematic for Thoreau because he never encountered anything to justify the certainty, and he saw such convictions as standing between the person and the divine. In this way, the obvious verbal and material burdens were a result of an underlying stringent approach to life and the sacred. People attempted to make others conform to a supposed certitude that left no room for differences, idiosyncrasies, and alternative paths. Such approaches pushed the person down into the depths of conformity instead of allowing her or him to be elevated by inspiration.

Such burdens resulted in clear limitations. Instead of expanding possibilities, Thoreau’s society erected hard and fast boundaries. In his discussion of the “fish principle,” which I will\textsuperscript{218} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 69-70.
address in more detail in the following chapter, Thoreau describes absolute possibility and the need to cross boundaries; such healthy transgressions allow life to flourish in all its diversity, yet people decided to erect dams to constrain the free-flowing waters. These literal constraints stopped the fish from migrating, but the dams also had a pernicious effect on the people living in the region.

At length it would seem that the interests, not of the fishes only, but of the men of Wayland, of Sudbury, of Concord, demand the levelling of the dam. Innumerable acres of meadow are waiting to be made dry land, wild native grass to give place to English. The farmers stand with scythes whet, waiting the subsiding of the waters, by gravitation, by evaporation or otherwise, but sometimes their eyes do not rest, their wheels do not roll, on the quaking meadow ground during the haying season at all. So many sources of wealth inaccessible. They rate the loss hereby incurred in the single town of Wayland alone as equal to the expense of keeping a hundred yoke of oxen the year round. One year, as I learn, not long ago, the farmers standing ready to drive their teams afield as usual, the water gave no signs of falling.²¹⁹

Instead of being able to roam freely and to collect the needed grasses for subsistence—to feed and raise their herds—the people were forced to narrower and narrower plots of land as water filled the meadows because of the dams.

Control of land had its similar expression in the mastery of others—especially the attempted domination of Native Americans in the region. As he is describing a historical battle between Euro-American settlers and the Abnakis, Thoreau displays this sense of mastery and the foreclosing of Indigenous possibilities:

It was from Dunstable, then a frontier town, that the famous Capt. Lovewell, with his company, marched in quest of the Indians on the 18th of April, 1725 . . . . It is stated in the History of Dunstable, that just before his last march, Lovewell was warned to beware of the ambuscades of the enemy, but “he replied, ‘that he did not care for them,’ and bending down a small elm beside which he was standing into a bow, declared ‘that he would treat the Indians in the same way.’” This elm is still standing [in Nashua], a venerable and magnificent tree."²²⁰

²¹⁹ Thoreau, A Week, 38.
²²⁰ Ibid., 119-22.
Forced from the land, their ways of life were undermined and marginalized in the spirit of war, superiority, and mastery. A boundary was erected between whites and Native Americans: forced exclusion of one community so another could flourish. They dammed the interactions between cultures and dammed the possibilities of Indigenous peoples.

Through the customs and habits of the New England Puritan tradition, they erected boundaries. While these boundaries may have been somewhat permeable, the Puritans attempted to establish impermeable institutional structures, discourses, and religious orthodoxies that would provide the only true path to God. Thoreau could not understand this and pondered, “Why need Christians be still intolerant and superstitious?”\(^{221}\) Such intolerance dictated what counted as viable forms of life.

The reduction of possibilities and the imposition of societal norms established a trajectory for relations within and outside of the Puritan society. Negotiating the boundaries and obstacles erected in Puritan society and religion had to be done within the approved orthodox vision of Christianity embraced in the “New World.” Such Christian assumptions—while undergoing various alterations over the centuries—established constraints undermining America’s celebration of freedom in Thoreau’s eyes. These external constraints led to serious restrictions on one’s freedom. These burdensome qualities and the reduction of possibilities manifested themselves in overt curtailments—and even physical impediments. While the Puritans and many others in New England over the years were concerned with proper Christian living, Thoreau was concerned with the constraints deployed supposedly to make good, moral citizens. These constraints led Thoreau to see the diseased condition of society.

Most people acquainted with Thoreau’s corpus and life know about his arrest; he refused to pay his poll tax for a number of years. This refusal caught up with him during his residence at

\(^{221}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 67-68.
Walden Pond while he was writing *A Week*. In 1846, Sam Staples arrested Thoreau, and he spent the night in jail. Most readers are familiar with this incident from his two most famous texts, “Civil Disobedience” and *Walden*, but Thoreau recounted the same incident in *A Week* in language reminiscent of “Civil Disobedience.”

I have not so surely foreseen that any Cossack or Chippeway would come to disturb the honest and simple commonwealth, as that some monster institution would at length embrace and crush its free members in its scaly folds; for it is not to be forgotten, that while the law holds fast the thief and murderer, it lets itself go loose. When I have not paid the tax which the State demanded for that protection which I did not want, itself has robbed me; when I have asserted the liberty it presumed to declare, itself has imprisoned me. Poor creature! if it knows no better I will not blame it. If it cannot live but by these means, I can. I do not wish, it happens, to be associated with Massachusetts, either in holding slaves or in conquering Mexico. I am a little better than herself in these respects.222

What is important in the above passage is how Thoreau undermines the legitimacy of the de facto state; its actions subvert that which the state was created to nurture. The state disturbs the peace, imprisons its citizens, and restricts them because they were simply acting on the freedom and protection the state was created to maintain. Thoreau indicates in *A Week*, however, that the state also engages in criminal activity, such as the attempted extermination of Native Americans, legal justification for the buying and selling of chattel slaves, and also the theft of land through an illegitimate war with Mexico. The state had overstepped its boundaries and had become criminal—a thief who illegally and immorally detains citizens who have stood steadfast in support of justice.

Some could argue that such a position against the state has nothing to do with religion. Thoreau’s position, however, has everything to do with religion. Engaging the natural world, living simply and respectfully, and not profiting from the suffering of others were all linked to Thoreau’s religious sensibility. He imagined religion as a way of binding and rebinding oneself

222 Thoreau, *A Week*, 130.
to the sacred spirit present in and sustaining all life and creation. This he spoke of in terms of a higher law or natural law. Federal laws trump state laws; higher spiritual laws trump all human laws. He turned to Antigone about five pages later to support his understanding of a supreme law and the need to be faithful to it.

Brought before King Creon who had forbidden anybody to do the customary burial rights for Antigone’s dead brother, Antigone is asked, “Did you then dare to transgress these laws?”\textsuperscript{223} Antigone responded with the following speech:

For it was not Zeus who proclaimed these to me, nor Justice who dwells with the gods below; it was not they who established these laws among men. Nor did I think that your proclamations were so strong, as, being a mortal, to be able to transcend the unwritten and immovable laws of the gods. For not something now and yesterday, but forever these live, and not one knows from what time they appeared. I was not about to pay the penalty of violating these to the gods, fearing the presumption of any man. For I well knew that I should die, and why not? even if you had not proclaimed it.\textsuperscript{224}

Thoreau makes a quick observation: “This was concerning the burial of a dead body.”\textsuperscript{225} If a dead body is worth such ardent disobedience, surely such vehement disobedience is justified to preserve life and the rest of creation.

In this way, Thoreau’s time in jail—and any extraneous impositions on human and nonhuman life—is a religious concern because it violates freedom, which is one of the divine attributes. Society’s injustices were symptomatic of people’s inabilities to rebind themselves to what is sacred, and their allegiance to outmoded traditions allowed them to aid institutions through pernicious policies and actions subverting freedom instead of nurturing it. Society was moving in a direction antithetical to the divine and simultaneously undermining a more healthy religious expression.

\textsuperscript{223} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 135.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid.
The religious expression Thoreau envisioned focused on personal experiences of the divine. This encounter was linked to one’s placement in the world, the person’s perceptual angle, and the conjunction of one’s materiality with the spiritual realm. None of this was generalizable. In fact, Thoreau thought, life had too often been celebrated as an abstraction but rarely in the grandeur of its specificity and materiality. As he turned to the specificity of individual religious experiences, Thoreau envisioned a variety of experiences, interpretations, and expressions. Contrary to this awareness, he saw the intolerance of society trying to usher in homogeneity.

This negation of variety in favor of similarity is present in his anecdotes about British emigrants transplanting their religion and agricultural products in the “New World” while marginalizing indigenous elements: grasses, animals, and Native Americans. Unknowingly at the beginning, Puritan practices innocently displaced both animals and Native Americans in the “Sunday” chapter:

In this Billerica . . . the white man came, built him a house, and made a clearing here, letting in the sun, dried up a farm, piled up the old gray stones in fences, cut down the pines around his dwelling, planted orchard seed brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil apple tree to blossom next to the wild pine and the juniper, shedding its perfume in the wilderness . . . [He] cut the wild grass, and laid bare the homes of beaver, otter, muskrat, and with the wetting of his scythe scared off the deer and bear. He set up a mill, and fields of English grain sprang in the virgin soil. And with his grain he scattered the seeds of the dandelion and the wild trefoil over the meadows, mingling his English flowers with the wild native ones . . . And thus he plants a town. The white man’s mullein soon reigned in Indian corn-fields, and sweet scented English grasses clothed the new soil. Where, then, could the Red Man set his foot?226

Instead of enacting practices in harmony with their bioregional surroundings, the settlers’ founding acts were based on displacement and the introduction of new elements that would come to dominate the region; they scared off the animals, displaced Native Americans, and molded the environment to suit their needs.

226 Thoreau, A Week, 52-53.
Immediately following this passage, Thoreau makes a similar observation as he generalizes about the coming of the “white man”:

The white man comes, pale as the dawn, with a load of thought, with a slumbering intelligence as a fire raked up, knowing well what he knows, not guessing but calculating; strong in community, yielding obedience to authority; of experienced race; of wonderful, wonderful common sense; dull but capable . . . he buys the Indian’s moccasins and baskets, then buys his hunting grounds, and at length forgets where he is buried, and plows up his bones. And here town records, old, tattered, time-worn, weather-stained chronicles, contain the Indian sachem’s mark, perchance, an arrow or a beaver, and the few fatal words by which he deeded his hunting grounds away. He comes with a list of ancient Saxon, Norman, and Celtic names, and strews them up and down this river . . .

Dissatisfied with different forms of life, the Puritans sought to transplant the forms of life to which they were accustomed. They brought their grasses, their trees, and styles of architecture. They also changed the existing names in the region in a similar gesture as when they transplanted names from their homeland to North America. Their commitments to a certain form of life slowly transformed the region and marginalized that which existed there in the first place.

This historical awareness led Thoreau to the conclusion that his New England descendants failed to see the specificity of life as they overlaid their surroundings with Puritan concepts and values. This overlay obscured the richness of nature and the Indigenous cultures in the region. Instead of encountering the world intimately, the Puritans allowed their creeds, concepts, and parochial interests to diminish their encounters in the “New World.” This was accomplished with rigidity and a level of certainty that Thoreau could not accept in matters of religion and in life in general.

This lack of flexibility appears to lead to the inevitable reduction of Indigenous presence and culture in the region. Thoreau relates stories about direct physical violence against Native Americans in several colonial skirmishes with Native Americans. He also retells stories about Puritan attempts to convert Native Americans to a Christian worldview—all of which have been

---

227 Thoreau, A Week, 53.
detailed in this chapter in varying degrees, but there also appears to be a more silent force associated with both legislation and the general acknowledgement by Indigenous peoples in the area that their traditional bioregional homeland is no longer conducive to flourishing life because of the continued encroachment and disruptions caused by British emigration to the region.

Rowing upstream in the Merrimack River on Sunday between Chelmsford and Tyngsboro, Massachusetts, Thoreau and his brother pass by a seventy-acre piece of land known as Wicasuck Island.\(^{228}\) It had been the homeland of the Penacook Indians. Around 1663, the son of Chief Passaconaway was arrested for an outstanding debt of £45. Wannalancet, the prisoner’s brother, sold Wicasuck Island to cancel the debt. Thoreau recounts how two years later in 1665, the General Court returned the land to the Penacook Indians. Something strange happens, however, as the Penacooks leave the region in 1683. This is an odd occurrence because it was approximately six years after the end of King Philip’s War from 1675 to 1677. The Penacooks in the region migrated to Concord, New Hampshire during the war to avoid taking part in the battles, so it would seem that their actions would not have led to negative consequences. They apparently did not encounter any direct hostilities for their nonviolent actions and their neutrality. Furthermore, they later returned to the region without animosity from the British settlers.

There permanent departure from the region in 1683, however, allowed the local government to grant Jonathan Tyng a large portion of land for remaining in the region and loyally fighting the hostile Native Americans in King Philip’s War. “Thus he earned the title of first permanent settler” in what came to be known as Tyngsboro.\(^{229}\) To conclude this paragraph, Thoreau offers a telling observation:

\(^{228}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 110.
In 1694 a law was passed “that every settler who deserted a town for fear of the Indians, should forfeit all his rights therein.” But now, at any rate, as I have frequently observed, a man may desert the fertile frontier territories of truth and justice, which are the State’s best lands, for fear of far more insignificant foes, without forfeiting any of his civil rights therein. Nay, townships are granted to deserters, and the General Court, as I am sometimes inclined to regard it, is but a deserters’ camp itself.230

Thoreau’s quote and his interpretation are instructive. He juxtaposes truth and justice with desertion—and implicitly injustice and dishonesty. From his recounting of Jonathan Tyng’s fighting, holding fast despite his fear, and the area being renamed in his honor and placed under his ownership, the reader knows that Tyng did not desert the colony. Tyng and others like him would maintain their civil rights while others lost them with the passage of the 1694 law. As he comments how “townships are granted to deserters,” Thoreau is describing how Tyng is actually a deserter of a better moral land characterized by fidelity to truth and justice. Even the General Court is a safe haven for those who have deserted these same qualities. Civil rights are guaranteed to the unjust but removed from those who absented themselves—implicitly—for truth and justice.

Read in this way with the historical knowledge that the Penacooks abstained from fighting while Tyng courageously remained loyal and had a town named after him, Thoreau is leading the reader to see the general unjustness and dishonesty of Euro-American society while implying the justness and honesty of the Penacooks. This sheds new light on why the Penacooks gave up their land and removed themselves from the region. The general legal, religious, and social climate in New England was increasingly hostile toward Indigenous peoples making the area less favorable to their continued habitation in their traditional bioregional environs. They properly assessed the situation and realized their marginalized, undervalued position would only

230 Thoreau, A Week, 112.
become more entrenched and pronounced. This is the inflexibility of the Puritan environment that created an ethos of subjugation in Thoreau’s mind.

The five components (burdensomeness, limitations, coercion, homogeneity, and rigidity) designated the cumulative historical character of Puritan New England settlement. What Thoreau reveals is a religious inflexibility, intolerance, and exclusiveness that did not remain confined to the religious realm but overflowed into the political sphere and generally guided the culture of the emigrants. Thoreau, therefore, was left with America’s violent founding and a religio-political trajectory that he had to challenge. To do so, he reinterpreted “religion” and gave it a novel meaning supportive of differences, pluralism, and solidarity with the marginalized.

In the end, for Thoreau, observation did not occur free from prejudices; this is not the idea of prejudices with a negative connotation. Thoreau indicates that humans are embodied in particular times, places, and cultures; these embodied existences direct each person’s angle of vision, which gives particular interpretive lenses to the observer. Prejudice, then, is similar to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s emphasis on prejudices as assumptions and prejudgments that provide the initial framework from which a reader encounters a text. This means, for Thoreau, that as one encounters a word, an object, or an action, already in place are numerous associations—both historically and culturally. These would be the connotations or manifold associations wedded to certain words, objects, or actions. “Religion” had its own manifold associations, and Thoreau was attempting to break these affiliations throughout A Week.

The traditional associations with the word “religion” were not pleasant for Thoreau. He had to reinterpret this word, for Thoreau had been historically conditioned to see religion in its

---

institutionalized form as he grew up within the Unitarian Church in Concord, Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{233}

He was baptized in the Unitarian Church; as a child, Thoreau attended worship services and Sunday school in Concord’s liberal congregation. Religion and human-made structures were historically married in Thoreau’s mind, but this is not all; religion was associated with one text, the Bible. Buildings, church bells, the Bible, and Sunday school constituted the specificity of Thoreau’s religious understanding as a child. Through his historical awareness of his embodied existence in New England’s religious heritage, he did not associate religion with joy or exuberance; instead, the dominant religion was exactly that, namely, governing, controlling, or dominating.

Puritanism, later forms of orthodox Calvinism, and Unitarianism came to represent three variations of institutionalized religion that constrained religion. They confined its sphere to a building and a text. They gave religion a hierarchy, and they associated religion with observances of worn out rituals and pieties. They did not rebind the person to God; instead, they trained people in customs and taboos. They domesticated religion and constrained it. Religion, for Thoreau, had become an exclusionary practice as it effaced other religions and unconventional religious experiences, and it became an impediment to connecting with God as it set up the institution between people and the divine. Instead of freeing people and being an expansive force in their lives, New England religion subjugated people and contracted their religious sensibilities. He wanted to find an alternative to this subjugation, formalism, and religious dystopia.

Conclusion: New England’s Christian Dystopia

What Thoreau presents the reader with in *A Week* is a religion of subjugation that dissociates itself from the land on which it exists, and this type of religious expression separates itself from the diversity of human and non-human persons in the region. Instead of seeking to sustain plurality, it establishes boundaries that restrict the types of viable forms of life it will accept. To do this, it establishes rigid doctrines, interpretations of texts, clear guidelines establishing who belongs and who does not, and the proper or authoritative context for religion to take place. Thoreau has given us “material practices and spatial structures” that a religion of subjugation deploys to “shape [relationships] with one another and the environment.”

Thoreau shows how a religion of subjugation takes part in a “cultural geography” that shapes places “through complex social, economic, and political processes.” To maintain the fixity of these places and the dominance of a religion of subjugation, Thoreau uses images such as the dam to show how flux and flows are restricted through coercive and often violent processes leading to imbalances in nature and in humanity.

A religion of subjugation is established on imbalances of power, strict rules for what counts as knowledge, and persistent attempts to stabilize and perpetuate a certain type of geographical structuring. In doing so, a religion of subjugation suffocates wildness in nature, in individual human life, and in human relations.

Thoreau provides an explicit criticism of a religion of subjugation. By keeping in mind Iris Marion Young’s analysis of injustice, the reader can see how Thoreau has given an elaboration of the injustices that are a consequence of a religious posture toward the world based on subjugation. His examination of religion in New England has shown that the Christian

---


235 Ibid.


religion was a form of domination as it clearly restricted what form of religious expression was viable. For example, the Sabbath laws clearly restricted movements and flows in New England, and the residue of them allowed Thoreau and his brother to be accosted even after the blue laws no longer remained enforceable. Second, Thoreau clearly shows how a religion of subjugation sustains oppressive conditions, such as cultural imperialism, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence. Cultural imperialism is present through the region’s imposition of the Christian narrative and values on Natives Americans in the region and the attempt to convert them. On a broader level, New England Christian society exploited nature, animals, and trees without giving back to the land; they did not seek equitable “gift exchanges” with nature. Natives and nature are clearly marginalized entities within New England’s society. Natives and nature remain powerless within the established Euro-American system; they have no true representative voice and are often left without appropriate recourse to advocate for their best interests. Thoreau made this marginalization and powerlessness clear in “Saturday” when he observes the plight of the fish, “Poor shad! where is thy redress?” Then in the following paragraph, he offers a poignant question, “Who hears the fishes when they cry?” The heights of a religion of subjugation are found in the visible violence in the land, and Thoreau not only points to the violence done to nature as people used religious ideas to destroy the natural environment, but he links this violence with the genocidal actions sustaining the American founding; Thoreau describes the disappearance of both Native Americans and fish in the region as “extinction.” Both were forced from their place of habitation through violence, and the displacement has led to the extinction of a land-based way of life for both. Through Thoreau’s criticism of the cultural geography created by a religion of subjugation, Thoreau makes it clear that through its dams and

closures, New England’s religious posture is harmful to life and the creative energy sustaining all creation. In other words, it closes people off from the divine and their traditional, material existence in a specific place.

In other words, a religion of subjugation creates alienation on various levels; as Melvin Seeman has argued, alienation has a number of characteristics, such as isolation, meaninglessness, normlessness, powerlessness, and self-estrangement.\textsuperscript{239} As he describes a religion of subjugation in \textit{A Week}, Thoreau makes the isolating qualities explicit; a religion of subjugation isolates people from other communities (such as Native Americans), from nature (such as wildlife and the pulsating energy flowing through the natural world), and from themselves (a person’s own inner law or conscience that should be in balance with the cosmos and one’s local environs). A religion of subjugation leads to a condition of meaninglessness because the tradition is too constraining, and it disallows people from constructing their own meanings for life. While those within the tradition may experience meaning in the world, the affect on traditions and places irrelevant to the religion of subjugation undermines the relevance of those places for others as it coopts geography and tries to eradicate alternative interpretations of life and creation. This generated instability—whether it was in the natural world or in Indigenous communities. Those human and non-human beings who were forced to the margins and were constrained in their choices of viable life options found positive stability lacking. Instead of healthy, life-preserving stability, a religion of subjugation nullified the stability of others as it imposed its own norms. Self-estrangement may occur, and this can be for those it oppresses or for its own adherents. By forcing everybody into a mass-produced religious approach that constrains a person’s inward law and how a person creates her or his harmony with the natural world, a religion of subjugation creates disharmony for people as their material and

\begin{footnotesize}
\end{footnotesize}
spiritual components remain in a dysfunctional state, and disenchantment with life and creation is sure to follow. Instead of feeling a connection with place, with others, and with oneself, the person feels distant and plagued by melancholia.

*A Week* wants to undermine the posture toward life and the world engendered by a religion of subjugation. Instead of closing off paths, Thoreau wants to bring possibility, variety, freedom, flexibility, and buoyancy to life. In reconnecting with the creative energy pulsating throughout creation, touching the infinite within existence, Thoreau is seeking to leave open the avenues of approach to a pressing question that ceaselessly demanded an answer from him: “How shall I live?” In choosing an answer to this question, Thoreau and *A Week* do not give a solid answer—an answer for each and every person, but Thoreau does offer an alternative that tries to aid people in reconnecting with the divine in their lives. The next chapter will concentrate on Thoreau’s religious ideal and its various aspects, but one thing is clear. His religious perspective situates religion outside of a religious institution, its architectural constructions, and its doctrines as it tries to reposition people within a deeper respect for place through bioregionalism and an emphasis on direct or intuitive religious connections immersed in the material world. He offers a sensualist religion that underscores embodied existence within a specific locale that seeks to make room for different responses to that region and attempts to make room for different religious expressions. In this way, Thoreau’s religious ideal in *A Week* moves religion away from a religion of subjugation perpetuating the Christian Doctrine of Discovery toward a pluralistic approach to religion and an alliance with the dominated, oppressed, and alienated in the world.
CHAPTER THREE

THOREAU’S NATURE RELIGION:
THE EVENT OF NATURE, REBINDING ONESELF TO WILDNESS,
AND AN ONTOLOGY OF FLOWS

There is in my nature, methinks, a singular yearning toward all wildness.

— Henry David Thoreau, *A Week*¹

I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another— I have no sympathy with the bigotry & ignorance which make transient & partial & puerile distinctions between one man’s faith or form of faith & another’s— as christian & heathen— I pray to be delivered from narrowness partiality exaggeration — bigotry. To the philosopher all sects all nations are alike. I like Brahma—Hare Buddha— the Great spirit as well as God.

— Henry David Thoreau, written in his journal during 1850²

It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Persians, the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind. The New Testament is still, perhaps, too much on the lips and in the hearts of men to be called Scripture in this sense. Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalize the faith of men. This is a work which Time will surely edit, reserved to crown the labors of the printing-press. This would be the Bible, or Book of Books, which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost parts of the earth.

— Henry David Thoreau, *A Week*³

Introduction

In Thoreau’s New England religious context in the 1840s, people continued to think about religion based on a Christian paradigm.⁴ Most Unitarians thought of religion in Christian terms, and some Transcendentalists posited Christianity as the supreme religion. James Freeman Clarke—a Unitarian minister, Transcendentalist, and chaplain to the Massachusetts Senate— thought of Christianity as the pinnacle of religion, and he believed it would replace non-Christian

---


³ Thoreau, *A Week*, 143-44.

religions eventually. In his book *Ten Great Religions*, which is incidentally an important text for the development of the concept of “world religions,” Clarke asserts, “By such a critical survey as we have thus sketched in mere outline it will be seen that each of the great ethnic religions is full on one side, but empty on the other, while Christianity is full all around.” He concludes by quoting 1 Corinthians 13:9-10: “Christianity is adapted to take their place, not because they are false, but because they are true as far as they go. They ‘know in part and prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.’”

But Buddhist and Hindu sacred texts were reaching New Englanders—and more specifically the Transcendentalists—in a sustained way by the 1830s and 1840s. While these texts remained largely unknown to most Americans, the Transcendentalists Amos Brownson, Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thoreau added them to their reading lists, which allowed them to expand their religious sensibilities and to contemplate and incorporate religious truths established well before the emergence of Christianity.

In fact, one concern about Thoreau’s *A Week* is related to its unorthodox views and its offensiveness for nineteenth-century Christian readers; there is little doubt that his love for Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American culture, and “heathen” approaches to life altered Thoreau’s religious perspective and his text’s trajectory. In life, Thoreau repeatedly positioned

---

himself in heathen contexts as a lover of nature, a person immersed in his senses, and a person on a pilgrimage linked with non-Christian religious practices, literature, and modes of being. His alternative approach is clear in a journal entry from 30 October 1842 when he describes his religious allegiance and associates it with the natural world: “I feel that I draw nearest to understanding the great secret of my life in my closest intercourse with nature. There is a reality and health in (present) nature; which is not to be found in any religion—and cannot be contemplated in antiquity— I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature.”

Perry Miller would come to disparage Thoreau’s lifelong quest for this form of religious cultivation by calling it a “perverse pilgrimage,” but over a century earlier in 1848, Ralph Waldo Emerson was already skeptical about Thoreau’s life and his complete allegiance to the woods: “Henry Thoreau is like the woodgod who solicits the wandering poet & draws him into antres vast & desarts idle, & bereaves him of his memory, & leaves him naked, plairting vines and with twigs in his hand. Very seductive are the first steps from the town to the woods, but the end is want and madness.”

---


Lidian Jackson Emerson discloses similar concerns about Thoreau’s unorthodox ideas in a letter to her husband, Ralph Waldo Emerson, as she communicates how the Transcendentalists Charles Lane and Alcott are disturbed by Thoreau’s sensuousness:

Mr. Lane decided . . . that this same love of nature—of which Henry was the champion . . . was the most subtle and dangerous of sins; a refined idolatry, much more to be dreaded than gross wickedness, because the gross sinner would be alarmed by the depth of his degradation, . . . but the unhappy idolaters of Nature were deceived by the refined quality of their sin, and would be the last to enter the kingdom. Henry frankly affirmed to both the wise men that they were wholly deficient in the faculty in question, and therefore could not judge of it. And Mr. Alcott as frankly answered that it was because they went beyond the mere material objects, and were filled with spiritual love and perception (as Mr. T. was not), that they seemed to Mr. Thoreau not to appreciate outward nature.13

Lane associates Thoreau’s position with sin and idolatry, and Alcott believes Thoreau is concerned too much with the materiality of existence instead of rising above it to an ideal realm outside of the material sphere.14

Thoreau unapologetically made his non-Christian allegiance clear in “Sunday”: “In my Pantheon, Pan still reigns in his pristine glory . . . Pan is not dead, as was rumored . . . . Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine.”15

Following this line of thought and seeing Thoreau’s unorthodox position on religion, several reviewers commented on and noted their distaste for his pantheistic tendencies and his harsh criticisms of Christianity.16

14 There is a slight inconsistency here. As seen in Chapter One, Alcott praised and enjoyed Thoreau’s writings, and he gave a positive review of A Week. What this emphasis on a too sensuous approach to life is indicating, I believe, is the underlying resistance to John Locke’s “Sensationalism.” See Cameron Thompson, “John Locke and New England Transcendentalism,” The New England Quarterly 35, no. 4 (1962): 435-57. Thoreau’s time with Orestes Brownson supported this emphasis on materiality as Brownson saw a clear distinction between idealism and materialism as a naïve philosophical and religious view. See Robinson, Natural Life, 12-18.
16 For the contemporary reviews of A Week, see Joel Myerson, ed., Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 341-70.
The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore this infamously alternative religious option Thoreau provides in *A Week* that set him so far apart from his contemporaries as he earnestly sought to answer two questions: “For what shall I live?” and “How shall I live?” In the end, he concludes that religion is concerned with wildness, and Thoreau’s religious aim is twofold as he seeks to reconnect humans with wildness through repetitive pilgrimages in nature.

In the last chapter, I examined Thoreau’s criticism of Christianity along the lines of New England’s Puritan form of Christianity, which I identified as a “religion of subjugation.” Thoreau commented on religion with a very specific, local criticism of New England’s Puritan religious tradition and the destruction it brought to Native Americans, nature, and the lives of the inhabitants in New England. This can be seen as part of Thoreau’s assessment of humanity’s “progress” in New England and the United States, but he did not simply deconstruct religion without providing a viable option. While some critics have accused Thoreau of being pessimistic, this clearly is not the case in *A Week* as he offers an alternative to the convergence of religion, dominance, and violence.

---


A Week presents the reader with an idealized view of religion, which one could call a utopian religious view or even a telos for religion. Both “utopia” and “telos” are, admittedly, problematic terms in many academic circles today;\(^\text{22}\) for Thoreau, however, the emphasis on an ideal or a grand goal helped to challenge the actual by showing how situations can always be improved. Thoreau’s ideal religious perspective adds to his criticism of America’s Christian heritage as it shows what a religion of subjugation is not. Thoreau is attempting to show the reader what her or his religious life could be. This section, then, will concentrate on his religious imaginings: personal religious experiences, a religious esteem for wildness, a new ontological understanding of creation, and egalitarian liberation for human and nonhuman existence.

Thoreau’s religious view supports tolerance for dissenting positions and pluralism in matters of religion. He does not affirm the belief in one true religious path for all people; instead, each person has to make her or his religious path. As in life, nobody can live for another person, and in religion, nobody can tread another person’s religious path. Reconnecting with the divine in and around us is a personal task that does not rely on the externality of creeds, religious institutions, and architectural structures. For Thoreau, religion encompassed taking risks and venturing into unknown regions to experience the divine personally and without mediation, which is also to encounter the infinite in the present.\(^\text{23}\) The person should bring the divine to life in new personalized ways that will invigorate them while helping to improve society. Thoreau’s


\(^{23}\) Rosemary Whitaker, “\textit{A Week and Walden: The River vs. The Pond},” \textit{American Transcendental Quarterly} 17 (1973): 10.
desire, then, was for a new world in the here and now where balance, harmony, justice, and peace would reign, and religion would aid this outcome through rebinding people to the wild in all creation.

A Biographical Summary of Thoreau’s Contact with Wildness or the Wild

Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley, and Edward F. Mooney and Lyman F. Mower address the significance of external demands on a person that call for an affirmative response.24 This is what nature offered Thoreau. From an early age, the uncultivated natural world enchanted Thoreau and placed a demand on him, and it did so for the rest of his life;25 his grand experiences in the past and present found their expression in *A Week* as he sought to remain faithful to the insights he encountered in and through nature.26 In his experiences of the uncultivated natural world, Thoreau was exposed to something that he did not experience in civilized existence; he sensed his life diminished by human society, which left him longing to go into the wilderness.27

Thoreau encountered “the Not Me” in the natural world, and he envisioned the cultivation of the self through a relationship with the natural environment.28 On 2 June 1837, Thoreau wrote a brief essay on the theme of the “barbarities of civilized states.” He contrasts the civilizing role of cultured art in society with the uncultivated natural world and the wisdom arising from contact with natural creation. Thoreau argues that civilization and its civilizing arts detach people from

28 Bishop, “The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau’s *Week,*” 68.
the natural world, and this makes art's educational qualities deficient. Education, instead, should lead to wisdom and reconnection with the natural world. He says, “A nation may be ever so civilized and yet lack wisdom. Wisdom is the result of education, and education being the bringing out, or development, of that which is in a man, by contact with the Not Me, is safer in the hands of Nature than of Art.”

If culture and education are to be praised or supported, they must bring people into “contact with the Not Me.” They need to lead people beyond established personhood and the confines of societal values and society’s many other constraints. The uncultivated natural world did this for Thoreau throughout his life; it took him beyond the categories, labels, and limitations of his New England society. In nature, Thoreau encountered something that freed him from arbitrary human boundaries, and this is the wildness he valued in the natural world and always sought to cultivate within himself and others.

Thoreau offers readers two accounts of his early encounters with the mysterious and freeing consequences of the natural world. In fact, these early experiences and their ability to move Thoreau toward “contact with the Not Me” remained with him from the age of four until his death. In *Walden*, Thoreau describes his earliest recollection.

When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory. And now to-night my flute has waked the echoes over
that very water. The pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes. Almost the same johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture, and even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my infant dreams, and one of the results of my presence and influence is seen in these bean leaves, corn blades, and potato vines.  

This early introduction to the natural world made an indelible impression on Thoreau, and that perception would positively affect his present. He would contemplate his early experiences, and the joy of that memory and his re-immersion in the present would allow him to encounter something enduring. A perennial vigor exists that sustains every being inhabiting Earth that will be seen by “new infant eyes” in years to come, and through his contact with this regenerating law as he grew beans in the field at Walden Pond, Thoreau became part of the natural processes that sustain existence.

A passage with similar language and images, one that he altered and incorporated into *Walden*, is found in a journal entry for 6 August 1845:

Twenty three years since, when I was 5 years old, I was brought from Boston to this pond, away in the country, —which was then but another name for the extended world for me, —one of the most ancient scenes stamped on the tablets of my memory, the oriental Asiatic valley of my world, whence so many races and inventions have gone forth in recent times. That woodland vision for a long time made the drapery of my dreams. That sweet solitude my spirit seemed so early to require that I might have room to entertain my thronging guests, and that speaking silence that my ears might distinguish the significant sounds. Somehow or other it at once gave the preference to this recess among the pines where almost sunshine and shadow were the only inhabitants that varied the scene, over that tumultuous and varied city, as if it had found its proper nursery.  

Well, now, to-night my flute awakes the echoes over this very water, but one generation of pines has fallen and with their stumps I have cooked my supper, and a lusty growth of oaks and pines is rising all around its brim and preparing its wilder aspect for a new infant eyes. Almost the same johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture. Even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my imagination, and one result of my presence and influence is seen in the bean leaves and corn blades and potato vines.  

---

This is slightly different from the *Walden* quote as he speaks of an inward need for some peace of mind, which he was aware of early in life and associated with the healing qualities of the nature. Thoreau indicates a need for silence and the ability to listen to the different sounds of nature. According to this passage, something exists in nature that one cannot find in the “tumultuous and varied city” of Boston. There is a fertile component in the natural world that remains vigorous through the ages that he was able to connect with as a child and later as an adult. At such an early age, Thoreau had “contact with the Not Me” and continued to yearn for it throughout his life.

Thoreau describes his contact with the perennial “Not Me” in the introductory chapter of *A Week*: “As yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, so some flitting perspectives, and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are, in time, veritably future, or rather outside to time, perennial, young, divine, in the wind and rain which never die.” In encountering the uncultivated natural world, he cannot escape a power in nature that preserves or conserves life, and this contact constantly lures him back into the natural world repeatedly leading to deep contemplative moments. In fact, as “Concord River” paints the scene, the book is largely a result of habitual immersions in the natural world on the banks of the river and the meditative moments that originated from these encounters with the river.

I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made; the weeds at the bottom gently bending down the stream, shaken by the watery wind, still planted where the seeds had sunk, but ere long to die and go down likewise; the shining pebbles, not yet anxious to better their condition, the chips and weeds, and occasional logs and stems of trees, that floated past, fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me, and at last I resolved to launch myself on its bosom, and float whither it would bear me.

---

33 Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don’t Know*, 89.
This passage discloses the interdependence of life and death in the perennial fertile law of nature. The river is an emblem for Thoreau in his contemplative moments, and this symbol reveals how life flows from birth to death. Thoreau encounters the seeds planting themselves in the river bed, sprouting and growing, then being uprooted as part of the process of death to float onward with other matter. This is the ceaseless flux of the river and is, metaphorically, life itself. He does not seek to resist this constant flux; he embraces the river as “an emblem” and sees it as part of the “same law of the system” in which he and all beings are immersed. All creation is flowing.

Thoreau’s moments of immersion in nature offer a paradoxical moment. He connects with the “Not Me,” which is the perennial power in nature, but he launches himself on the river’s “bosom,” which indicates that he has chosen to flow with the current and be one with the ceaseless flow of nature and all creation. This, ironically, enjoins him to this perennial, universal process within the cosmos that is also simultaneously part of him. He is consciously choosing the “Not Me” and merging his self with the law of the system and will become a “me” and a “Not Me” at once—the paradoxical nature of personhood always in a process of being and becoming. Or as David M. Robinson describes it, “[Thoreau] tried to explain that the process of growth must remain enigmatic” and preserve “the fundamental mystery of the inner life.” Being and becoming manifest that inner mystery of personhood.

This enigmatic moment is present later in A Week. In “Tuesday,” Thoreau describes an excursion he took alone to Saddle-Back Mountain in July 1844; it is the highest peak in Massachusetts allowing a person on its summit to see five states. Thoreau spent the night on its crest against the wall of an observatory students from a nearby college had built, and awakening

---

37 Robinson, Natural Life, 21.
early in the morning, Thoreau climbed the empty observatory and positioned himself on the roof. He describes a miraculous view.

– As the light increased I discovered around me an ocean of mist, which by chance reached up exactly to the base of the tower, and shut out every vestige of the earth, while I was left floating on this fragment of the wreck of a world, on my carved plank in cloudland; a situation which required no aid from the imagination to render it impressive. As the light in the east steadily increased, it revealed to me more clearly the new world into which I had risen in the night, the new terra-firma perchance of my future life. There was not a crevice left through which the trivial places we name Massachusetts, or Vermont, or New York, could be seen, while I still inhaled the clear atmosphere of a July morning,—if it were July there. All around beneath me was spread for a hundred miles on every side, as far as the eye could reach, an undulating country of clouds, answering in the varied swell of its surface to the terrestrial world it veiled. It was such a country as we might see in the dreams, with all the delights of paradise . . . . As there was wanting the symbol, so there was not the substance of impurity, no spot nor stain. It was a favor for which to be forever silent to be shown this vision . . . . As I climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive days’ journeys I might reach the region of eternal day beyond the tapering shadow of the earth . . . . Here, as on earth, I saw the gracious god. 38

Thoreau is once again immersed in the natural world displaying reverence and awe for creation. It is a new world that subverts the old divisions of land and political territories; he can no longer discern the “trivial places” and their names: “Massachusetts,” “New York,” and “Vermont.” Such names have vanished in this mystical image of “cloudland.” His experience on the summit even effaces temporal distinctions, such as the months. In this erasure of human boundaries, Thoreau ponders the possibility of an “eternal day” in creation or an eternal, natural law revitalizing existence. As morning and daylight often stand as Thoreauvian symbols for newness, regeneration, and activity, 39 Thoreau is pointing to something eternally regenerative in this natural, uncommon scenery. It is in this scene that he encounters “the gracious god” permeating nature while also being nature—a pantheistic encounter with the divine common throughout Thoreau’s life.

38 Thoreau, A Week, 188-89.
While he was at Walden Pond writing both *A Week* and *Walden*, Thoreau was clarifying his ideas that would make their way into his 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government.” In a short essay called “Conflict of Laws,” written in June 1846 for the *Boston Courier*, Thoreau outlines a hierarchy of laws. He discusses the Constitution being the highest civilized law in the United States and the subordination of state laws to the Constitution, but neither the Constitution nor the state laws offers the most supreme law. He begins the essay by claiming, “In the conflict of laws, one law must be supreme. If our state laws conflict with our national, the state law yields. The higher law always renders the conflicting lower law null and void.”40 He moves analogically from this point to his conclusion: “Conscience is to me supreme law; whatever other law conflicts with it, is null and void.”41 This, however, is a religious assertion for Thoreau.

In “Thoreau’s Religion,” Christopher A. Dustin comments on the disjunction between everyday politics and religion: “There is a part of us, Thoreau says, that is not represented by a freedom that is merely political. Although political participation can secure a kind of autonomy, such freedom is still heteronomous.”42 Thoreau wanted a more autonomous freedom associated with one’s inner law in harmony with the cosmos; as humans are microcosms within a macrocosm, people need to free themselves from the imposed laws and moralities of their time and place and connect with something eternal.

Nature itself provides the stuff of which moral freedom is made. Thoreau’s metaphor suggests not only that moral freedom rests on something other than a purely rational foundation but that it is ultimately grounded in something deeper than any foundation we ourselves set down . . . . Thoreauvian moral freedom draws on a source outside of the self . . . . We owe our wholeness—our being fully ourselves—to something that is and is not . . . .

41 Scharnhorst and Thoreau, “‘Conflict of Laws’: A Lost Essay by Henry Thoreau,” 570.
other than us . . . The appeal to conscience involves a search for what must ultimately constitute the sources of conscience itself.43

Thoreau argues this point in “Monday.”

I must conclude that Conscience, if that be the name of it, was not given us for no purpose, or for a hindrance. However flattering order and expediency may look, it is but the repose of lethargy, and we will choose rather to be awake, though it be stormy, and maintain ourselves on this earth, and in this life, as we may, without signing our death-warrant. Let us see if we cannot stay here, where He has put us, on his own conditions.44

In Thoreau’s pantheistic view, God and nature merge; nature is not pointing beyond to God as in the writings of various Christians from Paul to William Ellery Channing.45 Nature is divine.46 Being present in nature allows for the discernment of perennial, fertile laws, which are aspects of the divine. Conscience is part of a process of being awake and consciously realizing a different path from the rest of the world’s habits and customs. Conscience, as an exalted law above the Constitution and the laws of states, is higher precisely because it is the infusion of the law of nature, of God’s manifestation and presence in creation, that signals how humans are to live as the creator intended them to live on earth. Awareness of conscience takes humans out of their illusory separation from nature and reminds them of their immersion in the processes of creation; it reminds Thoreau that his foundation is simultaneously beyond himself and within himself.47

From the outset of his encounters with the natural world, Thoreau was confronting the divine permeating creation. The wilderness, Walden Pond, the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and cloudland provided Thoreau “contact with the Not Me.” This paradoxical moment allowed Thoreau to transcend the limits of personality, culture, and habits in an expansive awakening: Names, labels, and territorial constraints vanished through a connection with and immersion in the perennial, regenerative law of nature. This led to his need to connect repeatedly with the wild in the uncultivated natural world throughout his life, and deep respect and responsibility for nature was the result of the religious rejuvenation he experienced.

What Is Wildness or the Wild for Thoreau?

This biographical outline establishes the importance of the wild for Thoreau and provides a starting point for understanding its role in Thoreau’s A Week. In his view, all existence takes part in wildness; all creation is founded on an underlying wild condition that should be nurtured, not extinguished.48 The word “wild” appears in A Week thirty-five times. He also speaks of a “wild-apple orchard,” encountering a tract of the river that is “wilder” than other parts of the river, the “wildest” parts of nature, “wild-fires,” “wild-flowers,” actions “wildly” performed, and “the wildness of the scenery.” These related terms constitute forty-seven uses of “wild.”49 It is not just these explicit uses of the term in its various forms that is important; Thoreau values related terms, such as “rude” and its several manifestations, “savage” and its cognates, “uncivil,” and “unexplored.”

The dominant binaries in A Week are the civil and the uncivil, the conquered and the unexplored, the constrained and the infinite, the cultivated and the rude, and the gentrified and

the savage.\textsuperscript{50} A Week values an undoing of society’s constraints while celebrating the wild.\textsuperscript{51} As Chapter Two addressed Thoreau’s criticism of New England’s hegemony and its cultivated society deploying and dependent upon a religion of subjugation, this section describes that for which Thoreau yearned, which is the untamed or wild quality of existence that represents the sacred for Thoreau; it rhetorically subverts the domesticated qualities of New England’s religion.\textsuperscript{52}

As terms appearing in Transcendentalist writings, “nature” and the “wild”—with their cognates, and their associations with cultivation, humanity, and the uncivilized—were far from univocal.\textsuperscript{53} Two of Thoreau’s closest Transcendentalist friends, Alcott and Emerson, differed from Thoreau over how cultivation, the wild, and nature intersected. Alcott thought people needed to tame nature and wildness as part of a process of cultivation: “These woods do not belong to art nor civility till they are brought into keeping with man’s thoughts, nor may encroach upon us by nearness . . . . They need to be cropped and combed before they are fairly taken into our good graces as ornaments of our estates.”\textsuperscript{54} To become more human was to shape and direct the wild and the natural world; Alcott wanted people to be part of a grooming process

\textsuperscript{50} Broderick, “The Movement of Thoreau’s Prose,” 72-73.
\textsuperscript{51} Whitaker, “A Week and Walden,” 11. One important point to remember is that the wild and wilderness were “considered uncivilized, dirty, and even pagan—it was certainly not a place to seek spiritual clarity.” Bingham, Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination, 47. This emphasis shows how Thoreau is trying to deconstruct the binary civilization/wildness. What people celebrate about civilization (its supposed ability to improve us) can actually be found in that which society deprecates, namely, wilderness and the wild. He also shows that what is normally ridiculed in nature is actually found in society. Is not this what Jacques Derrida does in Of Grammatology?! Here Derrida reverses and complicates the hierarchy of speaking/writing showing how what is celebrated in speech actually is found in writing and what is normally criticized in writing is found in speech. He then gives us a new vision of how “writing” or “textuality” can change our way of thinking. Derrida, Of Grammatology. Similarly, Thoreau gives us a new view of wildness, which allows it to become a new trope for politics, religion, social interactions, and writing. Sullivan, The Thoreau You Don’t Know, 172.
\textsuperscript{52} Bishop, “The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau’s Week,” 85-87.
\textsuperscript{53} Grodzins, “Nature,” 132-34.
\textsuperscript{54} As quoted in Tauber, 255. See Note 26.
that would transform the wildness in nature to make it more harmonious with human ideas and intentions.\textsuperscript{55}

Emerson valued wildness in life through an interweaving of the wild in nature with life in society. People should become one with the organic processes of the cosmos and allow the universe to work for the betterment of humanity; nature, then, was part of humanity’s true cultivation process. Emerson wrote, “therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power.”\textsuperscript{56} Sherman Paul describes Emerson’s view of nature in the following terms, “Nature, therefore, was another self, and adjunct of man. Above all it was a moral realm, and the patient teacher of his character . . . . The end of nature was a man’s spiritual aggrandizement . . . . Emerson’s theory of nature, therefore, terminated in the moral regeneration of man.”\textsuperscript{57} Nature serves humanity; Emerson valorizes humanity within nature and implicitly tames it as he places nature in subservience to the moral, religious, and intellectual development of humanity.\textsuperscript{58} This is a form of humanism, therefore, where humanity is more highly esteemed than the nonhuman realm.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} This idea, in many ways, sounds similar to the leading ideas found within the dominant Puritan religious culture that sustained a religion of subjugation.
\textsuperscript{56} Emerson, \textit{Essays and Lectures}, 41.
\textsuperscript{57} Paul, \textit{The Shores of America}, 8.
For Alcott and Emerson, human interests supersede the concerns of nature and nonhuman beings, but Thoreau offers a different perspective. He presents a paradoxical view as true wilderness becomes the goal of civility: “In the wildest nature, there is not only the material of the most cultivated life, and a sort of anticipation of the last result, but a greater refinement already than is ever attained by man.” A little further down the page, Thoreau wrote, “Man tames Nature only that he may at last make her more free even than he found her, though he may never yet have succeeded.” Nature and the wild should not be molded or brought into a subordinate position to humanity; instead, humans should serve nature and wildness as each person partakes in wildness to free all creation to be more untamed. This deferential posture toward nature, rudeness, savageness, and the uncivilized allows them to become guiding tropes in A Week.

Thoreau juxtaposes the wild with domestication. In “Saturday,” he writes, “Innumerable acres of meadow are waiting to be made dry land, wild native grass to give place to English.” Similarly in “Sunday,” Thoreau asserts, “The white man’s mullein soon reigned in Indian cornfields, and sweet scented English grasses clothed the new soil. Where, then, could the Red Man set his foot?” These passages establish a difference in type between cultivated grasses that will overtake uncultivated grasses growing indigenously in the region. The British, dissatisfied with indigenous grasses, bring their own to replace what was established long ago. Likewise, the settlers displace Indigenous peoples and domesticate their fields, so they are continuously

---


61 Thoreau, A Week, 316.

62 Ibid., 38.

63 Ibid., 52-53.
supplanting the wild, indigenous elements with their transplanted, domesticated ones. More constrained, planned ways of being are replacing more natural, unconstrained forms of existence. White society is a symbol for domestication, and Native Americans represent wildness.\textsuperscript{64}

In “Tuesday,” Thoreau addresses the scenery and the wildness around the Merrimack River: “Being on the river, whose banks are always high and generally conceal the few houses, the country appeared much more wild and primitive than to the traveler on the neighboring roads.”\textsuperscript{65} Similarly in the same chapter, he describes the same uninhabited quality of the river: “It was still wild and solitary, except that at intervals of a mile or two the roof of a cottage might be seen over the bank.”\textsuperscript{66} Thoreau focuses the reader’s attention on the difference between the river as a natural road and the roads constructed by settlers after their arrival.\textsuperscript{67} He associates the wild with what one can or cannot see; the houses and other human constructions are largely hidden from view, so the boat’s navigator generally sees the river’s banks, its wilderness, and undomesticated animals. Nature eclipses human products.

Other passages similarly juxtapose indigenous aspects with the disruption of white society. This is clearest in his discussion of the railroad in “Sunday.” The themes of displacement and substitution come to the fore once again: “Instead of the scream of a fish hawk scaring the fishes, is heard the whistle of the steam-engine, arousing a country to progress.”\textsuperscript{68} Technology and “progress” seek to mold and master the environment, which allows Thoreau to address the unhealthiness of New England’s communities as they displace, disrupt, and degrade nature; society is working against wildness.

\textsuperscript{64} In \textit{A Week}, indigenous peoples mostly reveal heroic traits for Thoreau. Taylor, \textit{America’s Bachelor Uncle}, 31. While white settlers show some heroism throughout the text, Native Americans are an example for a better way of life and sustained virtuous actions.
\textsuperscript{65} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 194.
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Ibid.}, 233.
\textsuperscript{67} In “Concord River,” Thoreau speaks of the river as a natural highway. \textit{Ibid.}, 12.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Ibid.}, 87.
Thoreau, however, seeks to orient readers toward the natural world unconstrained by New England’s Euro-American settlers. He makes this clear as he describes the shores of the Merrimack River: “Still the ever rich and fertile shores accompanied us, fringed with vines and alive with small birds and frisking squirrels, the edge of some farmer’s field or widow’s woodland, or wilder, perchance, where the muskrat, the little medicine of the river, drags itself along stealthily over the elder leaves and muscle shells, and man and the memory of man are banished far.” Shannon L. Mariotti aptly sums up the above aspect of Thoreau’s understanding of the wild as she writes, “The wild [for Thoreau] is typically understood as a confrontation with untamed, uncivilized, undomesticated nature, the wilderness.” He never fails to remind the reader of this wildness and the esteem it deserves.

The point to note is that in the uncultivated wilderness, a process exists that propagates and perpetuates creation, diversity, freedom, and life. Chapter Two established the dam as a symbol for a religion of subjugation and a society focused on developing constraints; he counteracts this diseased approach in “Saturday” as he describes “the fish principle in nature.” Thoreau describes why the fish principle is important: “Whether we live by the sea-side, or by the lakes and rivers, or on the prairie, it concerns us to attend to the nature of fishes, since they are not phenomena confined to certain localities only, but forms and phases of the life in nature universally dispersed.” This principle represents “the more fertile law itself” in nature and how natural processes cannot be fully constrained or stopped. He presents readers with variety,

---

flexibility, freedom, buoyancy, natural conservation, and possibility;\textsuperscript{73} the fish principle provides insight into the resiliency of nature and its ability to sustain human and nonhuman life.

This principle not only addresses the types of fish in the region and around the world but also reveals something deeper about the processes of nature that affect all creation, especially humans. He writes, “. . . the fruit of the naturalist’s observations is not in new genera or species, but in new contemplations still, and science is only a more contemplative man’s recreation.”\textsuperscript{74} Science, mathematics, morality, and religion merge for Thoreau and help him understand what the dispersion of fish means for humanity not only as a scientific observation or a mathematical computation as he counts the many types of fish in the region—but also as a moral, poetic, and religious principle. For Thoreau, observations should offer concise mathematical precision, but these observations should move back into the person’s life as a moral principle and as part of a religious, aesthetic posture toward the universe and other humans.

The most distinct and beautiful statement of any truth must take at last the mathematical form. We might so simplify the rules of moral philosophy, as well as of arithmetic, that one formula would express them both. All the moral laws are readily translated into natural philosophy . . . . Or, if we prefer, we may say that the laws of Nature are the purest morality . . . . Mathematics should be mixed not only with physics but with ethics, that is mixed mathematics . . . . The purest science is still biographical. Nothing will dignify and elevate science while it is sundered so wholly from the moral life of its devotee, and he professes another religion than it teaches, and worships at a foreign shrine.\textsuperscript{75}

Close observation of nature and fish reveals that “There are fishes wherever there is a fluid medium, and even in clouds and in melted meadows we detect their semblance.”\textsuperscript{76} While one is

\textsuperscript{73} For these religious qualities, see \textit{Ibid.}, 136. Phyllida Anne Kent, “A Study of the Structure of Thoreau’s \textit{Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers}” (Master’s Thesis, Carleton University, 1968).

\textsuperscript{74} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 25.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, 362-63.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, 26.
aware of his hyperbole as fish do not exist in “clouds,” Thoreau wants people to appreciate this observation, discern a law, and allegorically read it into the rest of life as a law to guide living.\textsuperscript{77}

In the Concord River, there are approximately twelve species of fish,\textsuperscript{78} they look different and have different characters, yet they survive despite obstacles. They reveal how life may emerge in unanticipated regions. The naturalist should be looking for more than new classifications; science concerns the creation of laws from facts in one’s environs: “Observation is so wide awake, and facts are being so rapidly added to the sum of human experience, that it appears as if the theorizer would always be in arrears, and were doomed forever to arrive at imperfect conclusions; but the power to perceive a law is equally rare in all ages of the world, and depends but little on the number of facts observed.”\textsuperscript{79} Thoreau is advocating a posture toward the world and experience that allows a person to confront the facts of life and turn them into something more than facts; the person is to transfer them creatively into perennial laws that offer a healthy consistency to nature and human life without tyrannical control.

The laws of nature reveal a sustaining (positively conservative) force behind existence that provides stability while allowing for the unpredictable to emerge in a patterned, organic cosmos. Thoreau wants readers to realize the flexibility nature offers all life and creation within its consistency:

Surely the fates are forever kind, though Nature’s laws are more immutable than any despot’s, yet to man’s daily life they rarely seem rigid, but permit him to relax with license in summer weather. He is not harshly reminded of the things he may not do. She is very kind and liberal to all men of vicious habits, and certainly does not deny them quarter; they do not die without priest. Still they maintain life along the way . . . \textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{77} J.J. Boies assesses Thoreau’s description of the fish in “Saturday” and the resulting insights as “an analogue of all nature.” J.J. Boies, “Circular Imagery in Thoreau’s Week,” \textit{College English} 26, no. 5 (1965): 352-53.

\textsuperscript{78} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 26.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid.}, 364.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}, 35-36.
The patterns of the natural world are steady, predictable, and conservative as they preserve human and nonhuman life, but they are not oppressively rigid. In the fish principle, then, Thoreau offers an important example of what wildness means. The fish transcend boundaries as they are disseminated around the world, and their vigor is a symbol of flourishing life and the ability of novel forms of existence to emerge in unexpected places.

Thoreau, however, does not leave the wild in the cultivated wilderness beyond or outside of individuals and society;\(^{81}\) he does not leave the wild as an aspect of the natural world that is defenseless in the contest between civilizing and naturalizing processes. Instead, he defends wildness and discloses how humans and their creations exist on a shorter timescale within the larger natural processes of the cosmos.\(^{82}\) In fact, Thoreau wants humans to naturalize themselves and to become part of these processes within the longer duration of natural time;\(^{83}\) he sees naturalization as the highest human goal.

Men nowhere, east or west, live yet a natural life, round which the vine clings, and which the elm willingly shadows. Man would desecrate it by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only to be spiritualized, but naturalized, on the soil of earth. Who shall conceive what kind of roof the heavens might extend over him, what seasons minister to him, and what employment dignify his life! Only the convalescent raise the veil of nature. An immortality in his life would confer immortality on his abode. The winds should be his breath, the seasons his moods, and he should impart of his serenity to Nature herself.\(^{84}\)

People should not have an imbalanced life focused only on the spiritual component. He esteems the material realm of the natural world and its processes and wants humans to organize their spiritual lives in a way that is harmonious and balanced with the natural world. To be fully

\(^{81}\) Anderson, “Wildness as Political Act,” 70.
\(^{83}\) Robinson, Natural Life, 1-8.
\(^{84}\) Thoreau, A Week, 379. Also see Robinson, Natural Life, 1-2.
spiritual ironically means to naturalize one’s life. The person’s body and mind should harmonize with nature and its many cycles.

Fortunately, however, humans are not left to their own devices, and nature constantly works to reintroduce wildness into human settings to help naturalize people to bring them back into harmony with the cosmos. Earth (and its natural processes) is the oldest protagonist in Thoreau’s *A Week*; she is dynamic, alive, and actively altering the harmful consequences of civilized history. The struggle of the fish he describes in “Saturday” is framed in the history of nature. He suggests that Earth and her processes will destroy the dams and allow the fish to return to their natural paths of migration: “Perchance, after a few thousand of years, if the fishes will be patient, and pass their summers elsewhere, meanwhile, nature will have levelled the Billerica dam, and the Lowell factories, and the Grass-ground River run clear again, to be explored by new migratory shoals, even as far as the Hopkinton pond and Westborough swamp.” Thoreau divulges a level of optimism for the processes of the natural world. As human creations, the dams and the mills are vulnerable to the larger processes of natural history and nature’s cycles. He discloses a level of hope that things will be corrected eventually in the larger cosmic cycles that dwarf civilized history. Civilization may not be around to see nature’s justice as the dams fall and the fish are free to resume their natural patterns, but cosmic justice will not be stopped.

---

85 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 7-8. Buell offers four criteria for what constitutes an “environmentally oriented work”: “1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.” “2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.” “3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.” “4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.” Thoreau’s *A Week* fulfills all of these criteria.

86 Thoreau, *A Week*, 34.
This is reminiscent of an ecological awareness today in an essay by Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons called “Keepers of Life.” Lyons addresses the Law of Regeneration and its ability to continue despite human violence to the natural world:

Thus, we created great ceremonies of thanksgiving for the life-giving forces of the Natural World; as long as we carried out our ceremonies, life would continue. We were told that “The Seed is The Law.” Indeed, it is The Law of Life. It is the Law of Regeneration. Within the seed is the mysterious force of life and creation . . . . So reality and the Natural Law will prevail, the Law of the Seed and Regeneration.87

Whether humans change their behaviors or not, eventually The Law of Life will reset the balance, and humanity may be present or extinct when it happens, but The Law of Regeneration will prevail. This is Thoreau’s view too, for humanity is only one small part of the larger cosmic forces and processes. While we may destroy the natural world, he is convinced that natural processes cannot be subjugated forever. He is on the side of nature and is willing to find out how a crowbar “may avail . . . against the Billerica dam.”88

While this may sound slightly pessimistic to some and while this antagonism may seem too harsh, Thoreau in no way fashions this as an ontological antagonism between humans and nature. It is an antagonism that came about with civilized history; the period of conquest of Indigenous peoples and their land is Thoreau’s concern and the starting place for the true antagonism between nature and humanity. Even with this antagonism, however, it is not nature who is hostile but Euro-American settlers. Their religion of subjugation, the establishment of the United States through violence to nature and Indigenous peoples, and the steady expansion of capitalism and the transformation of nature into a commodity are the antagonists in A Week. Thoreau leaves room, however, for transformation. The challenge is to get civilized humanity to be aware of nature’s gentle prods and to get humans to decide to change their actions and values.

87 Lyons, “Keepers of Life,” 43-44.
88 Thoreau, A Week, 37.
Nature is on our side, but most humans in the West are not on her side. As he believes nature’s processes will finally be victorious and return things to a balanced, harmonious condition, Thoreau envisions nature bringing wildness to civilized life as she gently tries to naturalize civilization.

No human habitation, for example, is able to exclude nature fully from the horizon. Civilized history has not been able to fully destroy nature, nor has it been able to establish impermeable boundaries. Nature is not a respecter of human boundaries as she constantly allows wildness to permeate cities and towns. In “Monday,” nature disrupts attempts to fully civilize a region.

The wildness is near as well as dear to every man. Even the oldest villages are indebted to the border of wild wood which surrounds them, more than to the gardens of men. There is something indescribably inspiriting and beautiful in the aspect of the forest skirting and occasionally jutting into the midst of new towns, which, like the sand-heaps of fresh fox-burrows, have sprung up in their midst. The very uprightness of the pines and maples asserts the ancient rectitude and vigor of nature. Our lives need the relief of such a background, where the pine flourishes and the jay still screams. 

As much as civilized history and Euro-Americans have attempted to master or efface nature, the attempts have proven unsuccessful. While settlers established towns and have cultivated gardens, nature not only frames these activities but also stealthily crosses civilized boundaries in various ways. As a background, nature infringes on the civilizing attempts. The pines stand firmly in the background beyond houses, cities, and highways; they remind people of the vitality of nature. Although humans may not always pay attention to these noble trees, they patiently wait to remind civilized life that something uncultivated still exists. Nature also breeches the civilized borders whether physically or vocally. The jay’s scream erupts suddenly and calls attention to nonhuman inhabitants in the region. Humans cannot control the birds and their songs and calls;

89 Thoreau, A Week, 171.
they do not follow the same laws as civilized humans, and they sing or scream freely as they feel
the need. Civilized boundaries are permeable. The fox wanders beyond the established human
borders and finds a home suitable for her needs, and the fox’s trace disrupts the civilizing
processes and the dividing lines establishing the town’s limits. The fox and its burrow are
reminders that civilized life is not separate from nature and its many inhabitants. Nature prods
Euro-Americans to rethink civilization and its attempts to dominate nature.

With nature’s disruptions effacing human boundaries, she urges civilized existence to
naturalize. This process of becoming more wild or uncultivated takes various forms. Thoreau
indicates that one manifestation is for humans to mold their creations in the image of nature.
From vehicles to writing, the best human creations are those founded on natural examples. All
human constructions should follow the organic laws of nature, which Thoreau describes in
“Saturday” with the construction of their boat:

Our boat, which had cost us a week’s labor in the spring, was in form like a fisherman’s
dory, fifteen feet long, by three and a half in breadth at the widest part, painted green
below, with a border of blue, with reference to the two elements in which it was to spend
its existence. It had been loaded the evening before at our door, half a mile from the river,
with potatoes and melons from a patch which we had cultivated . . . If rightly made, a
boat would be a sort of amphibious animal, a creature of two elements, related by one
half its structure to some swift and shapely fish, and by the other to some strong-winged
and graceful bird. The fish shows where there should be the greatest breadth of beam and
depth in the hold; its fins direct where to set the oars, and the tail gives some hint for the
form and position of the rudder. The bird shows how to rig and trim the sails, and what
form to give the prow that it may balance the boat, and divide the air and water best.
These hints we had but partially obeyed.91

Relating to the aesthetic aspects of the boat, Thoreau and his brother chose to paint it according
to the water and the air that the boat would be inhabiting. In constructing the shape of the boat,
they took the fish as their model, and in establishing the portion above the water with the sails,

---
91 Thoreau, A Week, 15-16.
the brothers looked to birds. A boat is an amphibious vehicle making its way through both water and air—or analogously earth and heaven. Although humans will never be able to construct perfect replicas of these natural aspects of the world, they still should make the attempt, and in this modeling of human creations after nature, Thoreau indicates the presence of the wild in the outward aspects of human life.

Even intellectual products, such as poetry, are to be organic products in balance and harmony with nature. Wisdom’s manifestation in poetry is a “natural fruit.”

There is no doubt that the loftiest written wisdom is either rhymed or in some way musically measured, – is, in form as well as substance, poetry; and a volume which should contain the condensed wisdom of mankind need not have one rhythmless line.

Yet poetry, though the last and finest result, is a natural fruit. As naturally as the oak bears an acorn, and the vine a gourd, man bears a poem, either spoken or done. It is the chief and most memorable success, for history is but a prose narrative of poetic deeds.

Wisdom is not a civilized product extracted from any foundation in the natural world; instead, it is a natural product sprouting from the human mind. Through poetic works and deeds, wisdom culminates in poetic creations in harmony with the cosmos. All life in Thoreau’s idealized world, then, would be poetic; all life would be a natural product originating organically as the oak coming from an acorn. In this way, nature and its processes of regeneration should enter human existence and manifest themselves in every person’s thoughts, words, and deeds. By allowing the wild to permeate human existence, life becomes organic, poetic, and wise. In human life, this would manifest itself as savageness or as rudeness.

---

94 Thoreau, A Week, 91.
95 Robinson, Natural Life, 39-40.
96 Bingham, Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination, 66-72.
Thoreau turns to the etymological roots of these words. To be “savage” in a civilized life means to be “violent,” “hostile,” “undomesticated,” “rude,” or “wild”; it is also a descriptor referring to “primitive peoples” or those with a “fierce, ferocious, or cruel” nature. By turning to the etymological roots, he undermines the civilized definitions while using the etymologies to justify his yearning for the wild. In Old French, the root was *sauvage*, which meant “wooded” or “woodland.” The Old French root evolved from the Latin root *silvaticus*, which means “woodland, wild,” and this came from the Latin word *silva*, which means “a wood.”

Similarly, Thoreau values rudeness as a characteristic of wild living. For those in Euro-American civilized life, to be rude is to be “uneducated, unlearned; ignorant; lacking in knowledge or learning”; it is to be “devoid of, or deficient in, culture or refinement; uncultured, unrefined” or to be “uncivilized, barbarous.” Again, he turns to etymologies to challenge the civilized understating of what it means to be rude. In Middle English, it means “uncultured.” The Latin root is *rudis*, which means “unwrought, crude, unripe, unsophisticated, untaught, untrained, inexperienced, unfamiliar” or “something not worked into a finished condition.” It figuratively means “uncultivated.” Each of these is also associated with the Latin *rudus*, which means “broken stone.”

Nature and the wild make their way into human life and are manifest in a person whom one can describe as savage or rude. These terms honor the life of a person who is closely allied with the natural world and a person whom society has not molded into a finished product—somebody who is uncultivated by the common sense, habits, and customs of civilized life. This is

---

98 “Savage,” OED Online, June 2012, Oxford University Press.
99 “Rude,” OED Online, June 2012, Oxford University Press.
Thoreau offering a reversal of the standard hierarchy. By calling Native Americans savages, Thoreau reconstructs this into a positive label; all people need to become more savage and be more connected with nature, the woods, and the uncultivated surroundings. Thoreau wants people to be rude; he wants them to be rough, uncultivated, and able to go beyond the customs of society. To be rude is to not live by the scripts of one’s society but to live according to the dictates of the current situation without recourse to what society expects; so being rude and savage are markers of a naturalized life that may challenge others to free themselves from societal restraints.

Thoreau turns to two symbols of the savage or rude life; the first is Native Americans, and the second is a man called Rice who lives in the mountains.\footnote{Max Oelschlaeger weaves together natives and Rice as emblems for Thoreau’s idea of wilderness. Oelschlaeger, The Idea of Wilderness, 141-45.} By turning to Native Americans as a way of life for reverential interaction with nature, Thoreau deploys a dualistic framework based on gardening and uncultivated nature.\footnote{What is implicit here is how indigenous peoples provided Thoreau with an alternative way to interact with nature while also giving Thoreau a counter-cultural approach. Bingham, Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination, 103-04.} The best kind of relationship with any object or person is one that maintains a balanced, harmonious existence together that allows both to remain themselves and independent while still being connected.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 6.} Thoreau seeks to interact without introducing any form of subjugation into a relationship, and gardening in white society is a form of degraded interaction with nature. He describes gardening in “Sunday”: “Gardening is civil and social, but it wants the vigor and freedom of the forest and the outlaw. There may be an excess of cultivation as well as of any thing else, until civilization becomes pathetic.”\footnote{Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 55.} It is not the garden that is bad per se, but what the garden does for society and stands for in society; the garden for white civilization is another manifestation of the desire for mastery, the desire to subdue all things for human gains and ends.
The subduing of Native Americans is similar to the gardening projects of whites: “The young pines springing up in the corn-fields from year to year are to me a refreshing fact. We talk of civilizing the Indian, but that is not the name for his improvement. By the wary independence and aloofness of his dim forest life he preserves his intercourse with his native gods, and is admitted from time to time to rare and peculiar society with nature. He has glances of starry recognition to which our saloons are strangers.”

Native American life remains in respectful intercourse with the natural world and the wildness it reveals—of which Native American life is a part; Native American cultures allow Indigenous peoples to remain in a responsible intercourse with their environs, but white civilization has sought to master their environs and to tame the world to meet their endless demands and wants.

Thoreau likens white society’s mastery of nature to a tasteless affair with a woman and her degraded position as a sex object.

We would not always be soothing and taming nature, breaking the horse and the ox, but sometimes ride the horse wild and chase the buffalo. The Indian’s intercourse with Nature is at least such as admits of the greatest independence of each. If he is somewhat a stranger in her midst, the gardener is too much of a familiar. There is something vulgar and foul in the latter’s closeness to his mistress, something noble and cleanly in the former’s distance.

While being immersed in nature, paradoxically, Native Americans maintain a healthy distance in their interactions with nature; that is, Native Americans respect the environment while being in healthy intercourse with it. He or she connects with nature but is always cognizant of allowing it to follow its own laws. Native Americans do not seek to use nature as a commodity for their own ends. In civilization, however, whites have domesticated nature and have tried to connect with the natural world through their small gardens on a cultivated plot of land. They fool themselves

---

104 Thoreau, *A Week*, 55.
into thinking this is all nature is—something tamable, controllable, and for human desires. In this way, society has treated nature like a mistress who is there for the man’s sexual gratification lacking the respect of a lover and partner. Nature has become an object intended to satisfy others.

In this contrast between garden and wilderness, Thoreau indicates how the taming effects of gardening reduce the vigor of the wildness found in the woods, and he would like people to allow nature to exist untamed, not as a product for human control. In this outlook, Indigenous people generally model a healthier relationship with the natural world that allows nature’s wildness to persevere and allows the wildness of Natives Americans to remain an important part of their lives. In speaking of Native Americans, he continues to use the word “savage” but does so from the etymological root meaning both “of the woods” and “wild.” They display a respectable, deferential posture toward nature that whites should weave into civilized life.

For Thoreau, another form of wildness exists that he respects as much as savageness, which he terms “rudeness.” In farmer Rice, he identifies a rudeness that makes him truly hospitable, not hospitable in an artificial, scripted way—as in genteel white society. In “Tuesday,” Thoreau recounts a journey he took along the banks of the Connecticut River and its nearby mountains; he travelled along the river, ventured into the Deerfield Valley, and then travelled up the Hoosac Range in July 1844. After bathing in the river and sleeping “on the grass in the shade of a maple,” Thoreau ventured into the mountains around the river. He “found himself just before night-fall, in a romantic and retired valley.” It was on this journey that he met Rice.

---

107 For more on this excursion and an attempt to uncover the artistry and the facts behind Thoreau’s description of Rice, who exemplifies “roughness of character” or a “natural roughness,” see Donald M. Murray, “Thoreau’s Uncivil Man Rice,” *The New England Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (1983): 103-09.
110 This story covers approximately six pages in Thoreau’s text. *Ibid.*, 203-09.
The people Thoreau spoke with called Rice “a rather rude and uncivil man.”

Undeterred by their criticisms, Thoreau continued up the mountain. The house Rice lived in comes across as an exotic mountain dwelling; it was inhabited by numerous men who worked outside for most of the day, and in the corner of the house, part of the stream had been diverted into a pipe to provide the house with a steady flow of water. The house and nature’s flows merged, and in Rice, the reader discerns a similar merging with nature:

He was, indeed, as rude as a fabled satyr. But I suffered him to pass for what he was, for why should I quarrel with nature? and was even pleased at the discovery of such a singular natural phenomenon. I dealt with him as if to me all manners were indifferent, and he had a sweet wild way with him. I would not question nature, and I would rather have him as he was, than as I would have him. For I had come up here not for sympathy, or kindness, or society, but for novelty and adventure, and to see what nature had produced here. I therefore did not repel his rudeness, but quite innocently welcomed it all, and knew how to appreciate it, as if I were reading in an old drama a part well sustained. He was indeed a coarse and sensual man, and, as I have said, uncivil, but he had his just quarrel with nature and mankind, I have no doubt, only he had no artificial covering to his ill humors.

Instead of trying to force Rice into a prefabricated expectation of what he should be, Thoreau remains aloof from Rice just enough so as to not impose himself on Rice and to transform him into what he wanted Rice to be. In this way, Thoreau displays respect for this “natural phenomenon” who had been shaped in his daily intercourse with nature and existence away from the cities and towns of New England. With his distance, Rice was able to maintain a naturalness that did not conform to the genteel customs of society. Instead of being like the garden in a Euro-American backyard, Rice remained in contact with nature and a product of nature as he lived in a more natural, uncultivated way.

As Rice and Thoreau had been talking, Rice eventually decided to take Thoreau to the room in which Thoreau would sleep.

---

111 Thoreau, *A Week*, 203.
112 Ibid., 206-07.
113 Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 144.
... as he lighted the lamp I detected a gleam of true hospitality and ancient civility, a beam of pure and even gentle humanity from his bleared and moist eyes. It was a look more intimate with me, and more explanatory, than any words of his could have been if he had tried to his dying day. It was more significant than any Rice of those parts could even comprehend, and long anticipated this man’s culture,—a glance of his pure genius . . . . He cheerfully led the way to my apartment . . . .

In his rudeness, paradoxically, Rice displays a “true hospitality and ancient civility” that transformed Thoreau and brought him into a more intimate relationship with Rice. As he did not try to tame Rice and maintained a respectful distance to let Rice be himself, Rice’s wildness and hospitality manifested themselves through care for Thoreau in a way he would not forget. In fact, Thoreau alludes to falling in love with Rice for who he was: “But I arose as usual by the starlight the next morning, before my host, or his men, or even his dogs, were awake; and having left a ninepence on the counter, was already half way over the mountain with the sun, before they had broken their fast.” Instead of being off with no sign of his gratitude, Thoreau offered a token of love. It was an old custom to take a ninepence piece and split it in half or to bend it and give it to another as a token of love. The act indicates that he loved Rice for his wildness or rudeness.

Through the above descriptions of Native Americans and Rice, Thoreau offers the reader emblems of wildness. The wild is not only present in the natural world out in the wilderness. It makes its way into the lives of civilized people as the wild crosses the borders of cultivated life, but it does more than this. The wild is manifest in human lives when people do not try to tame others or the natural world; it is present when people choose not to conform to the civilizing processes of society. Wildness, therefore, is both part of uncultivated wilderesses and natural scenes, but it is also a quality within human life when lived in a respectful and responsible way.

---

114 Thoreau, A Week, 207.
115 Ibid., 208.
116 “Ninepence,” in Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, ed. Ebenezer Cobham Brewer (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), 783. Donald M. Murray slightly misses the point in his article; he assesses Thoreau’s ninepence contribution to Rice as a little lower than the expected going rate. He is looking at it from a capitalist or market perspective, but again Thoreau undermines such a view by offering a token of love in response to Rice’s rude hospitality. Murray, “Thoreau’s Uncivil Man Rice,” 107.
that allows the regenerating forces of nature and creation to exist unconstrained throughout all existence.\textsuperscript{117}

**Thoreau’s Religious Foundation: An Ontology of Flows**

Behind wildness is an ontology using water as an ontological metaphor.\textsuperscript{118} Sherman Paul says, “[There was] something irresistible in water for Thoreau, that something so spiritually akin to him that he felt himself called to it . . . the constant lure was the quest for a reality that had been encrusted by time and landed conventions, a reality to be regained by experience outside of time—that is, by immersion in its flux . . . The river had become the way of communion with the eternal.”\textsuperscript{119} This opposes what Chapter Two discloses as a religion of subjugation. In that chapter, the dam was an appropriate image for the human will to mastery and its damaging consequences. Technology, culture, religion, and habits act as dams that inhibit the flows of life and creation. Concomitant with Thoreau’s positive valuation of wildness, however, was his view of the universe and all existence as processes of flows.\textsuperscript{120} People not only inhibit the wild when they erect literal and figurative dams, but they also resist the underlying ontological foundation of human and nonhuman life; they attempt to stop the flows. As we will see later in this chapter, such a desire to stop the flows is foolhardy because the materials and ideas used to stop the flows


\textsuperscript{119} Boies, *The Shores of America*, 199.

\textsuperscript{120} But to be clear, Heraclitus was not the only influence on Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists relating to water and the idea of flows. Baym, “From Metaphysics to Metaphor,” 231-32. While Heraclitus often takes center stage for assertions about how existence is in flux, Cratylus is also important because he took the ideas of Heraclitus to the extreme and helped to further Heraclitus’ ideas, and he comes down to the present age through Plato’s resistance to the ideas of Cratylus. See Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11-16. For more on the importance of Thales for Thoreau’s thought, see Wilson, “Thoreau over the Deep,” 96-98. For Thoreau’s encounter with Greek thought and Thales, see Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 78-81.
are themselves part of the flowing processes. This allows Thoreau to have an optimistic view: Since all creation is flowing, constraints or dams will always fail. Nature, the wild, rudeness, and the processes of creation will continue despite the harmful human attempts to stop them. This section describes Thoreau’s ontology of flows and its emphasis on flux. 121

In some scholarly realms, “metaphysics” and “ontology” are unsavory words that deserve serious deconstruction; at most, some scholars can accept a “weak” metaphysics or ontology. 122 The view of Aristotle, however, that describes metaphysics, or the latter coined term “ontology,” as the study of “being qua being” is no doubt too strong of an approach in today’s postmodern or poststructural age. 123 It is also a philosophical position that pragmatists 124 and positivists 125 condemn, for ontological or metaphysical conceptions often speak as if they are beyond history and culture or about what one cannot verify, which means they are unscientific and otherworldly. This section will concentrate on ontology, however, in the more classic Aristotelian sense as explained in Book III, Chapter One of Aristotle’s Metaphysics: “There is a certain science which makes, as the object of its speculation, entity, as far forth as it is entity, and the things which are essentially inherent in this. But this is the same with none of those which are called particular sciences; for none of the rest of the sciences examines universally concerning entity so far forth as it is entity . . .” 126 As Aristotle was concerned with being qua being, so was Thoreau. Science, math, history, and other disciplines, for Thoreau, were not to terminate at the facts; they were

121 Paul, The Shores of America, 120.
supposed to deliver the person to a more universal law—something transcending sense experience but immanent in all existence (The Law of Regeneration). Thoreau, then, wanted and sought this “truth.” He wanted to discern the underlying causes of existence that sustained human life, nonhuman existence, and all material creation.

An ontology of flows is overlooked in Thoreauvian scholarship. For example, in *Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*, Alfred I. Tauber addresses Thoreau’s ontology, yet he does so by analyzing Thoreau’s understanding of time and its flux.

nature’s flux . . . must be appreciated constantly in the present . . . The world is forever new, a world of process, of becoming, and only by deliberate attention, expectation, and appreciation do we fully savor nature’s fruits . . . Time is elusive, but it serves as Thoreau’s fundamental ontology, the stream of experience, the substrate of nature, the fabric of eternity, the fundamental woof and warp of the divine . . . Time, actually only the present, dominates Thoreau’s self-conscious endeavors at world-making.127 Tauber is partially right in his analysis. Thoreau does seek to live in the present, and he does speak of time as a flow. Thoreau does address the flux of the world, but the problem with Tauber’s presentation is that he argues that time “serves as Thoreau’s fundamental ontology.” As this section will show, it is not time that is fundamental for Thoreau—but the imagery or trope of flows, the realization of flows all around us and within us.128 The metaphor of water and its coursing, then, provide the framework for Thoreau’s ontology.

As seen in the work of Catherine L. Albanese and Nina Baym, water was important for the Transcendentalists as it gave them a grounding trope for their worldview based on correspondence.129 Charles Mitchell describes correspondence in the following words: “As a theory of language, a theory of art, and a theory of morals, correspondence grew out of a

127 Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*, 35-40. Italics are present in the original text.
fundamental set of principles: The natural, material world is a direct expression of the mind of the creator; creative productions of the human mind are reflections of these natural forms; the purest forms of human endeavor thus provide insight into the divine spirit.”

Emerson turned to water as an emblem for a deeper reality, which is clear when he asked, “Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things?” This derives from his correspondence theory: “Words are signs of natural facts.” He, then, moves on to assert, “Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.” His view reaches its pinnacle when he asserts, “Nature is the symbol of spirit.”

Catherine L. Albanese says, “And, according to Emerson, the proper manner of intuiting the world involved an awareness of correspondence.” The idea of correspondence, then, provides a movement from one level of meaning to another through analogical flows.

What Emerson is indicating is that human beings, the natural world, the material world, and language all possess organic similarities that bring each realm into contact with the other. Language, in its best state, would indicate both natural and spiritual truths, and nature was a source for discerning spiritual truths that should affect one’s living in the world. What this allows Emerson to see, then, is that all reality is a process, a ceaseless activity of changing and becoming as the river represents higher spiritual truths. Humans and all creation are similar in that they flow and form endlessly new relations.

132 For all three quotes, see Emerson, “Nature,” 20.
As one turns to Thoreau’s writing, watery images fill his corpus. A Week revolves around his time on two rivers and the journey to the source of the Merrimack River high in the White Mountains. Walden emerges from intimacy with a local pond that he bathes in and measures precisely. The Maine Woods presents Thoreau once again travelling on water as he canoes on lakes and rivers in search of a deeper connection with nature—eventually encountered high atop Mount Ktaadn. Cape Cod leads him to the expansive Atlantic Ocean and its apparent indifference to human life.

His journals overflow with images of water; in fact, some of the first and last journal entries address water. Within the first month of starting his journal, Thoreau logged going to Goose-Pond to watch the ducks swimming and diving under water on 29 October 1837, Thoreau wrote about sailing with and against the current as a metaphor for thought on 3 November 1837, and Thoreau expressed how the depth of water symbolically represents depths of souls on 9 November 1837. He also addresses the Musketaquid River on several occasions. For example, he overlaps the character of the river with the characters of the inhabitants living around the river: “There goes the river, or rather is, ‘in serpent error wandering’—the jugular vein of Musketaquid. Who knows how much of the proverbial moderation of the inhabitants was caught from its dull circulation?” He is addressing the influence of one’s natural environment on the character and quality of the inhabitants; the water becomes much more than water for Thoreau. It is a formative influence. In the last year and a half of his life, Thoreau’s journal entries reveal a deep awareness of the rising and falling of the river’s heights around Concord. A reader of

---

135 Oelschlaeger, The Idea of Wilderness, 144.
137 Thoreau, August 1, 1860-November 3, 1861. 14: Journal.
Thoreau’s texts, in the end, cannot avoid his use of water and water’s significance for his literary, religious, and scientific endeavors.

One of the most famous passages of liquid flows for Thoreauvian scholars comes from Walden. As he is walking in spring, Thoreau comes to banks of clay and sand and sees a remarkable sight that gives him great joy and makes him pause to think about its deeper truths.

Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village, a phenomenon not very common on so large a scale . . . When the frost comes out in the spring, and even in a thawing day in the winter, the sand begins to flow down the slopes like lava, sometimes bursting out through the snow and overflowing it where no sand was to be seen before . . . I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artists who made the world and me,—had come to where he was still at work . . . I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe . . . What is man but a mass of thawing clay? . . . . Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature . . . It convinces me that Earth is still in her swaddling clothes, and stretches forth babe fingers on every side.  

Creation is not stagnant; the earth is still in a process of becoming. It is alive in its formation. The flow of the sand and clay allows him to feel closer to the processes of creation that are the “principle of all the operations of Nature.” Thoreau does not leave this in an abstract form; he turns the image back on himself and humans: humans are in the process of flowing. Fixity is not part of Thoreau’s symbolic vocabulary as he chooses to look for images that represent the underlying processes of flows sustaining creation.

A Week was his attempt to provide a narrative of these flowing processes; it confronts readers with coursing rivers that sustain life and travel. It is not one river that the reader encounters but the two flowing bodies of the Concord and Merrimack Rivers that intermix with each other and eventually flow to the ocean to mix fresh water with the salty waters of the

---

138 Thoreau, Walden, 304-08.
139 Sullivan, The Thoreau You Don’t Know, 222-25.
141 Oelschlaeger, The Idea of Wilderness, 161-64.
Atlantic Ocean. The waters on which Thoreau and his brother John are floating are not stagnant and without mixture themselves. Thoreau informs the reader that even the waters from other lakes and the snow from the mountains have managed to work their way into the channels of the Concord and Merrimack Rivers:

It was already the water of Squam and Newfound Lake and Winnipiseogee, and White Mountain snow dissolved, on which we were floating, and Smith’s and Baker’s and Mad Rivers, and Nashua and Souhegan and Piscataquog, and Suncook and Soucook and Contoocook, mingled in incalculable proportions, still fluid, yellowish, restless all, with an ancient, ineradicable inclination to the sea.¹⁴²

There is not a homogeneous purity beneath them, an undifferentiated wholeness keeping them buoyant in their travels; they are afloat on waters mixed from different sources.

Thoreau and his brother depart near the confluence of the Sudbury and Assabeth Rivers, and this convergence forms the Concord River, which eventually empties into the Merrimack. The different veins of water wending their way toward the sea mix and form the liquid roads of change that have carried travelers for millennia.

Rivers must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travellers . . . They are the natural highways of all nations, not only levelling the ground, and removing obstacles from the path of the traveller, quenching his thirst, and bearing him on their bosoms, but conducting him through the most interesting scenery, the most populous portions of the globe, and where the animal and vegetable kingdoms attain their greatest perfection.”¹⁴³

By the banks of rivers and the waters channeled within them, life is sustained as people wander to new lands and nature thrives in close proximity to the life-giving fluid. Rivers lure people out of a sedentary existence and coax humans to move around the earth.

It is not stability that the rivers give creation and life, but constant change, motion, and newness. Within the certitude of the rivers’ banks, newness erupts and life flourishes. The unpredictable occurs within the structured environment of the steady flows of the rivers. Life,

---

¹⁴² Thoreau, A Week, 84.
¹⁴³ Ibid., 12.
then, best thrives with a level of uncertainty within certainty, the unpredictable within the predictable. The oneness of the rivers bordered by their banks, then, is the result of multiple sources of water; the oceans are sustained by numerous rivers. To live is to take part in this endless intermixing of various elements, energies, and flows. To live is to change, and to live is to flow.

This ontological preference for flows is clearest toward the end of *A Week*. All the things we think are solid are actually flowing like rivers, and the earth is perpetually changing and coming to be. Nothing is fixed; the most solid material is in motion.

. . . all things seemed with us to flow; the shore itself, and the distant cliffs, were dissolved by the undiluted air. The hardest material seemed to obey the same law with the most fluid, and so indeed in the long run it does. Trees were but rivers of sap and woody fibre, flowing from the atmosphere, and emptying into the earth by their trunks, as their roots flowed upward to the surface. And in the heavens there were rivers of stars, and milky-ways, already beginning to gleam and ripple over our heads. There were rivers of rock on the surface of the earth, and rivers of ore in its bowels, and our thoughts flowed and circulated, and this portion of time was but the current of the hour.¹⁴⁴

Beneath our feet is a land constantly shifting and flowing like that of the river on which Thoreau was gliding, but it does so according to a different time than humans are used to. People are focused on the solidity of the ground beneath their feet, but Thoreau catches glimpses of the vast changes in the environment in and around New England.

Watching the waters of the rivers and how they alter the landscape in the region, Thoreau comments in “Wednesday” on the altering forms nature and Earth take.

The shifting islands! Who would not be willing that his house should be undermined by such a foe! The inhabitant of an island can tell what currents formed the land which he cultivates; and his earth is still being created and destroyed. There before his door, perchance, still empties the stream which brought down the material of his farm ages before, and is still bringing it down or washing it away,—the graceful, gentle robber!¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Thoreau, *A Week*, 244.
The significant fact is not to try to grasp onto solidity, but to ride the tides of change and the fluctuations the tides bring into our contexts and lives. What life is, what creation is, is a process of relations and broken relations that allow new associations to form. It is only through the gaps, the distances, the alterations, and the movements that life can flourish. Underneath the apparent stability of existence and the created world around us, endless, flowing channels are merging and diverging to sustain life and existence. From these flows, confluences emerge giving rise to structured, complex intermixtures; but such amalgamations cannot sustain themselves forever and will eventually break apart. Weaving and unweaving is creation and life. This ontology of flows and his emphasis on changing associations inform Thoreau’s view of human life and religion. The difficulty is supporting this flow despite our desires for certainty, mastery, and stability.

The reality is that flows often spill over their banks, and this happens to the Concord River with its expansions and contractions during its seasonal changes.

In Concord, it is in summer from four to fifteen feet deep, and from one hundred to three hundred feet wide, but in the spring freshets, when it overflows its banks, it is in some places nearly a mile wide. Between Sudbury and Wayland the meadows acquire their greatest breadth, and when covered with water, they form a handsome chain of shallow vernal lakes, resorted to by numerous gulls and ducks.”

An ontology of flows urges readers to pay attention to the differential nature of things based on their rising or subsiding flows and changing energies. More energy, more force, and more water can make the banks seem irrelevant; in the failure to contain the flows, a reorganizing of existence takes place. The land no longer is dry, and vernal lakes sustain new life—gulls and ducks, for example. This allows Thoreau to see the potential newness within any situation. There is no absolute closure; the dams and other constraints may be able to restrain the flows for some

146 Thoreau, A Week, 6.
time, but eventually, those flows will burst free and provide new scenery, new relations, and new viable forms of existence.

Life is an endless response to external and internal changing flows. As they are returning home in “Friday,” Thoreau and his brother have raised their sail to catch the flow of the wind, and they come close to passing from one fluid medium to another:

The wind in the horizon rolled like a flood over valley and plain, and every tree bent to the blast, and the mountains like school-boys turned their cheeks to it. They were great and current motions, the flowing sail, the running stream, the waving tree, the roving wind. The north wind stepped readily into the harness which we had provided, and pulled us along with good will. Sometimes we sailed as gently and steadily as the clouds overhead, watching the receding shores and the motions of our sail; the play of its pulse so like our own lives, so thin yet so full of life . . . . Thus we sailed, not being able to fly, but as next best, making a long furrow in the fields of the Merrimack toward our home . . . . It was very near flying, as when the duck rushes through the water with an impulse of her wings, throwing the spray about her before she can rise. 147

Human life is in motion here, and this motion is framed within the endless motion of the world around them. This passage offers a dizzying array of motion that allows nothing to stand still; in this fast-paced movement toward home, their boat and the brothers almost overflow their own banks. In their speed sustained by the “roving wind,” they become more like ducks; with a little more motion, they would have become something other than they were—closer to winged animals than humans. With this ontology, then, nothing remains stable. Each motion and each flow can drastically change the setting leaving things altered from what they previously were.

Thoreau changes his vision slightly from Emerson’s outlook. Emerson read the world through his theory of correspondence, and Thoreau maintained this to some degree. Thoreau, however, saw the faultiness in this vision as correspondence can shift people out of this world toward another. For Emerson, nature was valuable as it pointed beyond itself, but Thoreau saw nature as being valuable in itself, so he asks the reader an important question: “Is not Nature,
rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol?"\(^{148}\) No longer does nature point beyond itself to the divinity outside of nature. Nature is no longer the symbol pointing beyond to God, but Nature is divine. This view alters things drastically; Thoreau has transcended his mentor’s vision or overflowed the constraints of Emersonian thinking.\(^{149}\) By divinizing nature and placing the divine in the immediate realm of our senses, Thoreau is telling the reader that these natural processes are not symbols for something else; they are the divine, which is also in a constant process of being and becoming simultaneously with us and through us.

As a religious thinker this divinizing foregrounds an important insight. The divine is in flux; as humans are part of the divine, rooted in the divine, and expressing the divine, they are in “perpetual flux.”\(^{150}\) The goal is to intuitively grasp the flowing processes within and around us. Stanley Bates reveals this awareness as he writes about Thoreau and what Thoreau teaches us: “He is attaining the next self, which is not the final self.”\(^{151}\) Thoreau is challenging readers to be more aware of all creation through the lens of an ontology of flows, and people should give themselves over to the ceaseless flows of life and merge with those constant flows of becoming.\(^{152}\) Humans should be ready to flow into a new self that is never a final self.

**Conclusion**

We can now turn to Thoreau’s religious ideal. It is clear from the last chapter that Thoreau knew there were abuses in religion. Now after exploring Thoreau’s background with his natural environs, the wild, and his ontology of flows, we can understand better why an imposed

\(^{148}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 382.


\(^{150}\) The divine, humans, and nature are in “perpetual flux.” Thoreau’s awareness of this constant change came early in his literary career as he saw the seasons as signs of “perpetual flux” in his 1842 essay “Natural History of Massachusetts.” See Robinson, *Natural Life*, 42.


\(^{152}\) Paul, *The Shores of America*, 196.
religion—represented by an imposed Sabbath, for example—does not work for him. Returning to “Sunday,” Thoreau makes it clear that there is a difference between a *natural Sabbath* and an imposed Sabbath.

I was once reproved by a minister who was driving a poor beast to some meeting-house . . . because I was bending my steps to a mountain-top on the Sabbath, instead of a church, when I would have gone further than he to hear a true word spoken on that or any day. He declared that I was “breaking the Lord’s fourth commandment,” and proceeded to enumerate, in a sepulchral tone, the disasters which had befallen him whenever he had done any ordinary work on the Sabbath. He really thought that a god was on the watch to trip up those men who followed any secular work on this day, and did not see that it was the evil conscience of workers that did it. The country is full of this superstition, so that when one enters a village, the church, not only really but from association, is the ugliest looking building in it, because it is the one in which human nature stoops the lowest and is most disgraced. Certainly, such temples as these shall ere long cease to deform the landscape. There are few things more disheartening and disgusting than when you are walking the streets of a strange village on the Sabbath, to hear a preacher shouting like a boatswain in a gale of wind, and thus harshly profaning the quiet atmosphere of the day.\(^{153}\)

Thoreau does not live out of fear, and he does not worship a god that intentionally seeks to make people stumble. Traditional New England religion, for Thoreau, is superstitious and distances people from the divine. What people in the meeting houses do not understand is that the day is already holy enough; they do not need the meetinghouse, nor do they need a person shouting at them instilling fear and teaching them proper doctrines. These religious practices do not urge the person to higher living and a direct encounter with God. Instead, they separate the person from the divine as their encounter is mediated through a person who creates a din disturbing what is already sacred.

He asks the reader, “Why need Christians be still intolerant and superstitious?”\(^{154}\) On the following pages, Thoreau answers this question. He associates this intolerance with a view of the world that posits a high level of certainty. New England Christians and others he encountered

---

153 Thoreau, *A Week*, 75-76.
believed they knew all there was to know about the universe. It is this certainty that allowed them to be dictatorial and to impose their Sabbath on others. Thoreau describes this as a dry-rotted way to see the world:

Most people with whom I talk, men and women even of some originality and genius, have their scheme of the universe all cut and dried,—very dry, I assure you, to hear, dry enough to burn, dry-rotted and powder-post, methinks,—which they set up between you and them in the shortest intercourse; an ancient and tottering frame with all its boards blown off . . . . Some to me seemingly very unimportant and unsubstantial things and relations, are for them everlastingly settled,—as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the like. These are like everlasting hills to them.  

What Thoreau encountered was a level of unjustified certainty about the matters of the universe, but experience did not support the common sense buttressing New England’s religious ideas.

He would like to know how New Englanders come to the conclusions they impose on others. If they say the Trinity is in the Bible and is, therefore, true, then Thoreau will ask on what the Bible stands. As with the Hindu questions about Earth and its foundations, which indicates that it is tortoises all the way down, Thoreau would challenge the religious people around him to continue to search for the foundations of their religious beliefs. He is aware that their certainty is false because underlying their certainty is uncertainty—which they never seem to acknowledge. The consequence of this uncertainty masquerading as certainty is that it allows his fellow New Englanders to impose their ideas and ways of life on others.

When such a posture of certainty is placed within the context of nature, wildness, and an ontology of flows, Thoreau cannot help but find such religious postures puerile. Since he has never encountered the proof for such religious outlooks and since he has never found the foundations on which New England’s religious leaders base their authority, Thoreau would rather abstain from taking part in their false certainty.

But in all my wanderings, I never came across the least vestige of authority for these things. They have not left so distinct a trace as the delicate flower of a remote geological period on the coal in my grate. The wisest man preaches no doctrines; he has no scheme; he sees no rafter, not even a cobweb, against the heavens. It is clear sky . . . . What right have you to hold up this obstacle to my understanding you, to your understanding me? You did not invent it; it was imposed on you. Examine your authority. Even Christ, we fear, had his scheme, his conformity to tradition, which slightly vitiates his teaching . . . . Your scheme must be the frame-work of the universe; all other schemes will soon be ruins . . . .

Can you put mysteries into words?\textsuperscript{156}

In his travels, Thoreau has come across no authority for the Christian doctrines buttressing New England’s Calvinist and Unitarian traditions.

People spoke of the Bible to him and told him what doctrines were the right ones in which he should believe, yet he saw more of God in the world around him. In his pantheistic vision, it was possible to see all creation as miraculous with God eternally present. Creeds, doctrines, and ritualized ways of being religious are actually hindrances as they restrict experiencing God—being absorbed in God and letting God come through you and be you.

People want to encounter God and be in the presence of divinity, but instead, they deploy creeds and other obstacles that act as mediators.

This is a form of sickness for Thoreau. In trying to be religious, New Englanders were actually being irreligious: “It seems to me that the god that is commonly worshipped in civilized countries is not at all divine, though he bears a divine name, but is the overwhelming authority and respectability of mankind combined. Men reverence one another, not yet God . . . . Every people have gods to suit their circumstances.” Instead of the lower gods that are replicas of the values and wants of his New England society, Thoreau advocates a direct contact with the divine, with nature, with the wild, and with the flows of the universe. He advocates reconnecting

\textsuperscript{156}Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 70.
directly with the life-sustaining law of regeneration upholding all creation—all human and nonhuman life without discrimination.

Thoreau turns to religion as a process of binding and rebinding. People, however, too often bind themselves to their local creeds or something else that is not divine. Eventually, this binding leaves them with nothing special.

What he calls his religion is for the most part offensive to the nostrils . . . . A man’s real faith is never contained in his creed . . . . yet he clings anxiously to his creed, as to a straw, thinking that that does him good service . . . . In most men’s religion, the ligature, which should be its umbilical cord connecting them with divinity . . . . frequently, as in their case, the thread breaks, being stretched, and they are left without asylum.\textsuperscript{157}

Thoreau does not want to be bound to creeds, institutions, and anthropogenic structures.\textsuperscript{158} Instead, he wants communion with the divine and believes all people can commune with the divine if they will give up the mediating products of society and the sedimented traditions or creeds that take life out of the divine. He would prefer to see people loosen the binds, so they can be exposed to the miraculous.

This, then, is the foundation for Thoreau’s egalitarian liberation in matters of religion. All people should be free to connect with the divine personally, and each person should be able to express that religious experience without fear of retribution and without fear of violating some creed. The religious authority, for Thoreau, is the individual and his or her personal experiences of the divine.

To come into direct contact with the divine, however, means that each person needs to be more aware of their senses. The senses are crucial for religion. As nobody can taste something for another, as nobody can hear music for another, nobody can experience the divine for

\textsuperscript{157} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 78.
\textsuperscript{158} Robinson, \textit{Natural Life}, 11.
somebody else. Creeds and religious institutions fail because they mediate ways of connecting with God that leave the followers disadvantaged.

We need to pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and bland, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery, that its divine vigor has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such groveling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. May we not see God? . . . What is it, then, to educate but to develop these divine germs called the senses?159

Heaven and God are not elsewhere. Thoreau says, “Here or nowhere is our heaven.”160 Both heaven and God are not to be encountered at a later date. They are here and now. The present, not the past and not the future, offers connection with the divine. This communion with the divine does not come through belief, creed, institution, or presence in a religious building. Communion is through senses rightly attuned to the divine.

What people discover, then, is that the divine is not only all around them but within them too. This “purely sensuous life” is the key to Thoreauvian religion and freedom in religion. The sensuous life shows the eternal presence of God that precludes the need for imposed religious conformity: “I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth, the most remarkable fact which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispense with.”161 By replacing a religion of creeds with a religion focused on rebinding directly to God, the senses become foundational for all religious life. The materiality

---

159 Thoreau, A Week, 382. The italics are in the original text.
160 ibid., 380.
of the body, its placement within time and space, are essential. The specificity of the human body becomes the locus of religion. The connection that a body has with its surroundings becomes the context for religious experiences. Despite the many bodies, languages, religious cultures and conventions, and the different inclinations of people, each person possesses a special religious authority that nobody can rightly supersede. Only the individual can experience the divine and take part in freeing visions that liberate people and bring them into a different realm.

This leads to a split within the human. Thoreau identifies a flexible dualism based on both the sensual, material component and the spiritual component.\textsuperscript{162} This is not to say that he debases the one by privileging the other; instead, the two should exist in harmony.\textsuperscript{163} They are both important, and he identifies the relationship in the following way: “There are various tough problems yet to solve, and we must make shift to live, betwixt spirit and matter, such a human life as we can.”\textsuperscript{164} It is unhealthy to try to live more in one realm than the other. A too spiritual life will lead to an imbalanced life as it diminishes the body and its senses. A too bodily, material existence will diminish the spiritual. Instead, harmony between these realms should exist. This indicates an important component in Thoreau’s religious outlook, namely, the person is never completely spiritual; each person takes part in an endless process of becoming as he or she seeks to create balance and harmony between body and spirit in each new present moment.\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{162} Baym, “From Metaphysics to Metaphor,” 239.
\textsuperscript{163} Robinson, \textit{Natural Life}, 12.
\textsuperscript{164} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 73-74. Also see Paul, \textit{The Shores of America}, 209-10.
This internal balance and harmony, however, does not mean the material and the spiritual merge to become one; instead, they always remain separate and in need of constant vigilance to make sure they do not fall into antagonistic positions.

I am a parcel of vain strivings tied
   By a chance bond together,
Dangling this way and that, their links
   Were made so loose and wide,
   Methinks,
   For milder weather.

A bunch of violets without their roots,
   And sorrel intermixed,
Encircled by a wisp of straw
   Once coiled about their shoots,
   The law
   By which I’m fixed.166

We are many strivings that may at times conflict with each other, but they are held together within the materiality of our body.

As indicated in Simon Critchley’s work, this is the concept of the “dividual” (or even a poly-dividual) self; for Thoreau, people are not individuals.167 “Individual” comes from the Latin root *individuus*, meaning “not divisible,” and nothing is further from the truth for Thoreau. Each person is essentially split in various ways from the beginning, and no person ever reaches a perfected condition once and for all. Thoreau chooses the divided self and forces each person to constantly strive for internal harmony—matter, spirit, and desires. We have to figure out how to harmonize desires, thoughts, and the matter that constitute who we are.

Deploying the idea of correspondence, for Thoreau, nature teaches humans about themselves. As nature is the divine, we can come to see the divine within ourselves, and as we

166 Thoreau, *A Week*, 383.
167 This view arose from my reading Simon Critchley and his use of theorists such as Alain Badiou, Emanuel Levinas, and Jacques Lacan to better understand the self. See Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2007), 38-68. Thoreau’s poem clearly has a Buddhist orientation to it as it offers a similar view to the *skandhas* or “five aggregates.”
look to nature, we see both spirit and matter functioning constantly. The laws of nature are the conservative powers that maintain life and creation. The Law of Regeneration can only exist, however, in harmony with the matter of nature. In the natural world, then, one can see the perfect balance of spirit and matter in the endless processes of becoming. We can learn about our inward harmony by observing nature, but our inward harmony should also put us in balance and harmony with the natural world.\textsuperscript{168} Internal balance and harmony, then, should place one within the balance and harmony of nature and also in balance and harmony with other human and nonhuman life eventually. Each person needs to come into a supportive relation with the many flows he or she encounters each day throughout life.

This means that a person cannot be supportive of dams and damming activities, such as creeds and the supremacy of one religion over another. Through one’s personal encounter with the divine, that person will experience the divine in a unique way and will express the divine in a unique way. This means that constant flows of religious expressions will fill society. New scriptures will be in the making constantly. There is no one religious expression that can speak for all people because the materiality Thoreau values undermines this usurpation of a person’s unique expression of their experiences.

People will communicate their religious experiences in new ways, and society is expected to honor those individual expressions manifesting themselves through actions, speech, and writing. Society becomes a site for honoring differences in religious experiences and religious expressions. The closest one can come is a collection of these religious expressions in a book for all nations that will be in an eternal process of revision, expansion, and contraction. Over the millennia, people will test and retest them and discern which expressions are valid descriptions of the divine for them. They may choose none of them and find alternative expressions. What

\textsuperscript{168} Robinson, \textit{Natural Life}, 17.
Thoreau wants is a respectful posture toward these religious differences that provides room for novelty.

This places people in a position of being responsible for sustaining the flows in society and matters of religion. Thoreau is supportive of crossing boundaries and bringing back countercultural messages. People should listen to these messages and weigh them against their personal experiences. If the insights are thought to be beneficial and appropriate, assimilate them and use them to better life. If not, let them be and continue on your own path while remembering not to inhibit the religious expressions and commitments of others. Pluralism is the natural condition for a society that values endless flows and different religious experiences and expressions.

This has another important consequence for Thoreau; religion becomes preservative care or preservative love for endless flows, and this means that the right religious expression should undermine the dams society and religious institutions erect. Edward F. Mooney speaks of “preservative care” as a way of listening attentively to allow the wonder of all that is human and nonhuman to emerge and to enliven our sensibilities in the present. It is about respectful living that is open to both love and compassion, which does not seek to destroy life and options but seeks to nurture mystery, wonder, and an empathy with creation.

We should expect, then, that some essays are expressions of love, a kind of preservative love, a love that cares for persons and things and gives them life. Such essays can carry out a generous, even pious criticism or elaboration that brings a theme or person or object to its next and fuller meaning. Without such attentive care, fields of significance we now take for granted fall into disuse, decay. Like ill-treated living things, they slowly die, or stay fallow, awaiting summer’s rain and seeding . . . . The artful critic . . . can bring that plenitude out and into life, saving it from extinction or from an only paltry half-life.\(^\text{169}\)

In Mooney’s concept, there is the idea of a specific posture toward the world and all creation. It focuses on attentiveness to the nuances of our encounters, but it is more than this. Mooney’s idea

concerns being an empathetic, sympathetic observer of all creation that seeks to enhance existence and its best qualities. Instead of taking on a specific adversarial role, preservative care urges the person to engage life through a different form of interaction: “Reflective objectivity assumes a sort of preservative care for its object, presuming that there is something at hand worth caring for.”¹⁷⁰ This approach does not assume that we have answers once and for all; instead, they are worked out repeatedly in life. There is no worldview that simply becomes the dominant one; people should encounter different ways of being and thinking and value the differences while attempting to honor that which is good in the others through nurturing support.

Thoreau’s religious view, now understood as a religious posture of preservative care for the flows and fluxes of life, encourages respect for and solidarity with all that the dams and oppressive situations negate and try to freeze. This is why he takes the side of the fish who are kept from their traditional migrating patterns and hears them cry in distress, and this is why he chooses to side with Native Americans who are objects that whites try to exterminate.¹⁷¹ He realizes their marginal status in Western culture, and in their attempts to survive and to engage life at its most fundamental point, Thoreau finds much worth saving. He finds examples for life in the woods, the fish, and Indigenous peoples—all who are thought to be inferior because of a type of Christian theology that links the wilderness with the Devil.

Thoreau turns away from the hegemonic culture, he turns away from its attempts to devalue certain forms of life and creation, and he turns toward forms of existence that challenge dominant modes of thought. For Thoreau, the only true way to offer preservative care is to

¹⁷¹ Thoreau, *A Week*, 120.
choose a countercultural path that breaks free from consensus, common sense, hegemony, and other forms of political control or constraint.\textsuperscript{172}

I perceive in the common train of my thoughts a natural and uninterrupted sequence, each implying the next, or, if interruption occurs it is occasioned by a new object being presented to my \textit{senses}. But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable transition, is that from a comparatively narrow and partial, what is called a common sense view of things, to an infinitely expanded and liberating one, from seeing things as men describe them, to seeing them as men cannot describe them. This implies a sense which is not common, but rare in the wisest man’s experience; which is sensible or sentient of more than common . . . . What is called common sense is excellent in its department, and as invaluable as the virtue of conformity in the army and navy,—for there must be subordination,—but uncommon sense, that sense which is common only to the wisest, is as much more excellent as it is more rare.\textsuperscript{173}

Native Americans, fish, and the rest of nature are part of an uncommon sense; they are wild and offer something fresh about life and creation that white society has devalued.\textsuperscript{174}

His esteem for personal experiences of the divine is expansive. If we are to come to the divine through creeds and stagnant traditions that impose ways of thinking and feeling on people, they offer a common sense that effaces the singularity of the person’s connection with the divine. Religion should be about mystery and preserving that mystery in life. Existence is not something to be mastered, but something to be cared for. Humans, animals, trees, rocks, rivers, and other forms of creation should be nurtured and preserved. These various components of existence, when encountered with deep reverence and a sense of responsibility, reveal new ways of being.

Thoreau is ready to become more like a fish, to become more like Native Americans, to become like a river—as much as he can!\textsuperscript{175} He does not seek to be one thing with a worldview


\textsuperscript{173} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 386-87.

that is clear, distinct, and certain for all times. Instead, he is more than willing to encounter that which is different. These moments shatter dependence on the life raft of common sense. It is time to give up these dominant modes of thinking, sensing, and being for the ability to be challenged to be something else, something better.

Thoreau offers a nonconformist religion because religious conformity destroys life and creation around and within us. He aligns himself with fish, he offers solidarity with Native Americans, and he values the natural world because he wants wildness to continue to exist. He wants people to encounter The Law of Regeneration permeating all existence. Religion must be about nonconformity, pluralism, and preservative care because this is what allows wildness to enter our lives and society, so it can disrupt our common sense and allow us to expand our sympathy and empathy for all creation.

---

CHAPTER FOUR
THOREAU’S PRACTICES FOR RELIGIOUS LIVING IN A WEEK

It would be worth the while to ask ourselves weekly, Is our life innocent enough? Do we live *inhumanely*, toward man or beast, in thought or act? To be serene and successful we must be at one with the universe. The least conscious and needless injury inflicted on any creature is to its extent a suicide. What peace—or life—can a murderer have?

– Henry David Thoreau, 28 May 1854

In society you will not find health, but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid. Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so. There is no scent in it so wholesome as that of the pines, nor any fragrance so penetrating and restorative as the life-everlasting in high pastures . . . The doctrines of despair, of spiritual or political tyranny or servitude, were never taught by such as shared the serenity of nature . . . Surely joy is the condition of life.

– Henry David Thoreau, “Natural History of Massachusetts”

To watch for, describe, all the divine features which I detect in Nature. My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature.

– Henry David Thoreau, 7 September 1851

Introduction

As Steven Fink shows, Thoreau’s vision of the Transcendentalist life is one of tensions. In the broader horizon of his life, “Thoreau’s image of himself as a writer was that of a prophet,” but this prophetic role intersects aesthetically with Thoreau’s valuation of the poet and the poet’s imaginative, inspired creations: poetry being “language that is agile, philosophically ambitious, and grounded in the richness and strangeness of the material world.” The role of the

---


218
hero supplements these personae as a brave actor in the world. The ideal religious figure, then, is one who speaks critically about society and its ills—urging people to live a better life. This figure also produces great works of art—in Thoreau’s common examples, poetry and new myths; the religious figure’s life should become a lived poetry as a heroic figure in the present who models a different, viable lifestyle. These aspects ideally culminate in provoking and inspiring others to live better, elevated lives in the present while they live toward a qualitatively better future.

The difficulty Thoreau faced, however, was how to be active in the world but not supportive of constraining ways of being: “He found himself caught between his desire for independence from the community and the simultaneous need to engage its attention.” He had to learn how to provoke and inspire the world without being negatively affected himself in his interactions with those who still were not awake to the injustices and somber living characteristic of broader humanity in the industrializing United States. The problem, then, was how to provoke and inspire people to escape from the trap of common sense and conformity without being constrained by them.

This meant that for the religious person to take on this trinity of personae, she also had to find ways to provoke and inspire herself that would allow for engaging the world and others in an unconventional way, which would consequently lead to being a liberating power in the world. Thoreau’s processes for religious living try to posit a balanced symbiosis between isolation from and immersion in the world to bring one’s insights to the larger community in order to undo

---


uncritical conformity while moving people toward living life fully awake and engaged with their immediate environs.  

These concerns were present in Thoreau’s early journal entries and in his early *Dial* publications later inserted into *A Week*. For example, on 8 April 1840, Thoreau is already addressing the need for withdrawal: “How shall I help myself? By withdrawing into the garret, and associating with spiders and mice, determining to meet myself face to face sooner or later. Completely silent and attentive I will be this hour, and the next, and forever. The most positive life that history notices has been a constant retiring out of life, a wiping one’s hands of it, seeing how mean it is, and having nothing to do with it.”  

This entry emphasizes the need to confront oneself face to face; it is about a personal inventory that allows the seeker to see one’s deficiencies and genius, but a person cannot accomplish this within society with its din and trivial concerns. Instead, silence and solitude are necessary to help a person escape distractions obstructing serious searching and discernment. This, however, is not a complete retiring from life or a permanent estrangement. It is a process that is “a constant retiring,” so the person does not withdrawal permanently but must return to this retiring from the world repetitiously. The person continues to be part of the world but finds it necessary to withdrawal at specific times from what Thoreau identifies as its meanness.

What seems to be a conclusion to this paragraph was written a couple weeks earlier on 20 March 1840: “In society all the inspiration of my lonely hours seems to flow back on me, and

---

10 Robinson, *Natural Life*, 47.
then first have expression.” Thoreau indicates how moments of solitude and confronting his inner world face to face later receive “expression” within the company of others. The gifts of insight and inspiration he receives in solitude are not gifts that he seeks to hoard; they are offered to others when he reenters society.

This idea of giving one’s insights to others—inspiring and provoking others with one’s awareness from face-to-face encounters with one’s internal world—is associated with the universal potential for heroism and ardor within all people, which is found in Thoreau’s journal entry for 13 July 1838: “There are in each the seeds of a heroic ardor, which need only to be stirred in with the soil where they lie, by an inspired voice or pen, to bear fruit of a divine flavor.” Contact with an author’s fruit or personal contact with another person can inspire a person to heroic levels in life. The tension between isolation and engagement with society remained a steady theme within Thoreau’s early writings, which he would articulate in *A Week*.

With Jane Bennett’s work on Thoreau’s practices in mind, the focus of this chapter is to carefully detail this tension in *A Week* and show the various activities Thoreau advocates relating to isolation, inspiration, provocation, heroism, and engagement with society. The underlying assumption that Thoreau has is that these come out of a reattachment to the law of nature permeating all creation, human and nonhuman alike. These themes, then, are religious in nature

---

11 Thoreau, 1837-1846. 1: Journal, 129.
15 This is what Bron Taylor would identify as a manifestation of “dark green religion,” which is “religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care. Dark green religion considers nonhuman species to have worth, regardless of their usefulness to human beings. Such religion expresses and promotes an ethics of kinship between human beings and other life forms.” Then, in the concluding section, he writes how dark green religion is “a form of nature-related spirituality that shares the impulse toward environmental concern but that also considers nature and its denizens sacred in and of themselves. With such religion, ethical obligations to nature are direct rather than only arising indirectly as a means to promote human well-being. Such nature spirituality is decreasingly tethered and sometimes entirely independent of the world’s major religious traditions.” Bron Taylor, “From the Ground Up: Dark Green Religion and the Environmental Future,” in *Ecology and*
as the person reconnects with the divine or the miraculous in life and associates with the law of nature, which then leads to more balanced, harmonious, and peaceful relations with others, nature, and oneself. The practices one encounters in *A Week* are meant to sustain the religious ideal encountered in the previous chapter.

The practices in *A Week* are intended to lead to an impersonal mode of being where ego and the artificial constraints of one’s particular place vanish, so the person can speak and act in a way to inspire people across temporal, geographical, and cultural boundaries. From pilgrimage, labor, a purely sensuous life, a separate intention of the eye and uncommon sense, to withdrawing into solitude and silence, taking part in a natural Sabbath, engaging in civil disobedience, and being a friend, *A Week* proposes various tactics for freeing oneself from the constraints of hegemony to allow the person to become a counter-hegemonic force leading others to egalitarian liberation, religious pluralism, and peace. Thoreau is concerned with finding practices that allow people to encounter the wildness within their own lives, so they can reenter society and bring wildness within the domesticated, tamed, or cultivated life of the established order.

The religious practices in *A Week* intend to loosen the established order through wildness, savageness, and rudeness to provoke and inspire others to wake up and free themselves from the constraints of common sense, which will liberate them to be freeing forces to help others awaken. *A Week* offers practices that will lead, in Thoreau’s hopes, to a society of people who are liberating influences as they do not seek to constrain or dominate but seek to allow others to live out their lives with quality and intensity, so religion becomes the interweaving of self-reform

---

*the Environment: Perspectives from the Humanities*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Susan Lloyd McGarry (Cambridge: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2009), 89 and 100-01, respectively.

and social reform sustained by specific practices that qualitatively transform existence in harmony with The Law of Regeneration.

The Pilgrimage or Quest

A Week presents a pilgrimage or a quest. As they launch their boat, Thoreau and his brother do so to encounter new sights, new people, and the source of the Merrimack River high on Agiocochook. A pilgrimage has two important components. First, it converts life into a pilgrimage; the idea of one’s life as a pilgrimage provokes the person to remember that they are still on the move and have not reached their final destination. Second, it reminds the person that behind the struggles, failures, joys, and successes, each aspect of life is part of a learning process; each aspect of life is a gift in its own right with newness and vitality coming at unexpected times and in unexpected forms. It is not only about reframing our thinking to understand life as a pilgrimage but to embark each day on our own pilgrimages. We need to take risks and go on our own journeys of discovery, which must be both internal and external in nature.


18 By his freshman year in college at the age of sixteen, Thoreau was already reading extensively in travel literature. Richardson, Henry Thoreau, 13. While at Harvard College, Thoreau also read Virgil’s Georgics, which is an intense study of local place and agriculture. The two combined buttress Thoreau’s corpus and its focus on place and travel. Robert Sullivan, The Thoreau You Don’t Know: The Father of Nature Writers on the Importance of Cities, Finances, and Fooling Around (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 39-40. It was during this time that Thoreau began to associate writing with the cycles of nature and agriculture. In this way, writing is inseparable from place.


The idea of a pilgrimage has its roots in the Latin word *peregrinus*, which means “foreign.” *Peregrinus* derives from the Latin root *peregre*, which means “abroad” or, more literally, “through a field.”²¹ In this etymological sense, a pilgrimage means going to some foreign place, going abroad out of one’s comfort zone, and allowing that foreignness to confront who you are. Pilgrimage, however, is both an internal and external journey leading the person toward some sacred or divine end; it is an exit from ordinary life leading one into new places internally and externally.²² This liminal position is not permanent; when the person has made contact with the sacred or one’s goal for the journey, that person returns to the everyday processes from which he or she departed.

In this way, a pilgrimage has a component that is essentially nonconformist in nature as the person leaves the realm of common sense and accepted knowledge in the journey to some distant inward (figurative) or external (literal) land.²³ As the liminal position is temporary and as the person seeks direct experience of the sacred, the person reenters society transformed and ready to share her or his experiences with others. The pilgrimage is a nonconformist gift that can help transcend the common sense of one’s community in an attempt to rebind one’s community with the sacred. A pilgrimage, therefore, has an inherent quality of redirecting, realigning, or rebinding that acknowledges that one’s community was not fully on a harmonious path.

A quest is similar.²⁴ Both “quest” and “question” come from the Latin root *quaerere*, which means “to ask or seek.” A quest relates to an asking or seeking posture—a questioning

---

²¹ I turn to etymologies here because Thoreau was fond of them in his writing. See Harding, “Thoreau’s Ideas,” 127-28.
²⁴ For more on the importance of the quest emplotment for narratives, see Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 69-86. He identifies to following common components in quest narratives: (1) the call, (2) companions, (3) the journey, which includes monsters, temptations, the deadly opposites, and the journey to the underworld, (4) helpers, (5) the final ordeal, and (6) a life-renewing goal and a return to society.
attitude—toward the world. It is not an attitude of conquest or “gaining and winning.” Conquest relates to an action completed; the seeking and asking in the context of conquest are performed because one wants conclusive, absolute answers, but the quest is an endless process of asking and re-asking or seeking and re-seeking. Joseph Campbell associates this with the hero’s journey. Through Freudian and Jungian ideas, Campbell establishes three main phases of the quest: (1) “separation or departure,” (2) “the trials and victories of initiation,” and (3) the “return and reintegration with society.” The quest concentrates on something within the world placing a demand on the person, that person may or may not accept the demand and the call to act initially, but eventually the person leaves the comfortable atmosphere he or she is used to and wanders into unknown territory. Through facing dangers and uncommon occurrences, the person gains wisdom and returns to society. He or she offers that wisdom to the community, and they may accept it as a gift or deny it as insanity; so two dangers exist: (1) dangers on the journey itself and (2) the possibility of being rejected.

These components are present in *A Week*. Danger, new experiences, and treasure are addressed in the epigraph dedicated to his deceased brother, John:

I am bound, I am bound, for a distant shore . . .
   . . . the treasure I seek,
On the barren sands of a desolate creek . . . .
New lands, new people, and new thoughts to find;
   Many fair reaches and headlands appeared;
And many dangers were there to be feared . . .

---

Furthermore, “Concord River” focuses on the call of the river; it places a demand on Thoreau to which he feels he must respond. Over his life, nature and the river pulled him in, they lured him into their recesses, and they placed a burden on his attention to look deeper.

As he stands before the river in this introductory chapter, the demand he experiences is one that leads him to contemplate the many facets of the river: its name, pre-civilized history, civilized history, cyclical expansions and contractions, and the symbolic and pragmatic character of a river for all humanity. Thoreau cannot escape the call of the river, so he and his brother build a boat and answer that call. On their journey, they encounter temptations: “We, too, who held the middle of the stream, came near experiencing a pilgrim’s fate, being tempted to pursue what seemed a sturgeon or larger fish, for we remembered that this was Sturgeon River, its dark and monstrous back alternately rising and sinking in mid-stream.” In “Thursday,” when they have departed from their boat, Thoreau makes another gesture that places them in relation to the pilgrim: “We now no longer sailed or floated on the river, but trod the unyielding land like pilgrims.” Even the animals in “Friday” seem to be on their own pilgrimage: “Dense flocks of blackbirds were winging their way along the river’s course, as if on a short evening pilgrimage to some shrine of theirs, or to celebrate so fair a sunset.” Speaking of the Christian tradition and the best preaching that has come from the Bible, Thoreau values John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress: “I think that Pilgrim’s Progress is the best sermon which has been preached from [the Bible]; almost all other sermons that I have heard, or heard of, have been but poor imitations of this.”

---

30 Thoreau, A Week, 114.
31 Ibid., 304.
32 Ibid., 390.
33 Ibid., 71.
These references to pilgrims and pilgrimages help to focus the purpose of the book; the journey was not one of simple, boyish pleasure. It was not an outing simply to sail on the rivers. Behind the journey was a desire to come to the literal and symbolic source of the Merrimack River. The source for life and the forces sustaining life were the brothers’ foci: They were seeking The Law of Regeneration.\(^{34}\) This is clearest in the analogical reading of springs of water coming from the steep banks around the Merrimack:\(^{35}\) “Sometimes this purer and cooler water, bursting out from under a pine or a rock, was collected into a basin close to the edge of, and level with the river, a fountain-head of the Merrimack. So near along life’s stream are the fountains of innocence and youth making fertile its sandy margin; and the voyageur will do well to replenish his vessels often at the uncontaminated sources.”\(^{36}\) Their pilgrimage led them to the sources of life, so they could rejuvenate themselves and live with robustness and freshness.

This was only one goal; Thoreau’s other purpose was to come back to society with a different vision of life and creation, so he could share his discernment with others. The hero’s quest and the poet’s vision are not to be kept hidden; the hero and the poet are to share their wisdom with others, so others can escape the constraints of society’s common sense and damming processes. *A Week* is Thoreau’s gift to society; it is a prophetic book about his pilgrimage and the wisdom he gained along the way as he regained an intimacy with the divine.\(^{37}\) He reentered society in “Friday” with new perspectives and a new awareness of what matters for a good life. By analogy, readers are supposed to seek transformations through pilgrimages or quests of their own.

While not everybody will be inclined to go into nature like Thoreau did and while not everybody will have the stamina and skill to build their own boat, paddle tirelessly up a river, and hike into the mountains to find a river’s source, people should be willing to take the risk to find what rejuvenates them. It is about finding something in which one is passionately interested and pursuing that despite what others say or think. This means Thoreau wants people to cultivate an attitude that allows them to take risks. This is not a foolish or naïve risk. Instead, Thoreau wants people to be ready to confront the challenges of life as they pursue their passions and live fully in the present.

The practice of going on a pilgrimage or a quest necessitates being able to confront our fears and see that even in difficult times, optimism is lurking nearby:

So far as my experience goes, travelers generally exaggerate the difficulties of the way. Like most evil, the difficulty is imaginary; for what’s the hurry? If a person lost would conclude that after all he is not lost, he is not beside himself, but standing in his own old shoes on the very spot where he is, and that for the time being he will live there; but the places that have known him, they are lost,—how much anxiety and danger would vanish. I am not alone if I stand by myself. Who knows where in space this globe is rolling? Yet we will not give ourselves up for lost, let it go where it will.38

In preparation for the pilgrimage, people should cultivate a self-reliance that allows them to feel more at home no matter where they are in the world or no matter what situations they find themselves in. This means being able to confront real and imaginary dangers. Being willing to take risks is the first part of this practice, but it coincides with opening oneself up to the demands of the world—being aware of the value, preciousness, and dignity of one’s environs. This is risky business as being attentive to one’s surroundings can challenge the person and everything with which he or she is comfortable.

38 Thoreau, A Week, 183-84.
From Thoreau’s *A Week*, readers should become ready to leave their zones of comfort behind, to listen to the demands of creation, and venture forth from all they think is solid. They need to go into the world of uncertainty with only the certainty that they can persevere through the difficulties. A pilgrimage takes great courage as it is not only external, for it is also an internal journey that urges us to take an inventory of our virtues and vices or our positive character traits and our defects. It is not only about facing the outward world and all the risks this takes, but it is also about confronting the internal challenges that diminish our love for ourselves. Any way it unfolds, however, the pilgrim must not falter when dangers and fears arise. Instead, the pilgrim should assess the situation and push on in the most appropriate manner. Through their struggles, they will continue to remake life, learn about life, and live better in the process. Each return from the journey should not only manifest a transformed person, but that transformed person should reenter the world and give the gift of wisdom to others, so they will be willing to go on their own personal pilgrimages. The individual pilgrim and his or her quest are communal in orientation as the transformed self seeks to positively transform society.

**Labor as a Spiritualizing and Naturalizing Process**

When a reader considers the activities in *A Week* as a pilgrimage or a quest, this reframing alters the concept and meaning of labor in Thoreau’s book. When he published *A
Week in 1849, the United States was undergoing rapid changes. Not only had people been settling the West, but U.S. citizens were going West for wealth, specifically gold. In 1849, the gold rush was in full swing and leading people to give up the comforts and routines of their local environs and their close relations with their family because of the American emphasis placed on wealth and acquisition. Missionaries from the United States were already abroad, and even the American Unitarian Association had begun its own mission program in the decades following its establishment in 1825, which helped to support the nurturing and expansion of Unitarianism in India. The focus in the United States was to expand, to enter new lands, and to prosper financially.

A Week did not reinforce this ideological position and America’s intention to live out its “Manifest Destiny.” An anonymous review offers such an observation by placing A Week beyond the thinking leading people to the western limits of the continent:

We are glad to see a book that may be safely recommended as a prophylactic of the California fever. It is moreover a healthy and harmless stimulant to those who are removed from the circle of infection. The boy who is wild with the idea of sleeping in a tent and cooking his own dinner, will here find pointed out a readier and cheaper outlet for his enthusiasm than the “overland route”—with the added merit of increased facilities for repentance during a rain storm. To the sick heart and fevered brain, parched up by the thirst for the “golden streams,” this book, if read aright, should be as cool and pure as the fall of dew in summer nights. It is a revelation to such, of the absolute non-essentialness of wealth to a man’s happy life.

--

Instead of taking an “overland route” to find wealth, Thoreau’s journey is locally positioned and uncommitted to expansion, dreams of riches, and the need for new lands. Instead, he is turning away from these to urge the reader to cultivate a more noble soul where it already resides.

One reviewer of *A Week, Walden*, and some of Thoreau’s antislavery writings, a reviewer who is thought to be Lydia Maria Child, understands Thoreau’s theme in *A Week* and his other texts as offering a trajectory away from wealth, acquisition, traveling at fast speeds on trains, and chaining the soul to material goods. *A Week* and his other works oppose the values of capitalism.  

These books spring from a depth of thought which will not suffer them to be put by, and are written in a spirit in striking contrast with that which is uppermost in our time and country . . . The life exhibited in them teaches us, much more impressively than any number of sermons could, that this Western activity of which we are so proud, these material improvements, this commercial enterprise, this rapid accumulation of wealth, even our external associated philanthropic action, are very easily overrated. The true glory of the human soul is not to be reached by the most rapid travelling in car or steamboat, by the instant transmission of intelligence however far, by the most speedy accumulation of a fortune, and however efficient measures we may adopt for the reform of the intemperate, the emancipation of the enslaved, &c., it will avail little unless we are ourselves essentially noble enough to inspire those whom we would so benefit with nobleness. External bondage is trifling compared with the bondage of an ignoble soul.

The work to be done, as these reviewers indicate, is not external; the work to be done is internal, and all external work should help and should be in harmony with the soul work that each person should accomplish. Labor should be a spiritualizing and naturalizing activity, not simply an activity focused on acquisition. Vocation and vacation merge, and they should unite to improve the person.

---


As this section points to an anti-capitalist, anti-expansionist spirit in Thoreau’s *A Week*, it is helpful to remember the Transcendentalist revolt against the Puritans’ Calvinist theological assumptions that degraded human nature and placed humanity beneath a punishing, damning God. As they responded against such theological frameworks, the Transcendentalists turned away from some of the other Puritanical Calvinist consequences of this outlook; the Transcendentalists resisted the Puritan work ethic and its valuation of a subdued mercantile culture.

While scholars have challenged Max Weber’s thesis about capitalism and the Protestant work ethic on a number of points, it will be helpful to turn to a quote from Weber’s work as an introduction to Emerson’s similar assessment of Puritan New England. Whether such assessments are accurate is a moot point because the Transcendentalists were responding to a similar assessment given by Weber and his well-known thesis: “. . . the Puritan concept of the calling and the insistence on the ascetic conduct of life directly influenced the development of the capitalist style of life. Asceticism turns all its force (as we have seen) against one thing in particular: the uninhibited enjoyment of life and of the pleasures it has to offer.” Not only were the Puritans, for Weber, ascetic in nature, but he also associates this asceticism with capitalism and self-constraint, which helped to avoid a spontaneous enjoyment for life.

---

50 McKusick, *Green Writing*, 142.
51 Sacvan Bercovitch also associates Puritanism with capitalism, but he does so by arguing that they established a potentially more fluid society where wealth could lead to change in status. He, therefore, concentrates on their development of a solid middle-class in America found most clearly in a capitalist structure—which he set against aristocracy and feudal forms of government. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 18-22. Antonio Gramsci assesses Calvinism (and, therefore, the resulting Puritan work ethic) as arising in dialectical tension with capitalism; Calvinism, then, formulated its ways of being in harmony with capitalism. In Gramsci’s view, production shaped religion in a more traditional Marxist sense. John Fulton, “Religion and Politics in Gramsci: An Introduction,” *Sociological Analysis* 48, no. 3 (1987): 210.
54 It is interesting to note, however, that the Separatist Puritans supported spontaneity in worship. The minister was to give his sermons spontaneously, and members of the congregation after the service would prophesy spontaneously. Edmund S. Morgan, “The Ideal of a Pure Church,” in *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 27-28.
In his lectures on New England in January 1843, Emerson offered a similar assessment that associated Puritanism with a frugal, constrained life supporting mercantilism in the colonies based on the English love of trade:

The favorite employment of [the English race in both England and New England] is trade . . . The English, Napoleon said, are a nation of shopkeepers, and the English in America are shopkeepers. Trade flagellates that melancholy temperament into health and contentment by its incessant stimulus . . . The earliest laws of England have the interests of the merchant in view . . . . I please myself more with the reactions against the spirit of commerce in New England.55

Emerson offered a picture of New England as the transplantation of the Anglo-Saxon race in North America. He associated the imbrication of this race with religion, so to speak of Anglo-Saxon history is to speak about religious history because “[f]or a thousand years, the history of England is a religious history.”56 While Emerson may not have explicitly associated the mercantile nature of the English with religion as Weber so explicitly does, one thing is clear: The religiosity of Puritanism structured New England, and these highly religious people honored a mercantile life based on hard work, frugality, and restrained living. Weber and Emerson, then, indicate how Puritans were hardworking people associated with trade and capitalist intents exemplified through sober living.

What is also present in Emerson’s appraisal of the Puritans in New England is the assertion that he resisted their “spirit of commerce.” This is important because Thoreau would go to extremes to resist this spirit that would leave Emerson thinking that Thoreau had wasted much of his life and talent, and Emerson criticized Thoreau’s lack of a work ethic in his eulogy as he highlighted Thoreau’s disinclination for material wealth:

He chose to be rich by making his wants few, and supplying them himself . . . . A very industrious man, and setting, like all highly organized men, a high value on his time, he

56 Emerson, The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 10.
seemed the only man of leisure in town, always ready for any excursion that promised well, or for conversation prolonged into late hours . . . . Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party.57

Emerson was disappointed with Thoreau because of Thoreau’s lack of industriousness; Thoreau was not ambitious enough, yet this accentuates the difference between Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson was immersed in the economic world ambivalently, which allowed him to devalue the lifestyle Thoreau was cultivating; but for Thoreau, leisure and picking huckleberries with others in Concord were time well spent. Thoreau lived by a different economy that Emerson could not comprehend, but when one comes to examine Thoreau’s life according to Thoreau’s own philosophy of living, he lived a rich life.

One of the best-known lines from Thoreau comes from *Walden* when he asserts, “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” He reaffirms this a few lines later: “Simplify, simplify.”58 This is the heart of Thoreau’s anti-capitalist message in *Walden* as he urged the reader to discern what he or she actually needed to live life well and to be satisfied with the bare minimum.

Thoreau did not want to become a possession of his property; he wanted to live simply and to remain free from the constraints of capitalist acquisition, which hearkens back to his first letter to H.G.O. Blake on 27 March 1848 when he wrote the following lines: “I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest man thinks he must attend to in a day . . . When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all encumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of

---

life, distinguish the necessary and the real.”  

This places Thoreau on a different ground when compared with Emerson as Thoreau realized that much of the labor people do is extraneous or for the wrong reasons, namely, acquiring more possessions or fame.

Thoreau was not interested in the “spirit of commerce,” nor was he interested in the comforts and commitments to which Emerson had bound himself. Thoreau’s view was an extreme interpretation of Emerson’s revolutionary views in matters of religion and social organization as Thoreau makes clear once again in *Walden*:

> For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study . . . As I preferred some things to others, and especially valued my freedom, as I could fare hard and yet succeed well, I did not spend my time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture, or delicate cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet . . . In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely.

For Thoreau, it is not an aversion to work, for he sees work as something necessary for survival and part of the cultivation of joy—but not to acquire great sums of money or large quantities of material wealth. What is this but a reaffirmation of his balance between work and rest expressed in his 30 August 1837 commencement speech “The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times Considered in Its Influence on the Political, Moral, and Literary Character of a Nation?”

---

62 One should remember that Thoreau was coming of age and graduating from Harvard College during a period of expansion in Concord, Massachusetts and a simultaneous economic panic in the United States beginning in 1837 that would turn into an economic depression. Thoreau would have been quite aware of economics as this was a constant concern for Americans during the late 1830s and early 1840s (approximately from 1837 to the end of the 1840s). The economic problems also spread into employment problems and conflict between workers, managers, and owner. This depression has been seen as being worse than the Great Depression in the twentieth century. See Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism and the Class Politics of Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 25-34. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 14-18, 166-69. Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don’t Know*, 60-62, 122-87. An economically aware Thoreau seems obvious when one considers his historical context, and his experiment at Walden Pond was part of the utopian social movement of the time, such as Brook Farm. It was an alternative attempt to live and work better during uncertain economic times. Thoreau’s idea of simplicity takes on new meaning when placed against the background of a serious economic depression. Also see Cain, “Henry David Thoreau,” 13-16.
This curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient, more beautiful than it is useful—it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used. The order of things should be somewhat reversed,—the seventh should be man’s day of toil, wherein to earn his living by the sweat of his brow, and the other six his sabbath of the affections and the soul, in which to range this wide-spread garden, and drink in the soft influences and sublime revelations of Nature.\(^{63}\)

This translates into fifty-two days of work in a year or about seven and a half weeks of labor; Thoreau obviously discovered by his time spent at Walden Pond while writing *A Week* and *Walden* that he had estimated too high in his commencement lecture. Work is needed in both cases, however, to leave one with more time for serious study, engagement with nature, aesthetic pursuits, and the enjoyment of life—often all four overlapping in a day.\(^{64}\) What Thoreau leaves us with is something quite different from Emerson’s sustained lecturing across the United States. Thoreau wanted a simpler life that would provide him with enjoyment and time for personal spiritual cultivation and the ability to develop his writing.\(^{65}\) His outlook was quite different from “the spirit of commerce” or “the commercial spirit of the times.” He valued freedom to develop his character and sought enough work to sustain his higher pursuits, and this simplicity made its way into *A Week* to reposition labor alongside the desire for a pilgrimage.\(^{66}\)

In *A Week*, Thoreau continues to be concerned with how to live, how to use time wisely, and how to labor.\(^{67}\) In “Saturday,” Thoreau informs the reader at the beginning of the second paragraph about the construction of their boat, the “Musketaquid.” Thoreau declares that it “cost us a week’s labor in the spring.” If we take Thoreau at his word in his commencement lecture


\(^{64}\) Diggins, “Thoreau, Marx, and the Riddle of Alienation,” 592. Aesthetic concerns were always part of Thoreau’s concerns, so both the spiritual and the aesthetic overlap for Thoreau.


\(^{66}\) Simplicity is a theme found throughout Thoreau’s corpus; Thoreau often couples this with solitude or withdrawal. These themes emerged as early as his 1842 essay “Natural History of Massachusetts.” Robinson, *Natural Life*, 40-43.

\(^{67}\) For Thoreau, labor was not about acquiring material wealth and luxury items; such luxury was poverty for him. Thoreau was concerned with self-cultivation and individual and societal improvement. True wealth was the development of the self and living a good life. See Bingham, *Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination*, 69-70.
and in *Walden*, then his boat added seven days of labor onto their annual labor hours.\(^{68}\) As the boat was intended to allow them to travel on the two rivers, this work was clearly not necessary for them to survive materially. Their boat was not for their livelihood but for a spiritual quest as they wanted to find the source of the Merrimack River and metaphorically find the important source for a good life. What we have, then, is the idea of labor performed to make money to survive and labor needed to cultivate oneself spiritually. Both are important for a good life, and people should not allow the one to overtake or consume time from the other. In fact, all labor should sustain the person spiritually. Labor should be a right form of livelihood in harmony and balance with one’s deeper spiritual aspirations and with the laws found in the natural world.

The harmony and balance between laboring for one’s livelihood and laboring for spiritual ends should have an organic resemblance to the world of nature. Thoreau contrasts those who remain indoors and those who go outdoors to labor. Consonant with his emphasis on Euro-American culture finding comfort indoors instead of feeling at home in nature, Thoreau reveals how endless laboring indoors leaves much to be desired. Instead, he values labor done outdoors and in public; there is something in the privacy of the worker who remains hidden that demeans the labor. An anecdote to support this is found in “Tuesday” as the brothers encounter carpenters working on their boat on the banks of the Merrimack River.

Some carpenters were at work here mending a scow on the green and sloping bank. The strokes of their mallets echoed from shore to shore, and up and down the river, and their tools gleamed in the sun a quarter of a mile from us, and we realized that boat-building was as ancient and honorable an art as agriculture, and that their might be a naval as well as a pastoral life . . . . As we glided past at a distance, these outdoor workmen appeared to have added some dignity to their labor by its very publicness. It was a part of the industry of nature, like the work of hornets and mud wasps.\(^{69}\)

\(^{68}\) Many point to Thoreau’s “Economy” chapter as his best-known criticism of America’s consumer, capitalist culture. Thoreau, *Walden*, 3-79. Also see Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 151-54.

\(^{69}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 216-17.
Although they are part of New England’s mercantile trade, the carpenters are outdoors allowing their labor to mix with nature, and they become like the working hornet or mud wasp; it is the dignity of their labor that Thoreau emphasizes. The “publicness” gives the work dignity and attracts Thoreau. One’s labor should begin merging with the natural world. This is clear in his many anecdotes about labor in *A Week*.

In “Concord River,” Thoreau includes a poem about “respectable folks” who work outdoors and are friends to all.\(^70\) Later in “Saturday,” he points to people working outdoors in harmony with the natural world: “. . . we see men haying far off in the meadow, their heads waving like the grass which they cut. In the distance the wind seemed to bend all alike.”\(^71\) Labor for Thoreau is not concerned primarily with the monetary gain associated with certain forms of labor but with labor’s dignity and naturalizing qualities. Humans are not only to spiritualize themselves, but they are supposed to naturalize themselves.\(^72\) This means that labor becomes a way to reconnect with nature and to repair our previous alienation from it. Labor, rightly done for Thoreau, should put us back in our proper home, which is nature, by removing us from the parlor.\(^73\)

This labor needs to be done with the right attitude. It should not be done in haste according to endless timeliness; one’s labor should not conform to the bustle of the world and its ceaseless business for the sake of being busy. Labor should be done with awareness and in a comfortable, slow manner, for Thoreau does not want people to disturb “the calm days by unworthy bustle or impatience.”\(^74\) People, therefore, need to labor in a way that is calm, diligent, and steady. Laboring should not consume one’s full day, and neither should labor be done based

---


\(^71\) Ibid., 39.

\(^72\) Ibid., 379.


\(^74\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 222-23.
on dependence on others.\textsuperscript{75} Labor, instead, should ideally be accomplished with a right attitude in balance with the rest of one’s activities for the day, so that labor is liberating and not constraining:

Yet, after all, the truly efficient laborer will not crowd his day with work, but will saunter to his task, surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure, and then do but what he loves the best. He is anxious only about the fruitful kernels of time. Though the hen should sit all day, she could lay only one egg, and, besides, would not have picked up materials for another. Let a man take time enough for the most trivial deed, though it be but the paring of his nails. The buds swell imperceptibly, without hurry or confusion, as if the short spring days were an eternity.\textsuperscript{76}

The point is not to work in haste and in harmony with the ceaseless bustle of capitalism and the train’s timetable or the market’s schedule.\textsuperscript{77} The laborer needs to maintain a level of independence that allows a person to work according to her or his temperament.\textsuperscript{78} Each person’s labor should slowly unfold producing something as natural as the new spring’s buds on a tree. For Thoreau, labor is not about time and money, but about losing oneself in work that stands free of time as the laborer acts as though she has eternity to accomplish the task. One’s relation to labor, then, is independent of external constraints and should be based on one’s internal clock. Work and leisure coincide for Thoreau.\textsuperscript{79}

But labor should not be all about the body. Thoreau’s understanding of the divided nature of humans necessitates that labor be not only about the body—but also about the mind and the fruits of the mind: action and thought should effortlessly flow into each other.\textsuperscript{80} One of the problems with constant outdoor labor is that the materiality of it can dull the intellectual ability

\textsuperscript{75} Cain, “Henry David Thoreau,” 31-32.
\textsuperscript{76} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 107-08.
\textsuperscript{77} Thoreau was overly aware of how capitalism was transforming daily life. For Thoreau, capitalism was not an improvement but a hindrance to the development of a good life. Like Marx, Thoreau saw capitalism as an alienating force in life, and he disagreed with Adam Smith’s assessment of capitalism and the celebration of its values. See Bingham, \textit{Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination}, 23-24, 37-63. For Thoreau, capitalism had turned life and time into a commodity. Also see Cain, “Henry David Thoreau,” 27-32.
\textsuperscript{78} Diggins, “Thoreau, Marx, and the Riddle of Alienation,” 578-83.
\textsuperscript{79} Oelschlaeger, \textit{The Idea of Wilderness}, 158-59.
\textsuperscript{80} Paul, \textit{The Shores of America}, 210.
of the mind; to put it another way, constant emphasis on the body can allow for the devaluing of the mind:

It is so rare to meet with a man outdoors who cherishes a worthy thought in his mind, which is independent of the labor of his hands. Behind every busy-ness there should be a level of undisturbed serenity and industry, as within the reef encircling a coral isle there is always an expanse of still water, where the depositions are going on which will finally raise it above the surface.  

For the person who constantly works outdoors with the body, there should be a corresponding emphasis on the mind and intellectual processes. Each person should not only approach their work with patience and leisure, but they should also approach their work with elevated thoughts and serenity. The proper attitude toward work, therefore, should not be one worried about timetables, what others will think, and about what financial rewards one will get for their labor. Instead, labor is about producing a natural fruit that will be an expression of one’s inward stillness.

Labor, then, is not related to acquisition, financial success, and power in society. Instead, labor is a spiritual and naturalizing endeavor that should not undermine one’s serenity. One’s serenity and nobler thoughts should be part of the laboring process. His emphasis on labor reverses the standard values guiding the United States during the time. Society categorized people as rich because of the land and material products they possessed, and people were poor based on their lack of land, property, and money. Thoreau’s irony provides him with a discovery: People are actually poor when they are rich according to society’s standards. One of the fears of the Transcendentalists was that one’s possessions would come to own the person; they saw how the more one owns and desires to own, the more one becomes concerned with possessions,

83 Walden Pond, then, cannot be reduced to a place of leisure or escape. It was about how to organize life, how to live, and how to work. Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don’t Know*, 123.
protection of them, and acquiring more of them. Their desire comes to possess them making them a tool for their greed and for the preservation of what they already own. Thoreau turns to the “common” as a way of undermining wealth and ownership.

How fortunate were we who did not own an acre of these shores, who had not renounced our title to the whole! One who knew how to appropriate the true value of this world would be the poorest man in it. The poor rich man! all he has is what he has bought. What I see is mine. I am a large owner in the Merrimack intervals . . . He is the rich man, and enjoys the fruits of riches, who summer and winter forever can find delight in his own thoughts.

To be rich, then, is not based on what one possesses. Labor and its aid in accumulating wealth and land is not the proper approach to judging labor. The fruits of labor, in other words, are not money and other acquisitions. The criterion for judging a persons labor emerges from the harmony between one’s body and mind and how one’s attitude is toward laboring activities. Those who are richest are able to find joy in one’s un-owned surroundings and in one’s thoughts, and labor should be an expression and cultivator of that joy. External labor should simultaneously be inward labor.

In his first letter, Thoreau instructed Blake, “I do believe that the outward and the inward life correspond . . . The outward is only the outside of that which is within.” One’s external labor should be an outward manifestation of one’s inward life. As one cultivates one’s external world of work, this should mirror one’s internal world of work in some way. The external grabbing for prestige, power, and property reveals an internal poverty; being able to be free of such grabbing for outward signs of wealth would reveal an inward wealth as one is naturally satisfied with the world and the value permeating all creation. Being satisfied in the common

85 Thoreau, A Week, 350.
86 Thoreau, Dean, and Blake, Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, 35.
ownership of the entire world, the laborer does not strive to take possession of it; instead, the worker seeks to labor in a way that adds to creation and The Law of Regeneration.

Labor, therefore, becomes part of the pilgrimage process. There is the spiritual labor needed to prepare oneself for the pilgrimage, and there is the labor needed during the pilgrimage. Thoreau sank into deep meditation about his environs before building the boat and embarking, and he and his brother put in great effort as they built their boat and cultivated their own melons and potatoes. They also had to labor as they rowed against the currents, and they labored as they climbed to the summit of the highest mountain in the North East. Their laboring activities produced nothing similar to the labor associated with and dependent upon the market. Their labor did not depend on the market and the acquisitive desires of others. Instead, they engaged their tasks with leisure, patience, and serenity, so they could enjoy the beauty within the common natural landscape. They did not seek to possess it, nor did they seek to exclude others from this landscape; instead, they passed through it leaving few traces of their presence. Labor, therefore, is not a capitalist endeavor that kills the spirit, but a spiritualizing and naturalizing process that reunites the person with nature. Labor should be about inward balance and harmony that expresses itself in the fruits of one’s labor, which also should be in harmony and in balance with one’s environs and those around the laborer.

A Purely Sensuous Life

As he turned to nature as a source for beauty, inspiration, and religious insight, Thoreau valued immersing himself in his senses and the materiality of his body and creation to reconnect with the natural world, to reorient himself, and to regain an ecstasy that society’s civilizing

---

processes had occluded. Alan D. Hodder describes the moments of regained ecstasy in the following way, “. . . such [ecstatic] episodes appear to have involved exquisitely refined modes of sensory perception, particularly of hearing; a sharp altered sense of self; heightened forms of insight; and an exalted appreciation of the beauty of the natural world.”

Thoreau’s emphasis on the materiality of existence and a person’s engagement with the world creates a tripartite division; there is the outer world, the inner world of the person, and the senses that bridge the gap between the two. Through “refined modes of sensory perception,” one could come into immediate contact with one’s surroundings—a type of “passive surrender” to nature and life—and that contact could provide the person with facts, yet those facts are not enough. Plain facts are meaningless, and Thoreau’s studies of his local, natural environment were geared toward a higher truth coexistent with and interdependent with the particularities of his specific geographical placement in New England. Thoreau sought to transform facts imaginatively into something relevant and elevating, which was the processing of those facts from the person’s particular point of view into something grander. The senses and the sense data generated by the outside world come together in the perceiver’s immediate awareness to be

89 Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 5, 71, and 75.
91 Robinson, Natural Life, 19-22, 42-43.
93 This allows us to see two aspects of Thoreau’s natural environment: nature and Nature. Bishop, “The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau’s Week,” 68-69. Also see Harding, “Thoreau’s Ideas,” 101-03.
processed into words and actions to communicate insights based on those particular experiences.  

One moves from an experience, its sensory data, and those facts to their processing, reformulation through imagination, and the transformation into a poetic creation or truth: “As we thus rested in the shade, or rowed leisurely along, we had recourse, from time to time, to the Gazetteer, which was our Navigator, and from its bald natural facts extracted the pleasure of poetry.” Thoreau, however, was aware of the excessive accumulation of facts in his time; people could continue grasping facts and seeking more facts in line with the capitalist value of acquisition, but facts per se are useless because they do not go far enough. They remain local indicators of the person who discerned the fact, recorded it, and communicated it. Thoreau wanted to see The Law of Regeneration in the facts and show how material particularities express this law, and it is not the facts that do this but the creative genius processing the facts: “Observation is so wide awake, and facts are being so rapidly added to the sum of human experience, that it appears as if the theorizer would always be in arrears, and were doomed forever to arrive at imperfect conclusions; but the power to perceive a law is equally rare in all ages of the world, and depends but little on the number of facts observed.”

This outlook accepts the Transcendentalist premise that distinguishes between Reason and Understanding, where Reason—in the more Coleridgean sense—is an intuitive awareness of reality, and Understanding is a practical, calculating function within the human mind. Thoreau is undoing the privileging of Idealism that Emerson elaborated and set against Materialism; instead, Thoreau turns to “a purely sensuous life” to reveal how the material realm and the ideal realm

---

95 Thoreau, A Week, 90.
96 Ibid., 364.
are not separate but interdependent, and both are part of the divinely created order and must exist in harmony and balance with each other. By turning to his senses, Thoreau is trying to harmonize the inward creative faculties and the outward material world, which allows the sensuous to play an important role in religion from its relegated status in both Puritan and Unitarian theology.

Thoreau also moves his religious worldview away from logical foundations and cold reason; it is far from the Unitarian emphasis on “rational religion.” It also replaces a top-down approach for religion as nobody else can experience and live life for another person, and others cannot properly or fully interpret another person’s experience. Thoreau’s emphasis on a sensuous life necessitates intimacy with one’s environs and one’s psychological responses to external stimuli. Each person needs to be aware of the changing conditions of his or her mind as though he or she were a meteorologist watching the changing atmospheric conditions each day.

Thoreau displaces traditional emphases on texts as life becomes a person’s text. People can go to scriptures to provoke and inspire them, but scriptures and other books are neither de jure authoritative nor exclusive as to what counts as a religious text. One scripture may be right at a certain stage in a person’s life and useless at another. The sensuous life Thoreau advocates

---

97 This has implications for knowledge; our knowledge should not be divided up into independent, unconnected realms. The imagination and the materiality of science overlap. Walls, Seeing New Worlds, 5-10. Thoreau saw all realms of human life and creation as interconnected. Shawn Chandler Bingham also identifies Thoreau as an interdisciplinary thinker. Bingham, Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination, 1-2, 9, 24-26, 76-82, 118-20. Also see Robinson, Natural Life, 42-43.


100 Rick Anthony Furtak associates Thoreau’s emphasis on place and the relationship between the place and the inhabitant of that place is like love. To be is to exist in a loving way within our environs attuned to all that is around us and going on inside of us. Furtak, “Thoreau’s Emotional Stoicism,” 129-30. Also see Linck C. Johnson, “‘Native to New England’: Thoreau, ‘Herald of Freedom,’ and A Week,” Studies in Bibliography 36 (1983): 220.

emphasizes the person’s experience of the world, and that experience could come from reading a
text or from immersing oneself in nature and one’s bioregional surroundings.  

Thoreau uses organic imagery to unite experience, writing, and nature:

It is as if a green bough were laid across the page, and we are refreshed as by the sight of
fresh grass in midwinter or early spring. You have constantly the warrant of life and
experience in what you read. The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much
that was done. The sentences are verdurous and blooming as evergreen and flowers,
because they are rooted in fact and experience, but our false and florid sentences have
only the tints of flowers without their sap or roots

. . . steady labor with the hands, which engrosses the attention also, is unquestionably the
best method of removing palaver and sentimentality out of one’s style, both of speaking
and writing. If he has worked hard from morning till night, though he may have grieved
that he could not be watching the train of his thoughts during that time, yet the few hasty
lines which at evening record his day’s experience will be more musical and true than his
freest but idle fancy could have furnished. Surely the writer is to address a world of
laborers, and such therefore must be his own discipline.

Materiality, experience, communication, and nature merge in an organic and non-extraneous
interdependence. All life provides opportunities for learning and spiritual growth, and a sensuous
life displaces the classic religious authorities of tradition, reason, and texts as Thoreau turns back
to individual experience to maintain a humane face for religion by making it dependent on one’s
materiality, labor, and the person’s response to and imaginative interpretation of that
materiality.  

Rick Anthony Furtak says, “[Thoreau’s] use of religious language refers not to
any scriptural truth, of which he was skeptical, but to something immediately given at the heart
of human experience and yet supremely worthy of veneration.”

To cultivate these novel experiences, Thoreau rejects coordinated, anticipatory, highly
controlled, and precisely scheduled encounters with the world. While he was a naturalist, an
accurate observer, and a recorder of facts, what Thoreau was seeking with sensual immersion in

---

102 Bishop, “The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau’s Week,” 82-83.
103 Thoreau, A Week, 104-06.
104 This fourfold list (scripture/text, tradition, reason, and experience) is common in theological reflection. See Howard W. Stone
and James O. Duke, How to Think Theologically (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 41-56.
106 McSweeney, “Thoreau” 103-04.
nature was a way to undermine the habits and customs bred in society, and this necessitates a readiness to loosen one’s grip on one’s identity and self habitually cultivated throughout one’s life and immersion in society. To lose oneself means being open to the punctuating freedom of dreams, reveries, or visions emerging from sensory contact with and receptivity to one’s environs. *A Week* repeatedly discloses Thoreau and his brother in types of reveries, daydreams, or tangential thinking—which scholars continuously seek to disparage; in fact, many of his digressive essays are tangential reveries springing from associations with the natural environment.\(^\text{107}\)

People immersed in their houses do not encounter the freeing aspects found outside their dwellings; civilized life alienates people from the novelty of nature and its influences on the senses and the imagination. People out in the world and beyond the constraints of their four walls “shall see teal, —blue-winged, green-winged,—sheldrakes, whistlers, black ducks, ospreys, and many other wild and noble sights before night, such as they who sit in parlors never dream of.”\(^\text{108}\) Constrained within the parlor, people lose the possibility to dream like those who immerse themselves in nature. Being in the house of nature and receptive to the natural world will offer the person wild sensory experiences of the varieties of life not present in humanity’s constructed abodes. Unloosing one’s thoughts and the constraints placed on one’s mind through immersion in nature, the person is able to drift from past to future effortlessly and involuntarily as sensory experience initiates.

This is exemplified in Thoreau’s description in “Saturday” when he and his brother are passing beyond the area of the North Bridge and the site for the opening battle of the

---


Revolutionary War: “With such thoughts we swept gently by this now peaceful pasture ground, on waves of Concord, in which was long since drowned the din of war . . . . Gradually the village murmur subsided, and we seemed to be embarked on the placid current of our dreams, floating from past to future as silently as one awakes to fresh morning or evening thoughts.”\textsuperscript{109} Experience merges with dreams; the past and its experiences ease their way into the future and hopes for what will be. As with sense experience, dreams can only be dreamed by the dreamer, and “[d]reaming is a universal human phenomenon,”\textsuperscript{110} for “[w]e have all had our day-dreams, as well as more prophetic nocturnal visions . . .”\textsuperscript{111} Dreams orient people away from calculated thinking and allow them to float freely with the imagination and the images it conjures.

Reveries, dreams, and visions are a source of experience and wisdom that brings Thoreau insights about life and existence.

What, after all, does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything that I have done or may hope to do, but a transient thought, or vision, or dream, which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision.\textsuperscript{112}

Here Thoreau associates hearing the locust sing with visions and not the trivial facts of life in society. Thoreau is not seeking to escape everyday existence, but to let himself loose in the world and to allow that loosing to take him to unexpected experiences and insights. Dreams and experience, in the end, overlap for Thoreau, and people need to be able to lose themselves in the process to let the unexpected happen.

\textsuperscript{109} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{110} Carl Olsen, “Dreams,” 71-72.
\textsuperscript{111} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 54.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, 140.
This is a process of undoing what we expect and unraveling who we are—what Lawrence Buell calls Thoreau’s “self-relinquishment.” It is about leaving behind the commonness instilled by society and the common sense it has fostered (literally the common ways of experiencing and sensing the world and interpreting it); this disavowal with the common and the established self frees one to experience the world afresh and to allow for lofty flights of the mind through visions and dreams. Experience is not about scientific data and consistency through that sensory data but liberating moments of uncommon experience and uncommon sense that reveal newness in the familiar. The person becomes something different—if only temporarily; the person’s ego or sense of self diminishes with the unexpected. He or she can move toward a next, better self.

This practice of sensual immersion acts as a counterforce to established ideas, perceptual awareness, and expectations. Humans live by categories and ways of defining objects and collecting them into groups. This creates a false sense of unity among disparate things in life; it is a way of effacing differences and a way of professing to have mastery over objects. It is part of a logical process that asserts A = B. As Shannon L. Mariotti rightly indicates, the category or the concept comes to stand in for the object, effacing or hiding the portions that do not fit. By concentrating on sensory experience and letting the encounter transport the mind to ecstasy, dream states, or visions, the person is able to confront an object in a way that society has

---


114 McSweeney, “Thoreau,” 103-06.


precluded, which liberates the perceiver from society’s pre-established notions of the world. This means encountering nature as more than a “howling wilderness” or material within a mercantile system of trade. It means encountering Native Americans as more than a group of people to be displaced and civilized. It means encountering religion as more than an institutional phenomenon distanced from the processes of creation because of creeds, universal explanations of religious experiences, and making equal each person’s different needs for the religious life. Immersion in a sensuous life aims to counter the alienating, diminishing effects of categories, definitions, and conceptions that negate the particularity and vibrancy of creation.

Immersion in the sensuous life aims to regain a lost intimacy with life allowing each person to feel enchanted with the mysteriousness of everything she or he encounters, to reconnect with God everywhere. Thoreau wants us to cultivate a religious life that is a sensuous life because each material particularity is part of the infinite process of creation that needs to be experienced in its relation to the totality of existence while being aware of and respectful of the differentness of its materiality. This practice of a sensuous life allows us to see the nonidentity between the constraints of civilization’s organizing categories and the miraculous nature of the thing immediately before us, which puts a demand on us as part of the created order that deserves our respect, receptivity, and responsibility: “The miracle is, that what is is, when it is so difficult, if not impossible, for anything else to be . . .” This sensuousness expands a person’s consciousness.

---

117 Alan D. Hodder argues that Thoreau was aware of the institutions and creeds of his time, but he was also quite hostile to institutionalized religion. Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 3-6.
118 For “lost intimacy,” see Bataille, Theory of Religion, Mooney, Lost Intimacy in American Thought.
119 Thoreau, A Week, 293.
To cultivate the practice of a purely sensuous life allows the person to experience the miraculous in the common, to experience how the common partakes of the heavenly; it is a practice intended to cultivate an awareness of how the common is divine.\textsuperscript{121}

We are sensible that behind the rustling leaves, and the stacks of grain, and the bare clusters of the grape, there is the field of a wholly new life, which no man has lived . . . In the hues of October sunsets, we see the portals to other mansions than those which we occupy, not far off geographically . . . Sometimes a mortal feels in himself Nature, — not his Father but his Mother stirs within him, and he becomes immortal with immortality. From time to time she claims kindredship with us, and some globule from her veins steals up into our own . . . Here or nowhere is our heaven . . . . These things imply, perchance, that we live on the verge of another and purer realm, from which these odors and sounds are wafted to us. The borders of our plots are set with flowers, whose seeds were blown from more Elysian fields adjacent . . . We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a \textit{purely} sensuous life . . . May we not see God? . . . Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely? When the common man looks into the sky, which he has not so much profaned, he thinks it less gross than the earth, and with reverence speaks of “the Heavens,” but the seer will in the same sense speak of “the Earths,” and his Father who is in them. What is it, then, to educate but to develop these divine germs called the senses?\textsuperscript{122}

“For [Thoreau], religion was experiential or it was nothing.”\textsuperscript{123} We need to educate the senses to be able to catch glimpses of the grandness of creation and our place within the created order. Cultivating the senses allows the person to move from common sense, from seeing creation as merely a symbol for the divine, and finally to seeing the divine in all things, the Father within our very world and the Mother’s blood coursing through our veins. Cultivating the senses, therefore, leads to a pantheistic awareness that God or the divine is all around us and even in us. This emphasis on the senses should allow the person to see that God is “not merely immanent within the world, but [that] God is also identical to the world . . . all reality is part of God.”\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{121} Mayer, “The American Romantics and Religion in the Present Tense,” 352.

\textsuperscript{122} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 377-82.

\textsuperscript{123} Hodder, \textit{Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness}, 20.

A Separate Intention of the Eye and Uncommon Sense

To take part in these different practices, we need to generate an uncommon sense and a separate intention of the eye.\textsuperscript{125} Thoreau wants us to develop a comfortable acceptance and awareness of paradox in vision and language;\textsuperscript{126} he wants us to develop an ability to grasp various truths and levels of meaning beyond orthodox or common meanings and knowledge. He turns the reader toward strata of truths and infinite angles of vision,\textsuperscript{127} and it is through Thoreau’s comfort with paradox, irony, dialetheism (or even poly-aletheism)\textsuperscript{128} that he attempts to make us perpetually aware of the endless changes in life and thought that should be celebrated, not controlled and subdued. Instead of resting content with stagnation, dams, rigidified traditions, and habits, Thoreau wants us to cultivate a perceptual awareness of becoming, novel insights, and the ability to view the world on many levels and from different angles. The flow of language, perception, and truth become the consequence of Thoreau’s seven-day spiritual quest or pilgrimage.

When we take his ontology of flows seriously and metaphorically unite thought and perception with the idea of the flowing river, what occurs is a paradoxical awareness of becoming. Various levels or intensities of change exist; something can change slowly where one


\textsuperscript{127} McSweeney, “Thoreau,” 103-04. David M. Robinson gives an account of these levels and angles as he addresses the young poet Thoreau. Robinson, \textit{Natural Life}, 33-40. Also see Hodder, \textit{Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness}, 117-24.

part alters almost imperceptibly; this indicates a “weak form” of the doctrine of change. At the other end of the spectrum is a “stronger interpretation” of change that focuses on something “losing all of its properties.” Rapid change posits a complete metamorphosis leaving nothing recognizable. Most existing things, however, have a rate of alteration between these two extremes, which hints at the paradox of becoming: Something is itself and not itself. In The Logic of Sense, Gilles Deleuze captures this nicely as he examines the shrinking and growth of Alice in Lewis Carroll’s books:

But it is at the same moment that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes. This is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and pull in both directions at once . . . Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (sens); but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time.

To see the world beyond the stagnant conceptions and hegemonic interpretations structuring one’s society and culture, to see the world based on an ontology of flows, means that a person needs to be able to see the alterations of life and also the more stable components. This means that a person must be focused both on change and stability, the unpredictable and the predictable, and motion and fixedness. Such a view means that one should focus also on the spiritual and the material components of existence and on the inward self and on the outward world. None of these are separate; they are interconnected, interdependent, and exist within the endless processes of alteration.

---

129 Graham Priest associates this with the slow continental drift of Australia that may one day take it out of the Southern hemisphere. This change does not happen suddenly; Australia continues to maintain almost every aspect of the properties attributed to it. This form of change seems to be no change. Priest, Beyond the Limits of Thought, 11-12.
130 Priest, Beyond the Limits of Thought, 12.
Such paradoxes permeate *A Week*. In speaking of a person’s life and progression into different levels of being, Thoreau turns to the image of the river and the contradictory sameness and difference that is always part of a river’s being; newness is always present within the stability of its banks, and Thoreau contrasts this with a harmful form of custom that may leave people buried to the crown of their head. Thoreau, then, is trying to juxtapose a positive conservativeness with a harmful one in “Monday.”

Undoubtedly, countless reforms are called for because society is not animated, or instinct enough with life, but in the condition of some snakes which I have seen in early spring, with alternate portions of their bodies torpid and flexible, so that they could wriggle neither way. All men are partially buried in the grave of custom, and of some we see only the crown of the head above ground. Better are the physically dead, for they more lively rot. Even virtue is no longer such if it be stagnant. A man’s life should be constantly as fresh as this river. It should be the same channel, but a new water every instant.\(^{133}\)

Stability is needed; people need a level of certainty, so their lives will flourish. But life implies movement, growth, and some amount of novelty. Thoreau’s image of the torpid and flexible snake highlights the discord between those people disconnected with or trying to minimize flux and those who celebrate and immerse themselves in the processes of change. While we can never fully free ourselves from custom, while all of us are formed through custom, there are degrees of immersion that are more or less harmful.

To be fully buried in custom is worse than being dead. Even death is about movement, change, decomposition, and becoming something new. Thoreau is advocating a way of being that should leave us the most free while at the same time being grounded in custom just enough to give us some consistency within our banks, but custom should never supersede the flows of life. Thoreau wants people to be able to see both the consistency and the alterations in their lives and hold the more permanent and more changeable aspects in harmony. An ontology of flows,

\(^{133}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 132.
therefore, necessitates being able to see on both levels at once, and this means being able to be comfortable with the paradox inherent in becoming and remaining the same.

This perceptual awareness and complexity also presents itself in language. People need to be able to see that in language there is a level of conservativeness while there is an existent dynamism facilitating the ongoing alteration of words, their meanings, and referents. Experience and its expression occur in dynamic historical processes where referent, signifier, and signified morph their relations. Thoreau offers us landscapes that are flowing. The ground under our feet is flowing; the description of a stable ground is not accurate, for the earth is still coming to be as it is still being born or emerging from the womb. Words cannot point to something stable because the underlying processes of change are altering that which our words describe. So the signified and referent are in “perpetual flux,” and the discourses in which those signifieds are deployed are changing; the signified and signifier, therefore, change relations. This is clearest in Thoreau’s use of words, such as “savage,” “wilderness,” and “rudeness.” These signifiers have different signifieds; although he may be attaching them to similar referents, such as with “savageness” indicating something about Native Americans, yet Thoreau alters the meaning by honoring it in his discourse in a different way. This reveals the destabilizing nature of language.

In Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric, Henry Golemba makes this clear in the opening pages of his book:

[Thoreau] is so fixated on language that some of his writings make better sense as descriptions of communication acts rather than as articulations of their purported themes. Throughout his various genres, one obsession dominates: his fascination with the uses and limitations of language, particularly the phenomenon of meaning and its relationship to the text. Thoreau gained satisfaction from factual language . . . yet he was also lured by a language of desire that he felt to be more challenging, more potent, more

134 Oelschlaeger, The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology, 156-57. Oelschlaeger makes a similar observation as he examines Walden.
136 Robinson, Natural Life, 42.
portentous . . . Even when he suspected that these transcendental visions and idealistic truths may have no existence in the world except in the web of words, he comforted himself that a tantalizing writing at least engages readers strongly and makes them participate in the creation of meaning . . . . Although he would become best known as a writer of facts, he desired to create a wild rhetoric whose meaning always remains elusive and untamable, while its facts provoke readers to interpret, to decode, and thus to domesticate his sentences.\textsuperscript{137}

There is never one simple way to interpret language, the world, or the sacred. Instead, our language has to emerge as part of the larger creative processes within the macrocosm. What this indicates is how language and its interpretation have to correspond with the qualities of the Unnamed, which—once again—are buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, possibility, and variety.\textsuperscript{138}

The ontology of flows, the wild, and the correspondence between the emblem of the river and all creation extend to language and make every aspect of language part of the endless processes of becoming or part of The Law of Regeneration. The separate intention of the eye and uncommon sense, then, must apply to language too. Not only do we have to be able to see those aspects of language that remain more stable, but we also have to be able to see the dynamism within language. This means seeing at once how language constructs and deconstructs meaning.

This description is similar to Native American views of language and creation. Leroy Little Bear describes the Blackfoot view:

\begin{quote}
The Blackfoot mind is a repository of creativity because of the notion of constant flux. If one were to imagine this flux at a cosmic scale or at a mental level consisting of energy waves, one can imagine him- or herself as a surfer: a surfer of the flux. While surfing, one goes with the flow of the waves, becoming one with the waves . . . . The constant flux results in a view of constant change and constant transformation . . . But the spirit . . . is the common denominator . . . Nothing is certain. The only certainty is change . . . . The Blackfoot mind is a repository of creativity because it eschews boundaries and because, where there are boundaries, it can readily transcend them . . . . Blackfoot, like many other North American Indian languages, simply does not fit into the structural linguistic model of European languages . . . Blackfoot stresses morphology . . . a
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{138} Henry David Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 136. For more on the rhetorical implications of the Unnamed, see Golemba, \textit{Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric}, 153-54.
language like Blackfoot is all about process and action, mirroring the notion of constant flux.\textsuperscript{139}

Stabilizing and destabilizing forces are always working against each other, and these both construct, deconstruct, and recreate meaning, the possibilities of meaning, and the variety of interpretations one can pose. This is the buoyancy of language, the creativity within language, that allows it to escape the most ardent attempts to hold it down. There is always an uncommon sense in language and life that we have to find or create, which means that we need a separate intention of the eye to help disclose stability and instability simultaneously. We need to be comfortable with the paradoxes of language and life, their strata of meanings, and how infinite angles of perception alter meaning and can free language, perception, and one’s life in unexpected ways.\textsuperscript{140}

\textbf{Withdrawing: Solitude and Silence}

Silence, and the concomitantly implied solitude, fill Thoreau’s thinking and the conclusion of \textit{A Week}.\textsuperscript{141} In speaking about Thoreau’s view of self-culture, David M. Robinson emphasizes Thoreau’s need for deep moments of passivity and quietude: “Thoreau posits forms of stillness or quietism as methods of practical accomplishment.”\textsuperscript{142} An active, militant striving for purity and self-cultivation may lead one astray; as the natural world passively received its life, form, and fate, Thoreau believed at times humans needed to be similarly passive. He likened


\textsuperscript{140} This is similar to Jacques Derrida’s understanding of the processes of deconstruction in an interview printed in \textit{Acts of Literature}: “Nothing is ever homogeneous . . . A text is never totally governed by ‘metaphysical assumptions’ . . . In ‘each case’ there is a domination, a dominant, of the metaphysical model, and then there are counter-forces which threaten or undermine this authority. These forces of ‘ruin’ are not negative, they participate in the productive or instituting force of the very thing they seem to be tormenting.” Jacques Derrida, \textit{Acts of Literature}, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.


\textsuperscript{142} Robinson, \textit{Natural Life}, 21.
this passivity to a leaf falling from its branch or stones shaped by the force of the river’s water. Such moments provide the ability to give up or to transcend the self and its ego and to live fully and sincerely for the divine at the foundation of all creation and life; a person’s goals and ceaseless activity can eclipse the divine. As concerned as he was with his direction in life and his vocation, therefore, Thoreau longed for moments of aimlessness or wandering when he could simply be and become without the burden of a highly structured, directed life—or a militant quest for improvement and perfection. In the end, withdrawing provided Thoreau with the needed opening for “self transcendence,” which was important to the religious life.

Not only did Thoreau envision an ontology of flows, but he also envisioned a deep silence below and grounding all existence—a deep silence that escapes the conformity and common sense of human communities and their discourses as Jane Bennett correctly shows. The universality of silence is present in his equalitarian affirmation: “Silence is audible to all [people], at all times, and in all places. She is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly. Creation has not displaced her, but is her visible framework and foil. All sounds are her servants and purveyors, proclaiming not only that their mistress is, but is a rare mistress, and earnestly to be sought after.” Silence takes on the omnipresent aspect of the divine in Christianity, yet this silence is an unmediated aspect of creation open to all and accessible to any who seek it. In a similar fashion to the Christian theological position of “natural religion” where God can be read in all creation, silence is clearly encountered in noise and any created thing. In other words, within the flows and changing aspects of creation is a deep stillness that simply

---

146 McSweeney, “Thoreau,” 103-04.
needs to be experienced and revered. Within creation and action, silence and stillness should also exist.

This is clearest in Thoreau’s ironic description of the public speaker who communicates the best while listening intently to the silence:

The orator puts off his individuality, and is then most eloquent when most silent. He listens while he speaks, and is a hearer along with his audience . . . For through Her all revelations have been made, and just in proportion as men have consulted her oracle within, they have obtained a clear insight, and their age has been marked as an enlightened one. But as often as they have gone gadding abroad to a strange Delphi and her mad priestess, their age has been dark and leaden.\textsuperscript{150}

The best action includes inaction. To be active does not mean that all of one’s being is disturbed and ceaselessly toiling; instead, one performs actions with an inward calmness. To listen to this divine silence while being active is to bring it more clearly into one’s actions revealing both creation and non-creation at once. By being attuned to this inward and external silence, new revelations occur in the present; through the stillness, new insights into creation occur. The mistake is to seek this elemental silence beyond us, for it is always within a person and his or her environs if rightly sought.

Yet Thoreau’s quote also indicates how trifling activities and gossipy communication undermine one’s ability to hear the silence. This is why we need to extricate ourselves from the daily bustle of life and the “common sense” guiding these activities. They pull people into a realm that diminishes their ability to pay attention to this deep silence. By withdrawing, people can refocus their awareness and senses; they can engage their surroundings and their inner life with more intense concentration while abandoning their ego or individuality. Through withdrawing, one enters a realm of increased outer stillness that allows one’s inner stillness to increase.

\textsuperscript{150} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 392.
These moments of withdrawing were not manifestations of a misanthropic orientation, nor were they part of a larger desire to live in isolation permanently; instead, they were a religious activity that revivified Thoreau, which allowed him to reenter society to be a more beneficial friend and neighbor. Alan D. Hodder explains this process in relation to Thoreau’s attempts to experience ecstatic moments. He writes, “Solitude for him was not an end in itself but a means to cultivate the inconstant experiences of his youth.”¹⁵¹ Thoreau enjoyed the solitude of the woods, then, because of the fresh inspirational, ecstatic moments he had there. Hodder writes that Thoreau “conceived these experiences and their formulations as related to and governed by motives that can only be characterized in the broad sense as religious.”¹⁵² This means that “he was not essentially antisocial at all; neither was he misanthropic,”¹⁵³ for his retreats supported his larger religious goal, which was to merge with the silence, the Unnamed, and the regenerating law sustaining all existence.

Thoreau concludes his musings on the topic of silence with the following words concerning humanity’s inability to vocalize silence:

It were in vain for me to endeavor to interpret the Silence. She cannot be done into English. For six thousand years men have translated her with what fidelity belonged to each, and still she is little better than a sealed book. A man may run on confidently for a time, thinking he has her under his thumb, and shall one day exhaust her, but he too must at last be silent, and men remark only how brave a beginning he made; for when he at length dives into her, so vast is the disproportion of the told to the untold, that the former will seem but the bubble on the surface where he disappeared.¹⁵⁴

This is a humble realization to offer in the penultimate paragraph of a book. In all his strivings to be one with nature and the created order, to manifest the properties of the Unnamed, and to listen intently to and express lucidly the infinite silence at the heart of creation, Thoreau recognizes

---

¹⁵⁴ *Thoreau, A Week*, 393.
that the 393 pages of his text are merely a fleeting, humble, and incomplete attempt to convey his insights. Furthermore, his voyage with his brother is not the last voyage; instead, he will have to withdraw many more times, so he can reencounter the divine in the world.

Silence becomes one aspect of the Unnamed and the divine within and around us, and there is something inherent in the condition of silence that constantly escapes human attempts at mastery. By concentrating on components such as the “Unnamed” and “silence,” the non-representable quality of existence leaves Thoreau and humanity with the constant need to withdraw and to generate the conditions that will allow people to be hospitable to the divine in creation. Thoreau’s failure after ten years of working on his book and 393 pages of text means that the divine is not encountered once and for all; new moments of afflatus are needed along with new moments of introspection. Repetitive withdrawing, silence, and internal stillness, then, are crucial aspects for Thoreau’s religious outlook as they sustain fresh encounters with what is sacred in creation.

A Natural Sabbath

Thoreau urges readers to contemplate a natural Sabbath in “Sunday”155 as he exposes them to the importance of communing with nature, which allows humans and the natural world to mutually reverence the divine in all existence. As Thoreau and his brother awaken on a small island outside of Billerica, “a dense fog” blankets the region.156 As the sun rises, Thoreau describes a calm setting as the fog burns off, and he makes an important biblical comparison: “It was a quiet Sunday morning, with more of the auroral rosy and white than of the yellow light in

156 Thoreau, A Week, 43.
it, as if it dated from earlier than the fall of man, and still preserved a heathenish integrity.”\textsuperscript{157}

This early description establishes a clear tension between institutionalized Christianity as Thoreau knew it with its imposed Sabbath and a more ecstatic religion occurring spontaneously and harmoniously within one’s natural surroundings.\textsuperscript{158} He reverses the usual hierarchy that relegates heathenism to an inferior position; instead, the heathenish quality of the morning seems to predate the rise of the Christian theological justifications concerning the inherent sinfulness of humanity. Nature and humanity stand in a more positive light free from the disparaging theological framework of the fall of humankind. Thoreau and his brother will spend their Sabbath communing with the natural world.\textsuperscript{159}

Immediately, the reader encounters spontaneous, enthusiastic descriptions of Thoreau’s environs free from the domestication of humans: “For long reaches we could see neither house nor cultivated field, nor any sign of the vicinity of man.”\textsuperscript{160} His electrified surroundings offer Thoreau and his brother glimpses of a new world.

As we thus dipped our way along between fresh masses of foliage overrun with the grape and smaller flowering vines, the surface was so calm, and both air and water so transparent, that the flight of a kingfisher or robin over the river was as distinctly seen reflected in the water below as in the air above. The birds seemed to flit through submerged groves, alighting on the yielding sprays, and their clear notes to come up from below. We were uncertain whether the water floated the land, or the land held the water in its bosom.\textsuperscript{161}

The ambiance of the day provides fresh ways to encounter the world, and common ways of seeing are tested by the movements of animals in their bioregional surroundings. Thoreau is not separate from the environment and its webs of interdependence; he is immersed in it, challenged

\textsuperscript{157} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 43.
\textsuperscript{160} For more on Thoreau, religion, and nature, see Christopher A. Dustin, “Thoreau’s Religion,” in \textit{A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau}, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 256-93.
\textsuperscript{161} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 44.
\textit{Ibid.}, 45.
by it, and liberated through encounters with it. He has entered a new religious realm different from that in which his fellow New Englanders will encounter later that day: “The stillness was intense and almost conscious, as if it were a natural Sabbath, and we fancied that the morning was the evening of a celestial day.”

This provides Thoreau with a feeling he never quite seemed to get when he sat in a church. Thoreau’s criticisms are quite severe when he speaks of churches, institutionalized Sabbaths, and creedal religion. He calls New England Christianity “offensive to the nostrils.” He speaks of the “intolerant and superstitious” nature of Christianity in his region. He comments on the “dry-rotted” nature of New England’s religious sensibilities. He also describes how the yelling and harsh words of a minister were “profaning the quiet atmosphere of the day.” These negative aspects of institutionalized religion did not provide Thoreau with a sense of freedom and freshness; institutionalized religion in New England had created a feeling of constraint.

On this natural Sabbath that Thoreau describes in “Sunday,” the reader encounters a more liberating tone. As he and his brother travel on the river, Thoreau describes coming across two men “floating buoyantly amid the reflections of the trees, like a feather in mid air,” and he instructs the reader that they “delicately availed themselves of the natural laws.” Contrary to people sitting in church pews listening to sermons conforming to traditional theological doctrines, these men engaged the laws of nature, and they harmonized with them wisely and sympathetically as they floated along serenely and successfully. Thoreau then draws his own

162 Thoreau, A Week, 46.
164 Ibid., 78.
165 Ibid., 68.
166 Ibid., 69.
167 Ibid., 76.
168 Ibid., 48-49.
theological, aesthetic conclusions from this scene: “Their floating there was a beautiful and successful experiment in natural philosophy, and it served to enoble [sic.] in our eyes the art of navigation, for as birds fly and fishes swim, so these men sailed. It reminded us how much fairer and nobler all the actions of man might be, and that our life in its whole economy might be as beautiful as the fairest works of art or nature.”\textsuperscript{169} Whereas institutional religion profanes the surroundings, Thoreau interprets these men as examples of a qualitatively better path that makes human actions artistic and natural. These men reveal an art of living that is naturalized.\textsuperscript{170}

Through his encounters with the natural world in “Sunday,” Thoreau discloses that more beneficial religious sensibilities emerge from a more perceptive, intuitive contact with one’s natural surroundings: Religion needs to be in harmony with the laws of nature. As the men he encountered floated harmoniously because of their oneness with natural laws, religion should be a process that not only is harmoniously bound to natural laws but is also a process aiding humans to be more buoyant in their own lives. Whereas institutional religion encumbers people with creeds, mediating authorities, and routinized ways to encounter God, Thoreau posits a more expansive religion that excises these inhibitors to allow the person to connect with the divine in life. Being outdoors and unbounded, Thoreau’s religious sensibilities allowed him to start making broader connections with the world around him.

What is probably one of the most interesting aspects of his idea of a natural Sabbath is that the animals and all natural creation worship with him. This eradicates common definitions of religion; no longer is religion reserved for humans and their connection with God.

The sun lodged on the old gray cliffs, and glanced from every pad; the bulrushes and flags seemed to rejoice in the delicious light and air; the meadows were a drinking at their leisure; the frogs sat meditating, all sabbath thoughts, summing up their week, with one eye out on the golden sun, and one toe upon a reed, eyeing the wondrous universe in

\textsuperscript{169} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 49.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Ibid.}, 379. Also see Robinson, \textit{Natural Life}, 48-76.
which they act their part; the fishes swam more staid and soberly, as maidens go to church; shoals of golden and silver minnows rose to the surface to behold the heavens, and then sheered off into more somber aisles; they swept by as if moved by one mind, continually gliding past each other, and yet preserving the form of the battalion unchanged, as if they were still embraced by the transparent membrane which held the spawn; a young band of brethren and sisters, trying their new fins; now they wheeled, now shot ahead, and when we drove them to the shore and cut them off, they dexterously tacked and passed underneath the boat. Over the old wooden bridges no traveller crossed, and neither the river nor the fishes avoided to glide between the abutments.¹⁷¹

Thoreau describes a unity within human and nonhuman creation; each animal is partaking of this holy day and celebrating it authentically by doing what they were meant to do. The frogs sit meditatively and comfortably within and outside of the water. The fish swim steadily, easily, and successfully. The meadows leisurely recline and take in the warm light of the morning sun. The water flows peacefully between the banks and under the bridges. Humans are not the only ones who celebrate the divinity of life and creation, so do the animals and other aspects of nature. Thoreau and his brother, therefore, honor the sacredness of life and creation with nontraditional worshippers.

This creates a different trajectory for religion in New England. For Puritans and Unitarians alike, nature itself had no inherent sacredness or dignity. Even the liberal Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, spoke of nature as inferior to God and spoke of the inherent dignity of humans that allowed them to take part in reverential actions of worship that animals and the created order were unable to do.¹⁷² Through the traditional division between natural and revealed religion based on Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the Puritan tradition and the liberal Unitarian tradition diminished the natural world and allowed only humans to have a religious sensibility. Here, however, it is clear that Thoreau believed all creation celebrated or could

¹⁷¹ Thoreau, *A Week*, 49.
worship the divine permeating and sustaining all human and nonhuman existence. Religion, therefore, should bring together humans, one’s bioregional environs, and all life in the region to honor the divine sustaining human and nonhuman beings alike. No longer should religion be exclusive; it should open its doors widely to let those in who are traditionally seen as nonpersons.

This offers a significantly different understanding of religion that embraces diversity and pluralism. Thoreau is not concerned with taming nature, and he is not interested in making the frogs, fishes, and fields worship God as he does. Thoreau imbibes their religious sensibilities and is refreshed by their reverence. He is learning from everything he encounters. Unlike the Puritans and traditional Unitarians, Thoreau did not embrace the idea that all had to worship God through Christian dogma; instead, Christianity is only one form of religious expression among many others. Unlike traditional Christianity with its Sabbath, then, a natural Sabbath does not need human-made structures; contrary to this, Thoreau finds the house of nature to be the true sanctuary. In the end, Thoreau’s natural Sabbath expands what religion can mean and can help to heal broken relationships in a “this-worldly” setting as he allows humans and nonhumans to worship together reverencing the sacred in one another and in all creation.

Wildness in Civil Society: Civil Disobedience

As explained in the opening chapter, during the years he was writing *A Week*, Thoreau also was composing *Walden*. He was working on another text, however, that has received much attention and praise; this is his essay “Civil Disobedience.” This title emerged posthumously, and what readers know as “Civil Disobedience” began as a lecture entitled “The Rights and Duties of

---

174 Dustin, “Thoreau’s Religion,” 259-64.
the Individual in Relation to the Government,” which he gave on two occasions at the Concord
Lyceum on 26 January and 16 February 1848. Thoreau published this lecture a year later in May
1849—the same month in which he published *A Week*. The title for this publication was
“Resistance to Civil Government.” Thoreau’s essay has its roots, however, in an editorial
published in the *Boston Courier* on 15 June 1846 as Thoreau resided at Walden Pond. Published
approximately a month before his arrest on 23 or 24 July 1846 for failure to pay his poll tax,
Thoreau made a public statement declaring the supremacy of conscience and associated this with
the laws of nature.175 State and federal law have no authority over a person’s conscience. This
idea and the narrative of his arrest would make their way into his now famous essay “Civil
Disobedience”—a text that influenced and earned the respect of Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy,
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others.176 As with *Walden*, “Civil
Disobedience” came into being and took shape over the years that Thoreau was writing *A Week*,
and ideas within that essay are found his first book.

*A Week* is concerned with creating people who have enough courage and independence to
stand in opposition to the state, traditions, and entrenched habits. In other words, *A Week*’s
religious trajectory includes the formation of people who take part in resistance to oppressive
forces in society based on religious values. In *A Week*, Thoreau provides the religious grounds
for dissensus and civil disobedience, and to be a good citizen requires one to live a life founded
on the practice of civil disobedience.177


176 For a general review of Thoreau’s political importance, see Bingham, *Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination*, 28-33.

177 For the higher law basis of civil disobedience taking shape in *A Week*, see Cauger, “The Anti-Historical Bias of Thoreau’s ‘A Week,’” 1-16. For the idea of “Civil Disobedience” as a religious text describing a way of being religious through civil disobedience, see Daniel Walker Howe, “The Constructed Self against the State,” in *Making of the American Self: Jonathan
*A Week* turns to Sophocles’ *Antigone* in “Monday” and uses the story to sustain the right to act according to conscience and The Law of Regeneration in opposition to the laws of society.\(^{178}\) The purpose of much of “Monday” is to explore the difference between a proper conservatism and improper conservative trends. He recognizes that for life to flourish certain conditions need to be maintained. Thoreau is not seeking a conservative position sustained by custom or tradition; this is a base form of conservatism because it easily puts forth expediency as the valued approach. We come to live according to what others say and do instead of following what is right. After describing how nations often “clash with one another,” Thoreau declares that “only the absolutely right is expedient for all.”\(^{179}\) Instead of supporting that which has been thought or done for decades or centuries, Thoreau wants justice to be done without regard for the consequences. The truly expedient action is what is right—not what is economically or politically best. Antigone is an example in *A Week* as she opposes the dictates of Creon as she seeks a proper burial for her dead brother, Polynices.

Thoreau chooses passages from the play emphasizing the difference between Antigone and her sister Ismene. Unlike Antigone, Ismene chooses to follow Creon’s prohibitions against burial. Opposing her sister’s submission, Creon, and the mortal laws, Antigone says, “Nor did I think that your proclamations were so strong, as, being a mortal, to be able to transcend the unwritten and immovable laws of the Gods.”\(^{180}\) Thoreau indicates his lack of concern for the laws of humanity; instead, he is concerned with following the dictates of one’s conscience. Antigone is the civil disobedient, and Ismene represents that within us that allows us to follow and support the status quo even when we know it opposes what is just.

---


\(^{179}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 134.

\(^{180}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 134.
Following his use of Antigone, Thoreau asserts, “Conscience is the chief of conservatives.” The true conservative act, then, is not upholding the laws of the state or the customs of society. What Thoreau is attempting to convey is that following one’s conscience is the proper conservative act. Instead of trying to preserve traditions, people should listen to their conscience as part of the voice of God. In doing so, they allow God to exist within them; their actions turn toward supporting the divine pulsation throughout all creation. This means that conscience turns the person toward the qualities of the Unnamed and aids the person in acting in accordance with those qualities.

In discussing the conservative nature of Hindu thought, Thoreau—rightly or wrongly—identifies a problem with Hinduism. He asserts, “The end is an immense consolation; eternal absorption in Brahma. Their speculations never venture beyond their own table lands, though they are high and vast as they. Buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, variety, possibility, which also are qualities of the Unnamed, they deal not with.” While he was an ardent reader and supporter of Hindu texts and ideas, Thoreau is identifying what he sees as a narrow perception in Hindu thought. It does not transcend the constraints of context enough to enter into the universality of the Unnamed. Instead, it attempts to conserve the customs of Hindu practice. The Hindu conservativeness that Thoreau identifies, therefore, does not rise to the qualities of the Unnamed as part of the wild process that sustains life. Conscience as the truest conservative force, then, seeks to align the person with the qualities of the Unnamed. To be so aligned means that one will often and necessarily come into conflict with the state and society.

Here we come to the confluence of religion and politics in becoming a full person in Thoreau’s *A Week*. The wild for Thoreau is that which cannot be constrained; it is that which

---

continues to allude the boxing effects of naming, describing, and defining. The wild is the Unnamed; the wild possesses the qualities of possibility, variety, buoyancy, freedom, and flexibility. In the end, conscience is an inner voice that reorients the person toward the wild or the Unnamed. It urges the person to be true to that which breaks free from the constraints of the state and society. This, however, is not resistance for resistance’s sake. There are many aspects in society that he cherishes, such as education, good conversation, and the lyceum movement. There are many other aspects, however, that diminish people and separate them from the processes of creation. These are the things that Thoreau wants to resist. His idea of religion focuses on rebinding oneself to the wild or the Unnamed, which means that a person cannot take part in that which will diminish the wild or the Unnamed in oneself, others, society, or in nature.

To be aligned religiously to the Unnamed means that one must resist all that which opposes the qualities of the Unnamed. Society and communities attempt to direct and constrain their members through consensus, common sense, commonplace ideas, similar language, and common actions. Traditional religious practices attempt to do this also through such things as doctrines, a standard sacred text, hymns, and confessional practices. For Thoreau, these are negative conservative practices that undermine allegiance to the Unnamed. As society or a specific religion attempts to stand in for the Unnamed or attempts to say what the Unnamed is, they necessarily undermine the qualities of the Unnamed. Dissensus, then, must always be an option based on one’s perception and awareness of the Unnamed in one’s life and experience.

Being religious and political means cultivating the qualities of the Unnamed. To oppose it is to live in a way that is non-universal in nature. We lose our self to the extent that we take part in the Unnamed and its qualities (to the extent that we immerse ourselves in wildness). To seek to name, define, and describe so as to constrain is religiously and politically offensive for
Thoreau. One should seek to preserve the wild, and if we must define, describe, or name something or someone, it should always be done to maintain wildness. We must resist any act that constrains wildness—whether it be in religion or in politics. To be religious, then, is to be ready to take part in dissensus and resistance.

In *A Week* the practice of civil disobedience arises from his allegiance to The Law of Regeneration—that “process of becoming” necessary for existence to remain and flourish. To be a civil disobedient is to allow one’s intuitive insight and experience of the wild to guide one’s actions, thoughts, and words. This means that civil disobedience is predicated on an inward state ready to separate from and critique what undermines the Unnamed; it depends on an inward nature already in harmony with the processes of becoming. To rebind oneself to the Unnamed is a religious act, but it is also a political act as this rebinding affects one’s awareness, thoughts, actions, and words in public. It also affects one’s private communion with oneself and the natural world. It is an inner condition that allows one to harmonize one’s life with the Unnamed in all they do and think—to act only for what is right without worrying about the consequences. This means that even withdrawing into solitude is an act of civil disobedience in an attempt to maintain one’s connection with the Unnamed.¹⁸³ To choose nature over society is a way of resisting the constraints of common sense. In *A Week*, the practice of civil disobedience is not a supplementary aspect of the religious life; it is part of the religious orientation itself as one seeks to embody and bring wildness to society.

---
¹⁸³ This is Shannon Mariotti’s central argument: solitude, for Thoreau, is necessary for democratic and political action. Mariotti, “Thoreau, Adorno, and the Critical Potential of Particularity,” 393-422. Mariotti, *Thoreau’s Democratic Withdrawal.*
Civil Disobedience and Being a Good Friend

For Thoreau, religion appears in ambiguous ways. It is not undisputedly a positive force in society; he is aware of how often religion contributes to violence—clearly seen in the legacy of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. On the other hand, in his presentations of religion, Thoreau always believes religion should qualitatively transform society for the better. As such, religion should be truly good for both the individual and his or her society. Thoreau’s ideal religion is, therefore, a paradigm focused on religion’s beneficial possibilities, and following Jane Bennett’s argument, he comes to associate religious dimensions with friendship—which takes shape through the “anarchy” he associates with civil disobedience.\(^\text{184}\) In Thoreau’s case, the relationship of religion (the direct rebinding to God) to society (the broader social relations in which one is embedded) is that of anarchist or civil disobedient to friendship. It is a form of being that leaves one absolutely open to one’s conscience, inspiration, and life-affirming inclinations while simultaneously being respectful, responsible, and sympathetic to all creation and difference.

Richard Drinnon describes Thoreau’s anarchy based on higher law philosophy: “Living where he did when he did, Thoreau could hardly have escaped the doctrine of a higher law . . . . the doctrine of higher law . . . logically leads to philosophical anarchism . . . . for Thoreau it meant no supremacy of church over state or vice versa, or of one state over another, or of one group over another. It meant rather the logical last step of individual action.”\(^\text{185}\) Drinnon concludes this line of thought with an anarchist equation: “Belief in higher law plus practice of individual direct action equal anarchism.”\(^\text{186}\) This anarchistic understanding is nothing like the

\(^{184}\) This section is indebted to the work of Jane Bennett. See Bennett, *Thoreau’s Nature*, 20-23. Bennett, “Thoreau’s Techniques of Self,” 299-301.

\(^{185}\) Drinnon, “Thoreau’s Politics of the Upright Man,” 546-47.

\(^{186}\) *Ibid.*, 547.
jejune descriptions of anarchy as lawlessness or antidemocratic postures. What Drinnon’s
description reveals is that Thoreau is not essentially antagonistic to the state or to organizations,
but he is more concerned with how these entities interact with the rest of the world. Thoreau’s
interest is in non-coercive relationships at the personal, communal, and state levels.\(^{187}\)
Ultimately, only the person can truly decide to act morally; no outside force can make another
person moral.\(^{188}\)

Instead of domination, Thoreau values mutually beneficial relationships aimed at
improvement. This manifests itself most clearly in Thoreau’s idealization of friendship.\(^{189}\) In
Friend can foster individuality not only as a source of Wildness but also as a locus for one’s most
divine thoughts. In Friendship each party becomes the site in which the other invests his or her
highest aspirations.”\(^{190}\) Not only is friendship a serious, demanding relationship, it also comes
unbidden: “The choice of a Friend is not something one deliberately plans. It is, rather, the
spontaneous identification of one in whom it is possible to invest one’s ideals.”\(^{191}\) Yet this is not
forcing a friend to be something she or he does not want to be but elevating and inspiring that
friend and provoking her or him to live a higher more creative, fulfilling life: “Friends can add
nothing to each other; they can, however, help each other to look inward in the right way to
become ‘two solitary stars.’” Both become bright lights shining on the other—giving their
brightest rays to their friend with the hope that they will respond in kind. This mutual lighting of

\(^{188}\) This is somewhat similar to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 21-56. For Bonhoeffer, ethics remains a sign of the fall. To live by a moral system means that we are living below our potential. For other challenges to ethics, see John D. Caputo, Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). In fact, Thoreau instructs his readers not to be too moral, and he criticizes the New Testament for this too unbalanced concentration: “Yet the New Testament treats of man and man’s so-called spiritual affairs too exclusively, and is too constantly moral and personal, to alone content me . . .” Thoreau, A Week, 73.
\(^{189}\) Thoreau, A Week, 259-89.
\(^{190}\) Bennett, Thoreau’s Nature, 20.
\(^{191}\) Ibid.
the other appears to be an increasing luminosity tending toward divinity for Thoreau: “Friends tap into/insert into . . . the extraordinary or ‘divine’ in each other . . .”  

192 Each friend acts according to his or her conscience while inspiring and provoking the other to be better. This is also where the political component enters: “Friendship is Thoreau’s alternative to neighborliness and citizenship as models of intersubjective relations.”  

193 To be a good friend one has to be free and live according to The Law of Regeneration while listening to one’s conscience; friends do not dominate one another but sustain and enhance this anarchistic component in the other.

In this way, the sacred is both part of the individual’s personal and larger communal life. Religion is both private and public—but not as a form of outward religious observances and scripted public pieties; instead, it is part of one’s life as “preservative care.”  

194 Religion entails having respect for and nurturing that vital source sustaining all creation. It concerns nurturing another person to live fully according to her or his inner law, preserving that person’s wildness, and allowing her or him to connect directly with God through living that is unscripted, spontaneous, and authentically expressed. In this way, friends urge each other to live anarchically in the immediacy of a personal relationship with the divine. Friendship is religious as it is an act of preservative care nurturing the life-sustaining force and freedom in our friends.

Conclusion

What we have up to this point, then, is an attempt to completely restructure the common situations, the common sense, the customs, the knowledge, and the habits of people. To summarize, the dissertation began with the problem of a limited conception of Thoreau and his

192 Bennett, Thoreau’s Nature, 22.
193 Ibid.
writings. Scholars often have placed him in categories that negate his religious sensibilities or preclude analyses of these sensibilities, but this dissertation has sought to counter those restrictive categorizations or stereotypes of Thoreau by defining him as an organic intellectual within the religious movement of New England Transcendentalism, and in doing so, this necessitated an analysis of his counter-hegemonic religious message that challenged the status quo in politics and religion.

Through an analysis of his ideas, it has become clear that his religious ideas emerged from “evental” encounters with the wild within the natural environment. His fascination with the wilderness and the “Not Me” he encountered there led him to value an anarchic freedom in life that allowed human and nonhuman beings to develop according to their own inward law not the imposed laws of others. In Native Americans, Thoreau encountered this wildness as they existed more harmoniously in the wilderness but were relegated to an inferior position within Euro-American society. He turned to both nature and Indigenous peoples of North America as exemplars of how to cultivate wildness in life; they provided him with examples of an art of living that cultivated a respectful and receptive posture toward wildness. This contrasted sharply with the oppressive and dominating conditions established in New England with the support of Calvinist and Unitarian Christianity.

* A Week is a specific response to the local unjust situations created by Christianity as a religion of subjugation and its merging with politics and economic conditions. Through Christianity, New England founded a political structure that sought to manage the people and diminish their wildness through common sense, custom, gentility, and habits. In other words, New England tried to domesticate any hints of wildness. Thoreau’s resistance to this emerges through the construction of an idea of religion as preservative care that is receptive, respectful,
and nurturing of wildness in all creation.\(^{195}\) His religion of preservative care seeks to merge people with the active creative processes, so they become a positive contributing factor to the eternal processes of creation.

To move in the direction of harmony, balance, and peaceful coexistence with all of the created order, Thoreau models various practices in *A Week*, such as going on a pilgrimage or quest, laboring in a spiritualizing and naturalizing way, living a purely sensuous life, cultivating a separate intention of the eye able to generate uncommon sense, withdrawing, taking part in a natural Sabbath, and becoming a good friend. This leads to the ultimate political practice of aligning oneself with the margins of society and becoming a civil disobedient who tries to destabilize local situations and political structures to allow wildness to flourish. Here, then, religion is thoroughly political. The religious subject must also be a political subject who undermines the dominating and oppressive conditions in society.

Contrary to the consequences of the Puritan religious heritage in New England and the American ideology of Manifest Destiny, Thoreau offers a religion of preservative care that aims to undo the domination and oppression that went into founding the United States. In the end, Thoreau’s religious ideal is an urgent plea for a new American identity not aligned with a white, Euro-American heritage but with the otherness of the Native Americans and the natural environment.\(^{196}\) Thoreau is calling for nothing less than a radical reorientation of who we think we are, who we associate with, and who we struggle to help. Religion is about solidarity with the oppressed, practices committed to wildness, and the courage to risk everything for a new social order that will bring everybody equally into the processes of creation.

---

\(^{195}\) Walls, “Greening Darwin’s Century,” 100-01.

CONCLUSION

THOREAU’S CONTRIBUTION TO LIBERAL RELIGION IN THE PRESENT

If we could listen but for an instant to the chaunt of the Indian muse, we should understand why he will not exchange his savageness for civilization. Nations are not whimsical. Steel and blankets are strong temptations; but the Indian does well to continue Indian.

– Henry David Thoreau, A Week

Today, modern civilization may be creating conditions that could destroy the interlocking web of life upon which they are founded. Finding ways to bring cultural thinking toward profound respect for the works of nature is becoming a priority. It is easy to see that one way of accomplishing that objective is by learning about cultures that locate the sacred in the manifestations of nature and that have also developed traditions of celebrating that sacredness.


Introduction

Approximately half a millennium after Christopher Columbus sailed to the West seizing Indigenous peoples as slaves and a little over 175 years after President Andrew Jackson signed into law the Indian Removal Act, which legitimated the forced removal of Native Americans to undesired lands in the West and validated the appropriation of their homelands, people in the United States and political organizations around the world continue to question and debate the rights of Indigenous peoples and what their legitimate stature should be among the dominant, recognized nations. A rather new activity among religious peoples, such as the Episcopalians, the Quakers, and those belonging to the World Council of Churches, has been to denounce the underlying sentiments that gave rise to the displacement and oppression of Indigenous peoples.

During the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona in June 2012, members

---

passed a resolution to “repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery” with the following words: “BE IT RESOLVED that we, the delegates of the 2012 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery as a relic of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural, and racial biases having no place in the modern day treatment of indigenous peoples.” This is an important topic, as the Unitarian Universalist Association indicates on their website, because the case law used to support the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous peoples continues to buttress current legislation and the biased trajectories of new judicial rulings. The website urges Unitarian Universalists to review their religious history and theological ideas to understand the tradition’s complicity with the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and to discern how such ideas continue to guide the denomination today. They seek to foster an inclusive environment where Indigenous peoples can have an active role in shaping the “process of Honor and Healing.” They urge other religious organizations to oppose this pernicious doctrine while simultaneously encouraging the United States government to take the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples seriously in making U.S. laws and policies more just for Indigenous communities.5

This chapter will concentrate more closely on what Thoreau can contribute to the Unitarian Universalist tradition today.6 Their repudiation addresses various actions and desired ends, but what specifically can Thoreau add to these renunciations? What can he contribute to the process of healing and the creation of peace? This chapter’s emphasis will reveal a new moral imagination oriented toward “constructive change” and “justpeace,” which means that Thoreau shifts the path away from violence and revenge toward reverence and responsibility for

others—including nonhuman persons in the natural world; a slightly different way of saying this is that he offers a style of being in the world that reduces destruction and violence while fostering justice and peace in human and nonhuman relationships. Thoreau’s religious sensibilities disclose a concern for restorative justice, bioregional and ecological health, and conflict transformation. With these concerns in mind, Thoreau can help to transform the Unitarian Universalist tradition into a form of “dark green religion” that values nature for its inherent sacredness, honors an expansive view of personhood found in Indigenous cultures, and brings all creation into its religious observances as fellow celebrants seeking to transform past harms into life-sustaining relationships. He gives his readers a nudge in the direction of being less anthropocentric in matters of religion while merging God with this world, which places the sacred all around us—making the present and our materiality worthy of reverence.

This chapter is based on a trajectory provided in A Week. For example, Thoreau wrote in “Sunday,” “All [people] are children, and of one family.” Later in “Wednesday,” Thoreau inserted his own poetry:

True kindness is a pure divine affinity,
Not founded upon human consanguinity.
It is a spirit, not a blood relation,
Superior to family and station.

A few pages later, Thoreau turns to a quote from the Confucian philosopher Mencius: “If one loses a fowl or a dog, he knows well how to seek them again; if one loses the sentiments of his heart, he does not know how to seek them again. . . . The duties of practical philosophy consist only in seeking after those sentiments of the heart which we have lost; that is all.”

---

7 Lederach, The Moral Imagination, 181-82.
8 Thoreau, A Week, 59.
9 Ibid., 259.
10 Ibid., 264.
quote concludes this string of citations: “Friendship is first, Friendship last.”\textsuperscript{11} It is the idea of “practical philosophy” while speaking of kindness, interrelatedness, and fellowship in religious matters that allows Thoreau’s outlook to support a bioregional religious disposition accompanied by an earnest intent to foster restorative justice and conflict transformation. It is through this triad that Thoreau develops a religious sensibility honoring the preservation of human and nonhuman life and all of natural creation. This triadic weave with its practical implications constitutes what we can more properly call Thoreau’s praxis of religion as preservative care, which is to be lived daily.

It may seem an odd move to use Thoreau as a representative figure for restorative justice and conflict transformation within the Unitarian Universalist context for two reasons. The first is that by the end of his life, Thoreau had taken a decidedly militant position against slavery that was open to the use of violence. In “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854), Thoreau uses violent wording as he explains how the injustice of slavery has spoiled his daily serenity: “Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her.”\textsuperscript{12} And in “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859), Thoreau wrote, “I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable.”\textsuperscript{13}

The second reason is that he set himself apart from the Unitarian tradition. It is accurate to say that he was a Unitarian for a portion of his life, for he was baptized in a Unitarian congregation. He was educated on religious matters in a Unitarian Sunday school, and he was

\textsuperscript{11} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 265.
buried in a Unitarian cemetery; but later Thoreau withdrew his membership from the church and was rarely seen within any church.\textsuperscript{14} I turn to Thoreau, however, for several reasons that make sense when we shift our perspective slightly.

First, Thoreau’s \textit{A Week} is conspicuously clear about a middle path and the divine orientation of love. “But sometimes we are said to love another, that is to stand in a true relation to him, so that we give the best to, and receive the best from, him. Between whom there is hearty truth there is love; and in proportion to our truthfulness and confidence in one another, our lives are divine and miraculous, and answer to our ideal.”\textsuperscript{15} Love embodies sincerity, the miraculous, and the divine. It is not concerned with deceit or pragmatic concerns—but being the best and growing toward one’s ideal self. Thoreau also wrote, “All the world reposes in beauty to him who preserves equipoise in his life, and moves serenely on his path without secret violence; as he who sails down a stream, he has only to steer, keeping his bark in the middle, and carry it round the falls.”\textsuperscript{16} Life is best lived on a middle path that avoids extremes; to live on this middle path leads to a positive outlook on the world where the cosmic forces are harmonized and beauty manifests itself. In speaking of matters of religion, Thoreau also wrote, “for love is the main thing.”\textsuperscript{17} This means that love, balance, harmony, sincerity, beauty, the miraculous, and the divine are some of Thoreau’s valued concepts in \textit{A Week}. He is not concerned with excessive, unjust destruction—but with conditions that positively enhance nature, other persons, and oneself.

Second, the Unitarian tradition Thoreau knew was a decidedly Christian one, but today’s Unitarian Universalist denomination is an amalgamation of Christian and non-Christian


\textsuperscript{15} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 268.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, 317.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 67.
members. The denomination is an interreligious body with people identifying themselves as “Christian, Jew, theist, agnostic, humanist, atheist.” Furthermore, in the nonconformist spirit of Thoreau, Unitarian Universalists celebrate their “heretical” position; Forrest Church, Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, celebrates the tradition’s non-traditional posture: “Of course, I am a heretic. The word *hairesis* in Greek means choice; a heretic is one who is able to choose. Its root stems from the Greek verb *hairein*, to take. Faced with the mystery of life and death, each act of faith is a gamble. We all risk choices before the unknown.” Beyond these points, the denomination actively honors “Earth-centered” religious traditions as sources of wisdom. This inclusive orientation and emphasis on choice, I believe, would be acceptable to Thoreau. Lastly, Unitarian Universalists celebrate the Transcendentalist movement and Thoreau as part of their religious heritage and their respect for religious freedom and tolerance, the inherent worth of every person, and each member’s right to nurture authentic individual religious experiences. The denomination’s reverence for religious freedom and pluralism has created a more liberal religious environment in which Thoreau’s ideas and religiousness can be honored.

In this chapter, I am less concerned with the consistency of Thoreau’s ideas diachronically; this chapter is concerned with his synchronic expression in *A Week* as a final product and as a religious artifact. It is not attempting to account for the totality of Thoreau’s writing as a fountain of ideas able to guide the Unitarian Universalist tradition. This chapter only seeks to answer one question: How may Thoreau’s *A Week* help to support today’s Unitarian Universalist denunciation of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and its desire to cultivate healing, peace, and justice in today’s world?

---

19 Ibid.
21 Buehrens and Church, *Chosen Faith*, xxiv-xxvi.
His inconsistency toward violence is an appropriate reminder that more work needs to be done concerning the relationship between violence and peace. There are many forms of violence: physical, symbolic, economic, political, defensive, and revolutionary. There are many levels of peace: individual, interpersonal, national, international, eco-social, voluntary, and imposed. Other great thinkers and revered religious figures have displayed ambiguity toward violence also. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1896-1948) valued nonviolent responses to injustice, but he also accepted violence as a viable option, which he ranked below courageous nonviolence and above the cowardly avoidance of confrontation. Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) deplored violence and revered nonviolence based on Jesus’ emphasis on love; despite this, the atrocities of Nazi Germany led to his decision to support assassination attempts against Hitler. Martin Luther King, Jr. supposedly once said, “If your opponent has a conscience, then follow Gandhi and nonviolence. But if your enemy has no conscience like Hitler, then follow Bonhoeffer.” Violence and peace are not black and white categories; they are complicated concepts that are interrelated and deserve thorough examinations.

Thoreau’s apparent inconsistency was not a facile acceptance of violence; instead, it was a decision reached over a lifetime confronted by the absurdity of chattel slavery, the decimation of Indigenous communities, and his awareness of ecological destruction. Thoreau came to see the Constitution, religion, and American culture as advocating justice and freedom while ironically supporting injustice and confinement. This chapter will show how Thoreau’s serious

---

26 As quoted in Rankin, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Modern Martyr: Taking a Stand against the State Gone Mad,” 116.
intellectual engagement with violence and peace can aid current discussions through three elements in *A Week*: restorative justice, bioregional concerns, and conflict transformation. Such a posture is his practical philosophy oriented toward regaining our lost “sentiments of the heart” that will allow us to enter into sincere relationships where fellowship is marked by kindness and love, which seeks to preserve the qualities of the Unnamed in all human and nonhuman encounters.

**Seeking Restorative Justice**

Thoreau entered adulthood during a time of conflict between U.S. citizens and Native Americans; his journey with his brother took place shortly after the forced migrations of Indigenous peoples from the Southeast to the Midwest—and the thousands of deaths resulting from these sanctioned actions. This was part of a continuing historical trend of maltreatment toward “uncivilized” peoples; from today’s date backward to the settling of New England, Thoreau stood approximately at the midway point—a historically important period marked by the *Johnson v. McIntosh* decision and the Indian Removal Act. Following the work of Howard Zehr, what Thoreau recognized was a continuing pattern of unjust treatment in need of restorative justice, which means a focus on justice that concentrates on the interrelationship between offenders, victims, and their larger communities in an attempt to help heal the wounds for all affected by injustice.²⁷

Thoreau reveals how the crimes against Native Americans affected the entire social fabric of the United States. The people’s religious values wove their way into the crimes, and the offenses wove their way into the theological foundations of New England. Not only were the

---

Native Americans harmed, but Thoreau expands the web of destruction to include white society. In white society’s attempts to become more civilized, Americans focused on domesticating characteristics and actions that reduced the quality of life and diminished the qualities of the Unnamed in American society. Not only did their actions preclude them from sincere relations with Indigenous peoples, but the civilizing processes of white society actually distanced Americans from one another through scripted behaviors esteemed as genteel or polite. America’s way of life also separated the American people from nature. The church became the new house of worship, and nature was another feature of the world to domesticate. *A Week* makes it clear that “[c]rime is fundamentally a violation of people and interpersonal relationships,” and “[v]ictims and the community have been harmed and are in need of restoration.”

Instead of using his text in a way to paint settlers and New Englanders in an evil light, Thoreau never described the actors as inherently evil or unworthy of respect; he acknowledges throughout *A Week* that their actions had a level of heroism—even though he disagreed with what they did. Native Americans also appear in his text in both positive and negative ways; there are times in *A Week* when their violence seems excessive or unprovoked. He allows the reader to see that both cultures are open to possible peaceful or violent actions. In doing so, the reader becomes aware of the need for peace from every angle. Peace needs to develop within white society; it needs to develop within Native American societies, and it needs to develop between the two. For Thoreau, this also included another community of people normally left out of history—but recognized by his revered Indigenous neighbors. He believed that peace needed to develop between humans and the natural world. More respect was needed for trees, rivers, animals, and all nonhuman existence. Thoreau made it clear that “[v]ictims, offenders, and the

---

28 Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, 64.
affected communities are the key stakeholders in justice,” and this meant that society, religion, and the state needed to reorient their values, actions, and institutions to facilitate increasing wildness in each realm: white society, Indigenous communities, and nature.

Thoreau is clear in *A Week* that the actions of white society have created an obligation to those harmed: “Offenders’ obligations are to make things right as much as possible.” For Thoreau, this obligation is to generate a more wild, rude, undomesticated, and uncivilized religious posture that will allow those people in white society to regain sincere relationships with each other. In doing so, Thoreau turned to the natural world for inspiration and revelations of the divine, and he used Native Americans as examples of people who had harmonious, healthy relationships with the environment. This means that whites would become tied to and reverent of Native Americans. He builds a religious worldview grounded in more traditional ways of living connected inseparably from one’s local, natural surroundings, which means that white contempt needed to change to reverence leading to a new way of being in the world. This reverence would allow for changes in values, actions, and institutions in order to honor Indigenous ways of life instead of trying to “civilize” or eradicate Native Americans.

This allows “[t]he process of justice” to maximize “opportunities for exchange of information, participation, dialogue, and mutual consent between victim and offender.” This is what Thoreau meant when he said that whites needed to listen more closely to the Muse of the Indians. American society needed to listen sympathetically and empathetically to allow Native American wisdom to transform white society. It is a moment of listening to the victims—people

---

30 Ibid.
whom Thoreau recognizes as being on the receiving end of attempted “extermination.”33 Justice comes through sustained transformations of individuals, intimate relationships, and structural organizations and policies based on wisdom from those harmed. Thoreau makes it clear, however, that for U.S. society to be truly transformed, it has to give up its claim to supremacy as it listens to and learns from those whom American society has devalued for centuries.

In this way, Thoreau has laid out the skeletal elements of restorative justice in his first book.34 He has shown the harms of the crimes, which have been the attempted extermination of various Indigenous peoples and their cultures, the destruction of the natural environment, and finally the harms done to whites themselves—especially through less fertile lands and truncated relationships with other whites. This has allowed him to be equally concerned with “victims and offenders,” which has allowed him to emphasize the need for “involving both within the process of justice.”35 By emphasizing listening to the Muse of the victims, Thoreau is trying to restore Indigenous communities to their rightful place as honored peoples with fresh insights about life, and such acceptance would necessitate a deeper understanding of those who had been the victims of “marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism.”36 These new relationships were intended as a fresh opportunity for dialogue and a genuine attempt to create the conditions for dialogue.37

Thoreau’s vision in A Week, then, sought to restore relationships that had been destroyed or never given a chance to develop. Thoreau makes it clear that injustice does lead to offenders and victims, but he also shows how the negative consequences of injustice lead to decay and pain in all facets of life. The religious, political, and social devaluations of Indigenous peoples and

33 Henry David Thoreau, A Week, 5, 120, 220.
34 This paragraph draws from Zehr’s “Signposts of Restorative Justice.” See Zehr, The Little Book of Restorative Justice, 40-41.
35 Ibid., 40.
36 These are the five faces of oppression described in Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 48-63.
37 Zehr, The Little Book of Restorative Justice, 40-41.
nature led to harmful consequences for all involved. Thoreau turned to wildness as an opportunity to right the wrongs of civilizing goals, and he sought this not only to protect the environment and Indigenous peoples, but he also sought this as a way to better the lives of Americans.

**Toward a Bioregional, Ecological Perspective**

Thoreau extends his view of justice beyond the limits of anthropocentrism common to the dominant world religions. A *Week* moves toward not only breaking free from Eurocentric values and ideals as he turns to Native Americans as models for living in harmony with the natural world, but Thoreau’s text begins to transcend the limits of anthropocentric thinking that diminish nonhuman existence while esteeming human life. Through his emphasis on a religious posture that naturalizes humans, he is advocating a shift away from the constant honoring of human life as the apogee of creation that leaves room for learning from and developing sincere relationships with nonhuman life and all aspects of one’s bioregional territory. Thoreau’s restorative justice, then, seeks to heal the broken bonds between humans and their ecological surroundings.

---


In his advocacy to become more naturalized, and in line with Bron Taylor, Thoreau is acknowledging that the nonhuman realm represented by the word “nature” has inherent value, is sacred, and may form the center of one’s religious life.\textsuperscript{42} As he moves beyond Emerson’s claim to read nature in a way to experience the creator, Thoreau affirms that nature rightly read will lead to understanding God and nature as one.\textsuperscript{43} God’s sacredness is no different from the sacredness of nature. As humans have the divine within them, nature has the same divinity. As Emerson would affirm that we become “part or particle of God”\textsuperscript{44} as we lose our ego and merge with the divine, Thoreau reveals how nature itself is also “part or particle of God.”

This is not all, however, as to honor the divinity of nature means to honor it in the same non-oppressive way that Thoreau believes humans should be honored in the realm of religion, which makes his work harmonious with the principles of “deep ecology” as defined by Michael E. Zimmerman.\textsuperscript{45} As each person can have ecstatic moments and realize the divine through personal, highly individualized experiences and can express those moments in heterogeneous ways, nature as the expression of the divine and part of the divine must also be allowed to flourish through diversity. To honor the sacredness of nature is to nurture its diversity, which means that humans have to be aware of detrimental activities that would reduce the flourishing of nature and the many life forms present there. A very serious consequence of this outlook is


\textsuperscript{43} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 382.


\textsuperscript{45} This is based on the first principle of “deep ecology”: “Human and nonhuman life alike have inherent value.” Zimmerman, “Deep Ecology Platform,” 457.
that human life lacks the right to diminish nature because of human greed and ignorance.\textsuperscript{46} In the interrelated web of sacredness composed of non-living natural creation, non-human life, and human life, human communities have no right to destroy the natural world for selfish gain, nor do they have the right to do it in uncontrolled ways. Any use of the natural world must be done with reverence as a guiding factor and in a way that does not eradicate other species. Humans need to learn to live in balance with the diversity in their local regions, they must honor that diversity, and they must nurture it; when they do need to alter a portion of their local ecological region, they must do so in a way that is minimally invasive.

This leads to Thoreau’s clear emphasis on changing the values and ideologies of white society.\textsuperscript{47} Not only do people need to see the sacredness of nature, they need to live in a way that honors that sacredness through daily acts. This is clearest in his emphasis on local regions in \textit{A Week}. Thoreau and his brother take their gazetteer with them;\textsuperscript{48} as they pass by the local towns or cities, they read about the history there since European settlement began; but they also read the natural surroundings in a way that reveals Native American history too. They find fire pits from Indigenous settlements and other archeological traces of Native American life.\textsuperscript{49} Thoreau is offering a bioregional history focused on the intersection of Euro-Americans, Native Americans, and the natural world around the river; he is reading the watershed area around the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and showing how human and nonhuman life have interacted within a specific

\textsuperscript{46} The is based on the third principle of “deep ecology”: “Humans have no right to reduce richness or diversity except to satisfy vital needs.” Zimmerman, “Deep Ecology Platform,” 457.

\textsuperscript{47} This is based on a synthesis of the seventh and eight principles of “deep ecology”: “The ideological change must involve appreciating the inherent value of all life, rather than continually increasing the material living standard,” and “Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to implement the necessary changes.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} John Hayward, \textit{The New England Gazetteer; Containing Descriptions of All the States, Counties and Towns in New England: Also Descriptions of the Principal Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, Capes, Bays, Harbors, Islands, and Fashionable Resorts within That Territory} (Boston: John Hayward, 1839).

\textsuperscript{49} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 82, 146.
naturally created realm.\textsuperscript{50} Nature reveals a record of endless interactions in the region that makes his religious outlook specifically bioregional. As people encounter nature and as nature’s sacredness inspires people in different ways, specific inspiration is dependent upon the person’s local context within the natural world; each region will have its specific ambiance, diversity, and influence that will be different from other regions. Each specific watershed area with its diverse life forms and meteorological, climatological variations will influence existence in the region and encounters with the divine. In other words, each natural environment and its ecological specificity makes each bioregional milieu a very specific axis mundi for the particular people in that bioregional place.

In his influential book \textit{God Is Red}, Vine Deloria, Jr. offers a touching anecdote concerning the specificity and sacredness of one’s surroundings and the singular value humans gain from their environs, which can help us understand \textit{A Week} a little better:

\begin{quote}
When I was very small and travelling with my father in South Dakota, he would frequently point out buttes, canyons, river crossings, and old roads and tell me their stories. In those days before interstate highways, when roads were often two ruts along the side of a fence, it was possible to observe the places up close, and so indelible memories accrued around certain features of the landscape because of the proximity of the place and because of the stories that went with them . . . . I came to revere certain locations and passed the stories along as best I could . . . It seemed to me that the remembrance of human activities at certain locations vested them with a kind of sacredness that could not have been obtained otherwise. Gradually, I began to understand a distinction in the sacredness of places. Some sites were sacred in themselves, others had been cherished by generations of people and were now part of their history and, as such, revered by them and part of their very being.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

This is similar to what Thoreau is doing in \textit{A Week}. By disclosing the “pre-civilized histories,” the history of European settlement, the record of Indigenous-settler conflicts, and the flourishing of diverse life forms and natural creations, Thoreau is making each point along their journey

\textsuperscript{50} Richard J. Schneider, “‘An Emblem of All Progress’: Ecological Succession in Thoreau’s \textit{A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers},” \textit{The Concord Saunterer} 19/20 (2012): 78-104.
sacred in its own specific way. He embeds his religious outlook and worldview in the natural surroundings and the traces of humans there. From his fresh immersion in the natural world, from his specific way of narrating his pilgrimage, and from the specific cultural and political criticisms this engenders, Thoreau is emphasizing a new ecological awareness that is deeply embedded in one’s bioregional area that urges readers to reshape their lives to bring them into a more harmonious relationship with human and nonhuman life and all natural creation in the region. He offers the possibility of new relationships with creation as every part of the human and nonhuman worlds has a voice and places demands on others to listen and to respond respectfully.  

Conflict Transformation

Thoreau’s *A Week* offers multiple perspectives on the conflicts in America between Indigenous peoples, Euro-Americans, and the natural world. He does not approach the conflicts from a single angle of vision, and this multi-angled approach is consonant with John Paul Lederach’s description of conflict transformation. In other words, Thoreau seeks to offer various outlooks that include voices from each community and beyond. Thoreau describes the immediate issues of ecological decimation, Indigenous marginalization, and Euro-American inauthenticity, yet he does so with attention to a more comprehensive history; he embeds his analysis within a larger awareness of the wisdom passed down through generation after generation in different cultures: Buddhist, Chinese, Greek, Hindu, and Native American. This allows him to see conflicts within a larger global context in which local particularities, identities,

---


and egos dialectically engage with lasting wisdom that empties the selfishness associated with strong egos and harmful biases. Thoreau is not attempting to escape history but to show how one’s placement within the world can be expansive and more receptive to otherness instead of being constraining and exclusive. Wisdom, for Thoreau, is universal in nature—deep awareness of what is important to life found across cultures and time, which aims to support living a qualitatively better life. This provides him with an opportunity to see beyond the local, temporal disagreements and struggles to discern a constructive approach to transforming conflicts to bring lasting peace to the region.\(^{54}\)

In doing so, and consonant with the work of Johan Galtung, Thoreau concentrates on a threefold, interdependent vision of conflict.\(^{55}\) He offers the current conflict between Euro-Americans, Indigenous peoples, and the natural world. He embeds this within destructive relational patterns based on exclusive Christian theological premises, industrialization, and a dysfunctional celebration of “civilization,” “domestication,” “tamed” living, and institutional religion. Thoreau associates the problems in his present condition with the colonial past and the founding of the United States; he is clear that American freedom and peace came into being and exists through destruction of Indigenous ways of life and the local ecological surroundings. This span of time, however, is brief; he associates it with a longer duration in history. Americans think of civilized time in North America associated with colonization, but Thoreau emphasizes “pre-civilized” time and honors Native American culture before Euro-American settlement. He does this in association with pre-civilized time globally, which allows him to establish the local


\(^{55}\) Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means*. 
conflicts as a symptom of life separated from intimacy with the natural world, its cycles, and the sacredness of one’s ecological surroundings. Civilization—with its emphasis on cities, gentility, and common sense or hegemonic ways of encountering the world—creates this harmful distance; Thoreau contrasts this with a more bioregional awareness in pre-civilized life that posited nature as humanity’s true home. The conflicts result, then, largely from a growing abyss between humans, nature, and bioregional intimacy that diminishes human life and the relationships people have with others and with creation in general.

For Thoreau, and consonant with Lederach’s work on conflict, the most obvious solution was threefold and began with religion.\(^{56}\) He envisioned institutionalized religion as a primary problem; New England’s Christian religion with its emphasis on a distant God, dictatorial traditions, and superstitions allowed it to be exclusionary in nature—especially as it made the inside of the church building the only place in which worship could occur, and this necessarily means the devaluing of land-based religious practices. As Thoreau repositioned the divine throughout nature and within the human, religion became concerned with rebinding people to the sacred in all creation. This meant new relations with each other that necessitated a new reverence for humans, wildlife, rivers, mountains, and all creation. These relations, however, could not be scripted and based on common sense; they had to be spontaneous and sincere. The ethical content or moral trajectory of relationships do not come from external sources but from the immediacy and sincerity of relationships. This new way of relating to the world through sincerity, reverence, and spontaneity meant that institutions had to change. They were no longer to be imagined as creating and directing the moral lives of the people through policies and

\(^{56}\) This portion is based on Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 35-37.
People needed to refashion institutions as pragmatic facilitators that would allow the qualities of the Unnamed to flourish in daily life. In this way, institutions should be non-oppressive entities geared not for mastery of populations but for nurturing the conditions that will allow for freedom of conscience and novelty in human and nonhuman relationships.

This implies a change on four levels: “personally, relationally, structurally, and culturally.”\(^5^8\) Personally, people needed to be more aware of their passions; they needed to engage what inspired them and do so without concerns for what others thought. The development of curiosity was important for Thoreau; life is vibrant, changing, and has a level of mystery. To live is to be curious and to realize that passionate engagement with creation is healthy. Instead of devaluing human passions and creativity, Thoreau emphasized confidence in the human ability to have moments of deep intuitive awareness of what is necessary for the person’s life and conducive to health. This wisdom would have to manifest itself in relationships with others—both humans and nonhumans. To have the freedom to honor one’s enthusiasm and interests, others had to live in a way that avoided the goal of taming those nearby. This meant that each person needed to become more nurturing of others’ interests, idiosyncrasies, and encounters with the divine. Relationally, Thoreau wanted people to be more dialogical and oriented toward pluralism. He was not concerned with approval of others’ perspectives or articulations; Thoreau was concerned with allowing each person the freedom and support to experience the world in an intimate, novel way while providing safety and support to express such encounters in their own voice. Structurally, religious pluralism needed to replace New England’s religious exclusion in both the Calvinist and Unitarian traditions. Culturally, this meant that America needed to be more open to hearing the wisdom in other traditions and


cultures. Ideally this meant, for Thoreau, a deep reverence for otherness marked by sincere listening founded on a healthy stillness and silence. The United States, to be more just and to transform conflicts into peace, needed to be simultaneously more humble but more confident. It needed a sincere humility respecting the wisdom of different cultures while having confidence in each person’s ability to connect with a deeper spiritual truth free of dogma and superstition.

This is what allowed Thoreau to paint the picture of conflict, ironically, emerging from religion, which could be corrected through a fresh religious sensibility; such an outlook means that what people envisioned as religion had to change. They needed to move beyond superstition, dogma, and facile distinctions between humans and nature; and they needed to move toward a religious sensibility that opened people to the divine in all creation. By reframing religion in this way, Thoreau is making religion a tool for peace and qualitatively better lives. Religion becomes a process of rebinding to the sacred in all creation, which means nurturing the five qualities of the Unnamed in all we encounter. Religion, therefore, is a nurturing process that rebinds us anew to other humans and nonhumans. Through this reverence for The Law of Regeneration in all existing things, religion is about cultivating sustained peace. Conflicts and the patterns sustaining them do not have to remain. By being religious in a nurturing way, those conflicts can turn enemies into friends who are able to see the divine in each other. By shifting religion’s emphasis to the divinity around us and the process of rebinding oneself to the sacred, it logically becomes impossible to see others in a diminished light. As the divine pervades and sustains all creation, to hurt another—human or nonhuman—is to hurt oneself. Violence becomes a sign of ignorance, and peace and compassion become a sign of wisdom.

For Thoreau, therefore, religion becomes a decidedly new feature of the human landscape as authentic religion cultivates peace, sincere relationships, and authentic individual expressions
of the divine; and inauthentic religion manifests itself in violence, mastery of others, and emphases on a distant sacredness that diminishes the value of this world. Religion, conflict transformation, and peace are woven together in Thoreau’s religious outlook, and society needs to change its organizing principles to generate peace and mutual respect for all existence.

**Toward New Principles and Purposes:**

*Suggestions for Today’s Unitarian Universalists*

The three components above lead to a consideration of possible changes needed within today’s Unitarian Universalist denomination and ways to approach the current repudiations of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. Thus far, this dissertation has been addressing important ecological, Indigenous, and political issues as it has reconsidered Thoreau’s understanding of religion in *A Week*. Thoreau emphasizes how we are responsible for both the natural world and Indigenous communities. For Thoreau, the two are not separate. The land-based traditions of Native Americans reveal how their survival as communities are dependent on the land, its health, and its preservation from destruction. He came to this conclusion not only as a result of his respect for the ways of life revealed through his contact and studies concerning Indigenous cultures, but his moral principles advocating respect and responsibility for both nature and Indigenous cultures are grounded in his view of Earth as home. In other words, and as William B. Scheik discloses, Thoreau grounds his ethics, literally, in the ground, the soil, or the planet we call “Earth”—the mother of us all.\(^{59}\) He describes the materiality of human and nonhuman bodies grounded in a specific place or location that implies limits and locally-different, viable ways of existing.

---

Each place sustains certain ways of living while limiting others. Place, then, establishes viable options for life or existence. Thoreau justifies his standards by reminding his readers that without Earth, without water, without forests and animals, life would not only be unpleasant, aesthetically and spiritually unpleasing, but life would cease to exist for many species—even possibly homo sapiens. Without nature in processes of birth, maturity, decline, death, and new birth, humans would not survive. Society and nature should not remain separate categories; as Brian Walker and David Salt reveal, they co-construct or mutually affect each other forming “social-ecological” systems, but that co-construction needs to occur—on the human side—with reverence, responsibility, and awareness for all human and nonhuman existence.

For Thoreau, then, human interests—political, economic, cultural, and social interests—are interdependent with environmental concerns. Human interests should not degrade or put at risk other humans and nonhumans, such as the forests, watersheds, and general ecological wellbeing. Thoreau offers an environmental ethic that arises at the intersection between and mutual dependence of the human and nonhuman realms that responsibly allows them to exist and interact in beneficial ways, which means the Unitarian Universalist denomination should alter their aims, practices, and theology in ways more consonant with his vision—as the denomination includes Thoreau as an influential individual offering the gift of wisdom to the denomination.

As Thoreau wove his religious worldview together with a constant awareness of historical injustices offering the conditions for the emergence of Thoreau himself and his embeddedness within the Puritan theological heritage, today’s Unitarian Universalists should

---


also be aware of the violence that has gone into making their current religious sensibility. With a decidedly focused mind on the historical emergence of their religious heritage and its associations with injustices, they will be able to judge what in the tradition is no longer worthy of honor; in other words, a phase of serious self-criticism is necessary that will allow Unitarian Universalists to transcend their current state of being to enter a new phase of being Unitarian Universalist. As Thoreau dislodged religion from its firm attachment to the human structure of the church and creeds, it is time for Unitarian Universalists to contemplate what can be left behind and what new posture will inject the tradition with freshness.

I want to begin with a consideration of the tradition’s principles and purposes (or pseudo-creedal pronouncements). The denomination’s codified Principles and Purposes have much in them that are supportive of religious pluralism, Indigenous wisdom, and ecological concerns. They speak of “[t]he inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “[j]ustice, equity and compassion in human relations.” The denomination seeks “peace, liberty, and justice for all” people.63 Furthermore, the tradition seeks “[w]isdom from the world’s religions which inspire” them “in [their] ethical and spiritual life.”64 Most importantly for the purposes of this dissertation is the claim honoring the “[s]piritual teaching of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”65 The denomination takes an expansive view of religion that seeks to be more inclusive, pluralistic, dialogical, and supportive in matters of religion.

Despite this positive trajectory, however, certain aspects of the Principles and Purposes raise questions—especially when read with a new awareness trained by Thoreau’s criticisms of

64 Harris, “Principles and Purposes,” 383.
65 Ibid.
religion. For example, the members “covenant to affirm and promote” its humanist origins: “Humanist teaching which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”66 Furthermore, the tradition supports an ambiguous concept of God in its Principles and Purposes: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”67 If the denomination seeks to take Thoreau seriously and wants to allow his work to inform their religious worldview, then it is necessary to look afresh at the above affirmations more carefully to understand how they oppose the tradition’s goal for a more just world.

I want to turn first to the statement in support of a Jewish and Christian God; what I am advocating is not a denial or an outright denunciation of the God concept, for this would oppose Thoreau’s inclusive view as he spoke of God as comfortably as the Great Spirit or the Laws of Nature. They had an interchangeable value for Thoreau that allowed him to address a suprahuman component that was in direct contact with and permeating all creation, but it is this last point that makes me cautious about the Unitarian Universalist affirmation as it stands in the Principles and Purposes.

The reason for this is that Unitarian Universalists and scholarly non-members have written thorough historical accounts of the faith, yet serious scholarly criticisms of the founders’ ideas still need to be done. Within the tradition, there has been an honoring of the liberal sentiments found within the denomination’s history, but few have done as Thoreau did showing how the tradition actually emerged from violence. What needs to be done in the spirit of Thoreau is a serious examination of the tradition’s origins, ideas, actions, and religious sensibilities to show how as it struggled for religious liberalism it also perpetuated violence that worked against

---

66 Harris, “Principles and Purposes,” 382-83.
67 Ibid.
its goals. This means examinations not only of race, class, and gender issues—but also the
tradition’s historical failures within ecological realms. Race, class, and gender issues are
important in relation to the tradition’s failures to support Indigenous rights historically, but I
believe the ecological problem is more important as it is interwoven with Indigenous concerns.
Thoreau has shown that the maltreatment of Indigenous communities and the destruction of the
environment are intertwined. As the denomination wants to honor “Earth-centered” traditions
and nature’s cycles, it is time to start a serious critical examination of the denomination’s
religious sensibilities that undermine a healthy ecological religious sensibility, and I believe a
vague affirmation of the Jewish and Christian God is the first place to start.

One thing needs to be stated upfront: The tradition has never accepted a punishing God.
Theologically, this counters its celebration of the inherent dignity of all people. But as this
intuitive awareness of the universal dignity of humanity never stopped the tradition from falling
into pernicious racial, sexist, and classist traps, the equivocal idea of a loving Jewish and
Christian God has serious consequences for current repudiations of the Christian Doctrine of
Discovery. The denomination traces its roots back to William Ellery Channing whom I have
discussed briefly in Chapter One. The reader of the denomination’s introductory handbook reads
the following sentence about him: “William Ellery Channing, minister of the Federal Street
Church in Boston and one of the greatest figures in American Unitarian history, emerged as the
leader of the liberal Congregationalists.” Similarly, another book on the denomination’s history
asserts, “Even heretical and proudly rational religions have their patron saints,” and one of those

---

is Channing.\textsuperscript{70} His theology clearly set the trajectory of the denomination in later years, and it is to his idea of God that I now turn.

In line with more traditional, theological accounts of God, Channing held that God was clearly transcendent and above nature and humanity:\textsuperscript{71} “Nothing is supernatural but the divine. God is above nature. He is the supernatural.”\textsuperscript{72}

. . . I would not turn the mind from God’s infinity. This is the grand truth; but it must not stand alone in the mind. The finite is something real as well as the infinite. We must reconcile the two in our theology. It is as dangerous to exclude the former as the latter. God surpasses all human thought; yet human thought, mysterious, unbounded, “wandering through eternity,” is not to be condemned. God’s sovereignty is limitless; still man has rights. God’s power is irresistible; still man is free. On God we entirely depend; yet we can and do act from ourselves, and determine our own characters. These antagonist ideas, if so they may be called, are equally true, and neither can be spared. It will not do for an impassioned or an abject piety to wink one class of them out of sight.\textsuperscript{73}

It is true that Channing accepted the Genesis creation story and Psalm 8 that claim a divine likeness and closeness to God, but he also wholeheartedly accepted an endless division between humanity and God. Pantheism and panentheism would have diminished God in Channing’s eyes.\textsuperscript{74} He recognized as Paul did that God could be “read” through the language of the natural world,\textsuperscript{75} and in this way, all people could encounter God; Channing, however, affirmed traditional Pauline theological assumptions that the revelations of Christ superseded humanity’s insight of God through nature. In this way, God is both separate from nature and is superior to the created order. In fact, Channing was aware of a potential, serious theological mistake: People

\textsuperscript{73} Channing and Channing, \textit{The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing}, 58.
should never confound the Creator with the created order. Humans, therefore, should not work toward spiritual perfection to inhabit this world; instead, they work toward a divine perfection that goes beyond this world. Even the soul of the dead person works for eternity to become more perfect like God.\textsuperscript{76} Channing’s theology is grounded on a primary division between the Creator and the created order that allows humanity to seek perfection apart from nature and wildlife:

True, we depend on the Creator; and so does the animal, so does the clod; and were this the only relation, we should be no more bound to worship than they. We sustain a grander relation—that of rational, moral, free beings to a Spiritual Father. We are not mere material substances, subjected to an irresistible physical law, or mere animals subjected to resistless instincts; but are souls, on which a moral law is written, in which a divine oracle is heard. Take away the moral relation of the created spirit to the universal spirit, and that of entire dependence would remain as it is now. But no ground and no capacity of religion would remain; and the splendour of the universe would fade away.\textsuperscript{77}

True religious perfection concerns another realm beyond the materiality of embodied existence. Because of this acceptance of its Jewish-Christian roots, without nuance, and its unambiguous affirmation of Channing who rises almost to sainthood in a tradition without true saints, the denomination needs to reassess the theological ideas making their way through the tradition’s history that play a role in the continual devaluation of the natural world. While it is clear that the Unitarian Universalist denomination is in no way allied to or supportive of more “conservative” theological expressions found in literalist readings of the Bible or more conservative evangelical theological assertions, Channing and the Christian theological lineage giving continuity and shape to the denomination’s history surely overlap with some of these “non-liberal” theological sensibilities. What I am referring to is how Channing’s theology and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{76} Channing and Channing, \textit{The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing}, 1-5.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 60.
\end{flushright}
the Unitarian Christian heritage, in the words of Marcus J. Borg, do “not generate an environmental ethic” as “the nonhuman world doesn’t matter very much.”

Through Channing’s theological consonance with the Genesis creation stories and Psalm 8, Channing decidedly creates a theological position that places God beyond the created order while positing the created order within human control. Such a position supports “dominion Christianity” as Borg labels it: “To this day, ‘dominion’ Christians emphasize these verses [Genesis 1:26-28 and Psalm 8: 4-8]. They see modern Western dominion of nature as the will of God. This voice from the Bible is emphasized because it accommodates Western Christianity to the central dynamic of Western culture for the past few centuries.” Unitarian Universalists have failed to examine critically Channing’s theological weaknesses as part of a theological worldview that continues to sustain ecological destruction in the present. Channing’s was not a liberal or radical theological position concerning the natural world, and Borg makes it clear that another view needs to be considered: “And so it is important to realize that there is another voice in the Bible, one that has been muted in Western Christianity and Western culture ever since we began to ‘master’ nature. This voice emphasizes that the world—all of it, including the nonhuman world—matters to God. Indeed, it matters passionately to God.”

To be more in harmony, then, with the tradition’s reverence for Earth-centered religious sensibilities and the cycles of the natural world, the denomination needs to reassess its position regarding the Jewish and Christian God and its outright acceptance of this concept. A more nuanced affirmation is needed in their Principles and Purposes that explicitly affirms a Jewish and Christian God passionately concerned about not only humans but also wildlife and the

---

79 Ibid., 251.
80 Ibid.
environment. What the Principles and Purposes fail to do, which is evidenced by the tradition’s support for Channing and his version of a loving, fatherly God, is to bring into clear focus how the religious tradition is supportive of the natural world and the congregations’ bioregional embeddedness. In the end, then, the affirmation of a loving God within the tradition of Judaism and Christianity is too vague as such a religious affirmation supports a loving God overly concerned with humanity and other-worldly perfection while allowing the natural world to perish. Its affirmation of the Jewish and Christian traditions needs to be more nuanced to reveal that these traditions are supportive of the divine’s encounter with the material world and the divine’s presence in our bioregional surroundings, which would be more supportive of the pantheistic sensibilities disclosed in Thoreau’s writings.

As hinted at above, this revision is important because as the Principles and Purposes currently stand, they are too “humanistic” and “anthropocentric.” The criticism of their affirmation of Channing and their ambiguous support for a Jewish-Christian conception of God is intertwined with a criticism of their humanist lineage. Both honor the human world and devalue the nonhuman world through an anthropocentric interpretation of religion. In 1933, Unitarians and others supported a text called the “Humanist Manifesto,” which led to the elaboration of “religious humanism” within the Unitarian tradition. In fact, a significant number of Unitarian Universalists today identify themselves as “humanists.”

But what does this mean? According to the manifesto and the Principles and Purposes, being a humanist means valuing the human sciences and the consequent influence of science on one’s religious sensibilities. The manifesto has positive ideas, such as affirming life, seeing human emergence as the result of

---

natural processes, and the focus on religion as a site of joy. Several of the affirmations in this manifesto, however, are problematic. They emphasize human life, reason, and science; the focus, in the end, is on human fulfillment. What is interesting is how the language—while placing humans decidedly within the natural realm—does not emphasize becoming more natural—or “naturalized” as Thoreau would put it—but instead the human coming to recognize its humanness.

This anthropocentric orientation is clear in the fifth affirmation, which I quote in its entirety:

Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered, but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relation to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.  

Thoreau’s writings already make clear how this is a limited view. Science should belong to a more creative, poetic, and emotional realm that transcends simple methods and the extensive use of reason to manipulate facts. For Thoreau, scientific observations and insights were part of a larger process of ecstatic awareness that provided uncommon sense, which would transcend the limits of calculating, methodical thinking. Thoreau’s criticisms of science, history, and what the majority called “knowledge” dovetails with scholarly criticisms of humanism found in scholarly writings such as David Ehrenfeld’s *The Arrogance of Humanism*.  

Ehrenfeld’s title discloses the orientation of his book for any potential reader; his text addresses an arrogance guiding humanist thinking. But what is this arrogance? Awareness of humanist arrogance emerged for him from a twofold insight: a life philosophy based on human creations and mastery alongside the failures associated with those inventions and their attempts

---

84 Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism*. 
to control aspects of the world. What he addresses is a “failure” of this tradition that reveres humans so highly while seeing its association with many negative, destructive results.\textsuperscript{85} He describes the problem in the following words:

Setting aside the notion of human worth and dignity, which is part of many religions, we come at once to the core of the religion of humanism: a supreme faith in human reason—its ability to confront and solve the many problems that humans face, its ability to rearrange both the world of Nature and the affairs of men and women so that human life will prosper. Accordingly, as humanism is committed to an unquestioning faith in the power of reason, so it rejects other assertions of power, including the power of God, the power of supernatural forces, and even the undirected power of Nature in league with blind chance. The first two don’t exist, according to humanism; the last can, with effort, be mastered.\textsuperscript{86}

Ehrenfeld is identifying a high reverence for reason, and this reason helps to control the external world based on human interests. This has direct negative ecological consequences: “The difficulty is that the humanistic world accepts the conservation of Nature only piecemeal and at a price: there must be a logical, practical reason for saving each and every part of the natural world that we wish to preserve. And the dilemma arises on the increasingly frequent occasions when we encounter a threatened part of Nature but can find no rational reason for keeping it.”\textsuperscript{87} As this quote makes clear, the true underlying arrogance, then, is that things only exist and have value as long as they are useful to the fulfillment of human potential. Trees, animals, and watershed areas only gain value as long as they can enhance human life. The arrogance, therefore, is a privileging of the human species while maintaining a value for everything nonhuman insofar as it is related to human interests.

Environmentalists have associated this with a failure in human thought to break free from anthropocentric thinking. In a seminal ecological article, Christopher Manes speaks of one of the dominant silences in Western culture. This silence does not concern race, class, or gender.

\textsuperscript{85} Ehrenfeld, \textit{The Arrogance of Humanism}, vii-xiv.  
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.}, 5.  
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, 177.
“Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.”\textsuperscript{88} He associates the strong perpetuation of this silence with “Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism.”\textsuperscript{89} The problem with humanism is that it concentrates on human reason as it privileges “the rational human subject” who “struts upon the epistemological stage.”\textsuperscript{90} Those aspects of the world that lack rational faculties, creativity, and agency as understood in human terms become lesser aspects of creation, which diminishes their importance in Western society. Why? Because this inferior position means that they are not person’s deserving of reverence as they are not understood as possessing the same inherent dignity and autonomy as their human counterparts. Nature, as a whole, remains silent to many humans—especially in the West and for those supporting humanist values—because nonpersons do not communicate. In the final portions of his article, Manes offers a telling description hinting at the importance of Thoreau through the scholarly environmental work of Max Oelschlaeger:

A language free from an obsession with human preeminence . . . must leap away from the rhetoric of humanism we speak today . . . Attending to ecological knowledge means metaphorically relearning “the language of birds” – the passions, pains, and cryptic intents of the other biological communities that surround us and silently interpenetrate our existence. Oelschlaeger has convincingly argued that such relearning is precisely what “wilderness thinkers” such as Thoreau and [Gary] Snyder are attempting to do.\textsuperscript{91}

Through Thoreau, therefore, the Unitarian Universalist tradition needs to challenge its humanist origins and gain a more expansive understanding of persons that brings all of nature into the religious fold.

On a first reading, this may sound absurd since religion is a human creation and intended for humans. While William Ellery Channing’s theological position of God’s love for humans

\textsuperscript{88} Manes, “Nature and Silence,” 15.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 25.
from a transcendent position and the humanist lineage may have some undesirable consequences, some may argue that there is no need for a severe criticism of these positions. What I am arguing, however, is that a serious internal criticism of the tradition’s lineage is needed to counter every subtle anthropocentric theological and philosophical position guiding the tradition. Why? Because a strong anthropocentric bias has a serious consequence: It devalues the natural world and all nonhuman life. But what does this have to do with Native Americans and the Christian Doctrine of Discovery? It is intimately connected to the devaluing of Indigenous traditions and ways of life.

Thoreau clearly showed how the need to tame the wilderness led to the taming of those intimately connected to the natural world, and the decimation of Indigenous communities was perpetuated through the mastery and destruction of nature. This link should be clear by now, but failure to hear the voices of the natural world and to feel religiously connected to one’s bioregional surroundings means that one is not going to be able to take seriously Indigenous culture and religion. So long as Unitarian Universalist religious sensibilities maintain certain anthropocentric values, their religious orientation will continue to perpetuate—ever so subtly—the devaluing of Indigenous respect for the natural world.

George Tinker, a member of the Osage Nation and a scholar of Native American religions, makes it clear how impotent a humanist view is in matters of religion if one is to understand Indigenous worldviews: “The anthropocentrism already implicit in this eurowestern concern is not a part of our American Indian worldview. Rather, an Indian environmental concern begins with a deeply embedded sensitivity to our relationships with all life-forms, meaning all persons—if we can, as Indians do, interpret the english word ‘person’ much more
broadly, to include other-than-human persons."92 Not only does Tinker indicate how all humans are part of one large family, but in American Indian traditions, living and non-living aspects of creation are considered brothers and sisters:

Thus, “my relatives” include many more than all you readers or all two-legged folk of the world. Indeed, it necessarily includes all of life on our planet: the four-legged persons, the flying persons (from birds to butterflies, and even flies), and all those people called the living moving ones (that is, the mountains and rivers, the trees and the rocks, the corn that we plant to sustain our lives, and the fish in the lakes). Now we can begin to appreciate the moral ethic involved in praying for all our relatives—including especially those other-than-human relatives.93

This concern is rooted in the materiality of bodies in localized places embedded in interdependent webs, and these interdependent webs of coexistence mean that respect and responsibility for all persons in the present is essential to Indigenous worldviews:

American Indians, of course, are not temporally oriented in our worldview, nor do we inherently have a concern for something that amer-european folk would call “the future.” Indeed, our constant and continual concern is the here and now. It is a concern for place, our particular place in the world, our land; and it is a concern for managing ourselves within the spatial reality of place. Even the celebrated concern for generations yet unborn—to the seventh generation, as some national communities would proclaim (particularly those of the Iroquois Confederacy)—has to do with how we live in this place in the present moment. Balance and harmony in the future begin with harmony and balance in the now—our concern and the concern of every new generation of Indian people.94

Shifting away from an anthropocentric view and understanding that we are part of the larger family of creation means that we have to focus on the interdependent web of existence that exists in the present; it is a relatedness that is intimately anchored in one’s place in the world. Location is extremely important. By moving beyond an anthropocentric, humanist worldview, then, religion can begin to become more bioregionally aware while respectful of all persons—human

93 Ibid., 197.
94 Ibid., 200.
and nonhuman alike. It allows religion to become more naturalized in this world without an
emphasis on an other-worldly realm detached from the materiality of existence.

Thoreau, therefore, has an implicit critique that challenges the Principles and Purposes of
the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Thoreau’s *A Week* offers religious ideas that lead us away
from any affirmation of a distant, eternally separate God—whether “He” loves us or not. Instead,
for Thoreau, God comes down into this world within the very materiality of bodies living, dying,
drinking, eating, urinating, defecating, and engaging in sexual intimacy. Thoreau embraces our
materiality in his religious vision. He does not read nature to find some distant, eternally separate
God; instead, he engages nature as an inherently valuable realm of existence. He lets the animals,
the trees, and the rivers speak to him, and he learns from his reverent listening. It is in this
trajectory of deviating from humanist concerns and a distant God that Thoreau helps to bridge
the gap between traditional white religious cultures in the United States and Indigenous
communities. This means that today’s Unitarian Universalist denomination needs to begin
listening reverently to Native American wisdom and needs to alter their Principles and Purposes
accordingly to manifest a non-anthropocentric orientation while affirming a more expansive
view of personhood consonant with deep reverence for bioregional specificity. In doing this, the
denomination will simultaneously abandon previously harmful religious assumptions while
affirming a new path for the tradition.

With this move, however, they should adjust their Principles and Purposes in a clear way.
As they proclaim, the denomination supports peace, justice, equality, and other positive concepts
oriented toward the welfare of all humans. Within their many affirmations, however, one is
glaringly absent. There is no affirmation of the denomination’s support and solidarity with all
persons who are dominated and oppressed; they make no mention of uniting with all persons
experiencing injustice. With their fresh denunciation of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and with this examination of Thoreau and his solidarity with nature and Indigenous cultures, the Unitarian Universalist denomination needs to develop a religious position concerning solidarity with dominated and oppressed persons that takes seriously the expansive view of personhood found in Indigenous communities. Following Thoreau’s emphasis on the intersection between religion and civil disobedience, this means the tradition should consciously articulate a position of activism for all human and nonhuman person’s encountering injustice, such as Native Americans, the 18,000 to 55,000 species becoming extinct each year because of anthropogenic activities,\(^\text{95}\) and the retreating glaciers and polar icecaps. Instead of relying on its humanist lineage or an ambiguous statement of God’s love supported by Channing’s environmentally unfriendly theological presuppositions, the tradition should reorient its attention to principles and purposes clearly more consonant with Indigenous values and ecological concerns.

This new position would make clear the following points: (1) personhood includes human and nonhuman existence, (2) all creation is relational and forms a familial web of interactions, (3) religion needs to be bioregionally embedded and locally attuned, (4) diversity is at the heart of religion, (5) religion is about community and mutually beneficial relations within this diversity, (6) religion will honor the limited nature of the Earth’s resources and sustain bioregional activities that nurture instead of depleting Earth’s fruits, (7) there is never any justification for one species to dominate or exterminate another as there is no justification for domination and oppression of one group over another within a species—as all creation is sacred, (8) nonhuman creation in the natural world is more sacred than human-made creation, and (9) solidarity and promised support to all oppressed persons will be the guiding orientation giving

---

life and sustenance to all the denomination does.  

An important consequence emerges from these nine points: This naturalizes the Unitarian Universalist tradition—in Thoreau’s language—while allowing it to “listen but for an instant to the chaunt of the Indian muse.”

To use Bron Taylor’s language, it would make the Unitarian Universalist tradition a “dark green religion”: “By dark green religion, I mean religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care. Dark green religion considers nonhuman species to have worth, regardless of their usefulness to human beings. Such religion expresses and promotes an ethics of kinship between human beings and other life forms.” This transforms religion from a religious posture with ecological concerns to a religion grounded in and nurtured by the natural world:

For more than a generation some scholars closely affiliated with the world’s dominant religious traditions, at least those considered “world religions,” have labored to turn them in more environmentally friendly directions. My analytic focus here, however, has been on “dark green religion,” a form of nature related spirituality that shares the impulse toward environmental concern but that also considers nature and its denizens sacred in and of themselves. With such religion, ethical obligations to nature are direct rather than only arising indirectly as a means to promote human well-being.

Through such a naturalizing process, the Unitarian Universalist tradition would simultaneously champion ecological reverence and cultivate religious sensibilities consonant with Indigenous worldviews, which would be an act of religious and cultural solidarity. This seems the next logical step that would allow the denomination to move beyond denunciations to wisely engaged active solidarity.

---


97 Thoreau, A Week, 56.


99 Ibid., 100-01.
Conclusion

To conclude this dissertation, I want to turn briefly to an anecdote from Thoreau’s *A Week* that will help me to summarize all I have discussed in the previous chapters.

In the “Thursday” chapter of *A Week*, Thoreau added a brief story about Hannah Dustan (1657-1737) and her escape from her Abenaki captors. Her story became a common anecdote exemplifying pious heroism for early Americans in New England: “In the colonial period, Duston’s story was not meant to excite sentimental identification per se; rather, her story was ostensibly intended to teach lessons concerning humiliation and deliverance.” New Englanders eventually erected two statues as reminders of her heroism: One is in Haverhill, Massachusetts and another is in Boscawen, New Hampshire. In 1971, Notable American Women recognized Dustan as one of America’s “heroines.” In 1697, however, Cotton Mather helped to begin this glorification of her as he published his “Narrative of a Notable Deliverance from Captivity.” He describes Dustan as a prayerful woman who was obedient to God; Mather makes it clear that the Abenaki could not understand her actions as a prayerful Christian as one of them said to Dustan, “What need you trouble yourself? If your God will have you delivered, you shall be so.” Mather tersely and confidently proclaims, “And it seems our God would have it be so.” Toward the end of his narrative, Mather compares her to Jael in Judges who helped free Israel.

---

Mather leaves little room, in the end, for ambiguity; Dustan is to be celebrated as a model of holy living and as a personification of the superiority of civilization over savageness.105

The basic facts of the story are horrific. Toward the end of King William’s War, Abenaki Indians raided Haverhill, Massachusetts in the early hours of 15 March 1697.106 During their raid, they came across the home of Hannah and Thomas Dustan. They found Hannah Dustan lying in bed recuperating from giving birth. While taking her captive and leading her away, the Abenaki grabbed the recently born child and smashed its head against an apple tree and “dashed out the brains.”107 The raid left “twenty-seven inhabitants” dead, and the Abenaki took thirteen prisoners, which included Dustan.108 Prior to making it to present-day Concord, New Hampshire, Dustan and two others escaped on 30 April 1697; in doing so, they killed ten sleeping Abenaki Indians (two men, two women, and six children), but one woman and one child escaped.109 Dustan and the two others fled in a canoe with the ten bloody scalps in hand as evidence of their trials and deeds. The three eventually received £50 from Massachusetts as a reward.110

Both Mather and Thoreau convey these facts, but unlike Mather, Thoreau shifts his emphasis. Mather interprets the story as a sign of pious obedience and God’s grace, but Thoreau concentrates a significant portion of his story on the escapees’ trip down the river: the same portion Thoreau and his brother are gliding down in the book.111 Thoreau describes the escapees’ return trip and resettlement in the following words and with clear ambiguity:

106 Vaughan and Clark, Puritans among the Indians, 161.
107 Mather, “A Narrative of Hannah Dustan,” 163. Also see Thoreau, A Week, 321.
108 Vaughan and Clark, Puritans among the Indians, 161.
110 Vaughan and Clark, Puritans among the Indians, 161.
111 For more on Thoreau, A Week, and Hannah Dustan, see Alfred I. Tauber, Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 48-52.
Early this morning this deed was performed, and now, perchance, these tired women and this boy, their clothes stained with blood, and their minds racked with alternate resolution and fear, are making a hasty meal of parched corn and moose-meat, while their canoe glides under these pine roots whose stumps are still standing on the bank. They are thinking of the dead whom they have left behind on that solitary isle far up the stream, and of the relentless living warriors who are in pursuit. Every withered leaf which the winter has left seems to know their story, and in its rustling to repeat it and betray them. An Indian lurks behind every rock and pine, and their nerves cannot bear the tapping of a woodpecker. . . . ice is floating in the river; the spring is opening; the muskrat and the beaver are driven out of their holes by the flood; deer gaze at them from the bank; a few faint singing forest birds, perchance, fly across the river to the northernmost shore; the fish-hawk sails and screams overhead, and geese fly over with a startling clangor; but they do not observe these things, or they speedily forget them. They do not smile or chat all day. Sometimes they pass an Indian grave surrounded by its paling on the bank, or the frame of a wigwam. . . . these are the only traces of man,—a fabulous wild man to us. On either side, the primeval forest stretches away uninterrupted to Canada or to the “South Sea;” to the white man a drear and howling wilderness, but to the Indian a home, adapted to his nature, and cheerful as the smile of the Great Spirit . . . The family of Hannah Dustan all assembled alive once more, except the infant whose brains were dashed out against the apple-tree, and there have been many who in later times have lived to say that they had eaten of the fruit of that apple-tree.  

What is decidedly different is Thoreau’s emphasis on the escapees’ relationship to nature. Unlike Indigenous peoples who are more at home in the natural world, every leaf betrays them as they fearfully glide toward home. Not only are the Abenaki Indians in pursuit of them, but nature seems to support their capture. Nature leaves no lasting impression upon them—except that they are clearly not at home in the wilderness. They do not observe the specificity of their surroundings; they are clearly alienated. Their surroundings bring them neither joy nor solace. All they see is a “howling wilderness” apparently extending endlessly on both sides of the Merrimack River. They simply desire to get back to the comforts and familiarity of civilized life.

Alfred I. Tauber describes Thoreau’s use of this story in the following way: Thoreau “. . . used the story to reflect on the moral tenor of Indian-colonial relations and the implications of those conflicts for the American character.”

112 Thoreau, A Week, 322-23.
113 Tauber, Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing, 48.
assessment of the conflict; he allows the reader to encounter the brutality of Dustan—as he did with the scalping and slaying chaplain, Jonathan Frye, who was fighting alongside Captain Lovewell—that leaves her as “savage” as the disparaged Indigenous peoples white society displaced. Thoreau also places us within the scene as he shifts from past to present tense: “This grammatical turn is a striking shift in perspective by which Thoreau would attempt to bring the emotional quality of these historical events into present consciousness. Despite a distance of nearly a century and a half, he would have his reader identify with the scene as essentially his or her own.” Thoreau is not allowing history to be about the past and the dead only; their past and their experiences have left their traces in the present. The violence of the past contributes to the structure of today and America’s current identity: “Through his shifting into the present, we become parties to Hannah’s deeds.” We cannot deny that past, yet it seems unjustified to celebrate it. Native Americans acted horribly as they killed a child no more than two weeks old. Hannah Dustan reciprocated killing six children. These broken relationships exist alongside the broken relationships white society had with nature; the fear of Indigenous communities is mirrored by the fear of nature, and religion justified these fears as God supposedly helped Hannah Dustan escape—because she was a prayerful woman obedient to God’s will.

Once again, then, Thoreau places the reader and himself in the midst of endless webs of relations dissolved and precluded because of fear, theology, and a willingness to use killing as an answer. As we read A Week, we do not simply run our eyes over the page; instead, that violence

---

115 Thoreau, A Week, 119-21.
116 Tauber, Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing, 49.
117 Ibid., 50.
118 Ibid., 51.
engages us, and it is not only our past but our present too. Who we are is a result of murder and sustained alienation from the natural world. He leaves the reader questioning: What do I do now? How should I respond?

Thoreau gives no clear answer; instead, he offers the reader an equivocal conclusion: “The family of Hannah Dustan all assembled alive once more, except the infant whose brains were dashed out against the apple-tree, and there have been many who in later times have lived to say that they had eaten of the fruit of that apple-tree.”119 Hannah Dustan is back home with her family; historically, we know she gave birth to another child and lived for eighty years in all. Yet, things do not seem well, for people have eaten apples from that tree nurtured by the blood and possibly both the gray and white matter left behind after the baby was smashed against the tree. This means that they have not only been nurtured by the tale of the “heroine,” but the physical remains of that violence have nurtured their very bodies. Violence from the past sustains the materiality of who we are today. With this image, Thoreau makes it clear that past violence is materially present today. The other reading, however, is more positive; one can read Thoreau’s ambiguity as allowing for the realization that violence cannot stop life from flourishing. The violent death of the child—through its blood and pieces of its body left behind—worked its way into the ground, and nature transformed those violent remains into life. Not even the tragic killing of children can stop the life-preserving force of nature from turning violence into life-sustaining fruits. This returns to Thoreau’s urging us to have a separate intention of the eye—to see an object from many angles and as composed of strata of truths; he leaves the reader not with either one or the other interpretation—but with both held in tight dialectical tension with the other. To recognize the destructive past is also to recognize a possible fruitful, nourishing future—if we deliberately choose the latter over the former. He leaves the

119 Thoreau, A Week, 323-24.
reader with the choice: An optimistic, peaceful future is there if one looks carefully enough, at
the proper angle, and with the right attitude.\footnote{Edward F. Mooney’s observations concerning Thoreau’s ethics are guiding me here. See Edward F. Mooney, “Thoreau’s Wild Ethics,” \textit{The Concord Saunterer} 19/20 (2011-12): 104-24.}

Thoreau is offering an anecdote that forces us to look with a separate intention of the eye; he wants us to hold together at least two possible paths: (1) We can continue to be nourished by violence, that is, live life based on violence, or (2) we can start thinking about how to transform the violence in our history into something more positive, that is, something that will nourish us and allow us to live healthy, fulfilling lives. He offers the readers two clear thresholds; we have to make a deliberate choice. Which one do we want? Do we want to cross over into a way of living that flourishes because of violence? Or, do we want to cross over into a realm of transformed relationships where past and current wrongs are creatively refigured leading to a future of renewed, peaceful relations? In this way, Thoreau leaves the reader precariously hanging between violence and peace.

In doing so, however, he allows the reader to see how interconnected people are with other humans and with nature. He embeds humans within the natural world and shows how dysfunctional relations within the human realm find expression in dysfunctional relations with the natural world. Thoreau, then, introduces the reader to systems thinking where changes in one realm can have changes in another.\footnote{Walker and Salt, \textit{Resilience Thinking}, 1-14.} Murdering of other humans finds a parallel form of alienation in the natural realm. This implies that to be fully “human,” human beings need to be fully naturalized and become more than human (in the traditional sense). The two are interdependent. Humans exist within the house of nature; Earth is our true home. To be at one with Earth is to also see that all existence is nourished by the ground on which we live. All
creation is one large family. Disrespect for one aspect manifests itself in disregard for other aspects. Myopic thinking will not suffice.

This emphasis on transforming relationships and healing past wrongs to bring about more harmony in human and nonhuman relations makes Thoreau’s *A Week* much more than a text within the genre of American literature. His complex awareness of his embeddedness within the historical injustices labeled today as the “Christian Doctrine of Discovery” makes *A Week* a concerted effort to reorient American readers toward the violence that constitutes the American narrative. He does this, however, with an eye on human relations and an eye on the natural world; the symbiotic relationship between the two is always in the forethought of his mind, which means Thoreau is not only providing a text to improve human relationships. He is offering an ecological text allowing readers to see the natural world filled with nonhuman peoples, and he makes Earth a complex protagonist within his book that demands respect.

Thoreau does this, however, by offering a form of nature religion that emphasizes the sacredness of the natural world. He advocates rebinding oneself to the natural world and allowing the wildness of the natural world to inspire the reader to be more wild in life. This wildness should be brought back into society to transform the lives of others. He is showing people that they need to rebind themselves to something better—something that demands a new, better self.122

This makes his text a religious text written from within the American Transcendentalist movement that indicates problems with how humans are living, where they could be, and how to get there. Through this articulation, Thoreau advocates various practices that open up a space for people to encounter life and existence in a fresh way. Through his ability to decenter anthropocentric concerns by placing them within the broader contexts of nature and history,

---

Thoreau allows us to re-envision religion today. Religion should become more connected with the environment and Earth-centered traditions. This means transforming conceptions of a separate God who supports an otherworldly perspective that allows people to devalue this world for a new one. Thoreau also indicates that we should abandon our esteem for anthropocentric ways of envisioning the world. Religion should broaden itself to include all humans and all of the natural world as fellow members within congregations, which means listening to the cries of the fish and understanding the distress signals of a planet in peril. It is through such observations that Thoreau becomes relevant for today’s religious discussions.

For example, as today’s Unitarian Universalist denomination has renounced the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, Thoreau provides a path that will allow the denomination to move beyond denunciation. He provides a trajectory based on solidarity with the oppressed, such as Native Americans and the environment. Through non-anthropocentric principles and purposes and through reconnection with Earth as a protagonist within religion, Thoreau offers a bridge for the denomination that will allow them to revere the expansive view of personhood found in Indigenous traditions. In this way, cultural and religious harmony should help to prepare the denomination for further action beyond denunciation. Through a more expansive vision, the denomination should be better prepared to act in ways to reduce the harmful legacy of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery that used theological principles to support mastery over land and people.

This reveals that *A Week* is not an immature text. If—as some conclude—*A Week* was written during Thoreau’s “immature” period, then I can only conclude that this period of immaturity had a level of maturity and sophistication to which few have arisen. Instead, I would not seek to place it in an immature period, but I would argue that his text is a serious attempt to
address very real political, religious, and ecological concerns that would influence his other works. *A Week* should be read in dialogue with his other works in a recontextualized way that will hopefully lead to a rereading of his entire corpus. In the end, my hope is that this dissertation will lead to new investigations of Thoreau’s work situated within the interpretive framework of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery focused on his awareness that the destruction of the environment and the decimation of Indigenous communities are interconnected aspects of pernicious religious assumptions, which means that we should come to see Thoreau’s entire corpus as “Transcendental scripture writing” focused on undermining this pernicious posture while offering a more just religious way of being. In this way, Thoreau’s writings become liberative religious expressions intent on healing injustices. He seeks to preserve aspects of the world that have been devalued, and he seeks to bring balance and harmony to relationships that will allow for sustained peace to exist. Through preservative care, Thoreau challenges a religion of subjugation, and this provides the reader with a new, normative paradigm for religion: Religion is a tool for peace fostering pluralism, dissensus, and freedom. As all people, in Thoreau’s thinking, have a better, new self always waiting in the shadows, religion also has its better, new self. Religious violence, intolerance, and exclusion need not exist; Thoreau never lets readers forget this. If we would only change our angle of vision and attitudes slightly, a new nurturing world could be present in which all creation is deserving of and receives our respect.
WORKS CITED


VITA

Name of Author: Robert Michael Ruehl
Place of Birth: Winter Park, Florida
Date of Birth: July 16, 1974

Graduate and Undergraduate Schools Attended:
Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York
Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, New York
St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York
Monroe Community College, Rochester, New York

Degrees Awarded:
Master of Philosophy in Religion, 2010, Syracuse University
Master of Divinity, 2008, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2000, St. John Fisher College
Associate in Science, 1997, Monroe Community College

Awards and Honors:
Syracuse University Graduate Fellowship, 2008-2012
Theta Chi Beta Religion Honor Society, 2010
Winthrop Hudson Scholar Award, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, 2008
Jansje Dinkeloo Carey Scholarship, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, 2007-2008
Alpha Sigma Lambda Honor Society, 2000
Outstanding Critical Writing Award, St. John Fisher College, 2000
Zelda Lyons Award, St. John Fisher College, 2000
Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, 1996

Experience:
Lecturer, Department of Religion, Syracuse University, 2011-2013
REL 156: Christianity (Fall 2013)
REL 103: Religion and Sports (Summer 2013)
REL 103: Religion and Sports (co-instructor, Spring 2013)
REL 120: Introduction to the Study of Religion (Spring 2012)
REL 120: Introduction to the Study of Religion (Fall 2011)
REL 320: Religion, Violence, and Resistance (Spring 2011)

Teaching Assistant, Department of Religion, Syracuse University, 2010-2014
REL 103: Religion and Sports (Spring 2014)
REL 242: Religious Issues in American Life (Fall 2012)
REL 103: Religion and Sports (Spring 2012)
REL 242: Religious Issues in American Life (Fall 2011)
REL 103: Religion and Sports (Spring 2011)
REL 156: Christianity (Fall 2010)