“All is Harmony in that Department”

Religious Expressions within the Fourierist Communal Experiments of the 1840s

Amy Hart

ABSTRACT: Throughout the 1840s, numerous intentional communities based on a cooperative financial model were organized across the United States. Primarily led by social reformers and often based on the writings of French utopian Charles Fourier, these communities acted as a response to social and economic inequity. As part of their challenge to nineteenth-century social conventions, these communities refrained from including any religious test or expectation of religious adherence for members. The result was the development of spaces where new religious movements and diverse religious expressions emerged, sometimes resulting in communal strife. This article argues that diverse religious expressions were cultivated across these communities, if unevenly. The article highlights three case studies in which religious expression proved a central component of communal organization, social harmony, or community discord. These communities include Trumbull Phalanx in Ohio, Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Massachusetts, and Ceresco in Wisconsin.

KEYWORDS: Fourier/Fourierism, association, intentional community, Spiritualism/Spiritualist, utopia/utopian
During the economic depression of the 1840s, social reformers and disgruntled laborers across the United States joined communal experiments in their search for an alternative to the cold realities of market capitalism. Intentional living communities emerged across the country throughout the decade, attempting to offer answers to questions that most Americans did not yet know to ask regarding capital, free labor, and marketplace fluctuations. One particularly widespread network of communal experiments was inspired by the French writer Charles Fourier (1772–1837) who created a blueprint for the ideal society based on “attractive” labor, religious pluralism, and gender equality. Other communal experiments that could be collectively labelled “socialist” communities were also initiated throughout the decade. Together, these utopian experiments served as sites of upheaval of not only economic norms, but also of social and religious norms in the United States.

Over two dozen communal experiments inspired by Fourier’s writings were initiated by reformers during the 1840s. These communities eventually reached as far west as Texas and were particularly popular along the East Coast and the affordable lands of the Midwest. Though organized primarily to produce and demonstrate a cooperative economic model, these communities also enacted Fourier’s vision by including no religious requirement for joining the communities. Though religious diversity was not the central goal of Fourierist communities, their stance on religious tolerance resulted in the expression of multiple religious perspectives within each community. These communities also served as experimental grounds for emerging forms of religion including the burgeoning Spiritualist movement, which would continue to grow in popularity throughout the 1850s. The emergence of communal experiments in the mid-nineteenth century thus serve as one of the many events of the era that, in the words of one scholar of religion, “unsettle traditional hierarchies of religious authority.” This article will examine the religious beliefs that found expression within three of these socialist communal experiments, while also analyzing the ways that these communities forged lasting links between religion and social reform in the United States.

While numerous intentional communities could be analyzed for their role in cultivating new religious expressions and advocating religious toleration, this article highlights three communities in the Fourierist movement in the United States: Trumbull Phalanx in Ohio, Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Massachusetts, and Ceresco in Wisconsin. Each community represents one of the typical paths that utopian socialist communities were prone to follow in their attempt to produce harmony between religion and social transformation. Through increasingly unorthodox gestures, each of these communities challenged popular expressions of Protestant Christianity of the
period. The first community did so by encouraging religious diversity within a Christian socialist framework, the second by reimagining the role of the community as a replacement for the Christian church, and the third by exploring new alternatives to Christianity altogether. These three communities together illustrate the religious zeitgeist of the time, when perspectives on the relationship between the religious and the secular, material and spiritual, and body and society were in flux.

THE RISE OF UTOPIAN SOCIALISM

The communitarian wave that swept through the United States throughout the 1840s was inspired by the writings of Europeans from the preceding decades. Visionaries including Robert Owen (1771–1858), Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), Étienne Cabet (1788–1856), and Charles Fourier created blueprints for utopian societies that offered solutions to the social ills caused by industrialization in Europe. Each theorist highlighted the importance of producing an alternative economic system to unbridled capitalism, while also often proclaiming the need for the social elevation of women and religious tolerance. Charles Fourier, among others, predicted global implications if their blueprints were followed correctly. In his early nineteenth-century texts, Fourier described a future world in which the nation-state had passed away, replaced by numerous, interconnected communities that together maintained global trade networks. These communities would form self-sustaining and mutually beneficial microcosms of society in which every person could follow his or her desired vocation without facing oppression from social forces including gender norms, poverty, or discrimination. To Fourier, planned harmonious communities such as these represented the best response to unchecked capitalism.

Unlike other European utopians of his era, Fourier died before he could witness his writings brought to life in the form of communitarian experiments across the United States. Regardless, there is little doubt that each of the experiments would have been a disappointment to him. An eccentric and meticulous visionary, Fourier’s model for the ideal society was produced through mathematical equations and formulas he had created based on the diverse instincts, or “passions,” of individuals. Even as Fourier mocked philosophers as fools who were disconnected from actual human suffering, he simultaneously advocated his own all-encompassing theory of humanity based on his self-reportedly superior powers of observation. Grounded in the number of passions existent in humanity, Fourier deduced that 1,620 people would need to inhabit each community for each passion to be adequately represented. To Fourier, achieving these population numbers was crucial to the success of a community.
When Fourier’s young American disciple, Albert Brisbane (1809–1890), returned to the United States from a European tour in 1834, he embarked on the task of altering many of Fourier’s most controversial ideas to present a more palatable vision to American audiences. As the primary interpreter of Fourier’s writings to the American public, Brisbane held a powerful ability to filter Fourier’s messages, highlighting their most appealing aspects. This process involved omitting all reference to Fourier’s ideas on radical gender equality, polyamory, and the value of communal orgies. While Fourier’s utopian blueprints included directions for sexual encounters in group settings and sex work as compensated labor, Brisbane’s translations omitted those social aspects, focusing instead on the financial promise of a cooperative economic model. Brisbane’s modifications allowed middle-class Americans to pursue Fourier’s utopian vision while avoiding public criticism for becoming associated with sexually deviant proposals.

Brisbane also presented a more flexible blueprint for Fourier’s proposed communities, leading aspirational Fourierists to believe they could organize their own Fourierist community with fewer than 1,620 people and without the particular architectural requirements outlined by Fourier. Fourier’s architectural plan was based on an imagined structure called the “phalanstery,” a combination of monastery and “phalanx,” or military formation. Thus, Fourierist communities in the United States were typically referred to as phalanxes. However, beyond adopting Fourier’s name for these communal structures, little else was followed exactly to Fourier’s vision in these American communities.

Brisbane’s depiction of Fourierist communities as sites of resource sharing among forward-thinking Americans attracted numerous social reformers who sought financial cooperation without disruption of their monogamous marriages or their public reputations. Though rumors of “free love” within Fourierist communities persisted to an extent throughout the 1840s and ‘50s, few Fourierist community members actually advocated this progressive stance. Brisbane’s filtered writings and lectures inspired the creation of numerous, small Fourierist communities across the United States, to the disappointment of Brisbane himself. His hope that aspiring Fourierists would show restraint in founding new communities in favor of developing one model phalanx proved impossible to enforce, as local Fourierist clubs and lyceums stoked excitement to start new communal experiments within their own localities. The increasing number of Fourierist communities produced the unintended consequence of dividing the funds of wealthy donors and sympathetic patrons, leading to financial turmoil among the communal experiments, as will be explored below.

Brisbane’s message appealed to American audiences bent on utopian solutions to current economic and social problems. As market capitalism advanced across the United States in the early nineteenth century, boom
and bust economic cycles became more frequent and severe, impacting urban professionals and rural agriculturalists alike. Unstable currencies and perennial returns to reliance on specie (gold and silver) led to economic instability and ultimately an economic downturn in the late 1830s. This unpredictability in a new age of expanding global markets led to popular theorizing on better economic and social models that would address this instability. Plans for organized communities were pervasive among social reformers in the mid-nineteenth century: as Ralph Waldo Emerson commented in 1840, “not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.” The result of Brisbane’s publicity of Fourier’s writings was the emergence of numerous, diverse communities based on Fourier’s economic principles, yet each expressing unique social and religious leanings. The most documented of these communities is the transcendentalist community of Brook Farm, which has received unparalleled attention from scholars due to its famous members and visitors including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller, respectively. Brook Farm transitioned to a Fourierist organizational model a few years into its existence, thereby adding its numbers and influence to the popular Fourierist communitarian wave. Beyond Brook Farm, numerous lesser-known socialist communities were also created throughout the 1840s, resulting in the production of communal spaces in which religious diversity, and religious experimentation, could take form.

For socialist communitarians, as for nineteenth-century Americans in general, the increasing religious plurality existed largely below the surface of conscious reflection, only to be observed by scholars of later generations. Practical concerns instead took precedence, and were thus at the forefront of communal experiments’ stated goals. The artisans, craftsmen, and professionals who joined socialist communal experiments primarily sought a new economic organization that would solve the instability of the industrializing markets. After the Panic of 1837, bold new models for reorganizing society under a more just economic system suddenly seemed less outlandish to middle-class professionals than in the economically prosperous years. But along with economic reform, religious diversity would purportedly be allowed and even celebrated. For some who joined these communities, the introduction of a spiritual dimension was irrelevant, or even counterproductive, to the goals of harmonious living. To others, often the most outspoken leaders of the communal experiments, religious diversity and experimentation represented a rational evolution of civilization that would aid in the total transformation of society. For those latter reformers, defending their interpretation of advanced religious expression would become central to their experiences within the communal environment, often to the detriment of communal harmony.

Some socialist community leaders moved beyond a passive acceptance of religious diversity and toward active participation in new
religious movements. These religious expressions differed across communities, with some communitarians participating in emerging religious forms including Spiritualism, and others developing their own communal rituals and gatherings that mimicked religion in significant ways. In most Fourierist communities, religious experimentation remained grounded in Christianity, but emphasized the morality of the Fourierist economic model as a material expression of Christian principles. This communitarian form of early Christian socialism centered Christ along with the image of Charles Fourier. Decades before Christian socialism found expression as a religious movement promoting social justice in the United States, Fourierists were expressing this religious interpretation within their communities. Fourierist intentional communities thus provide case studies of often-overlooked spaces of religious experimentation in the 1840s, as well as the backlash that often followed from this experimentation. The first community examined here provides one such example.

TRUMBULL PHALANX

Trumbull Phalanx offers a case study of community leaders incorporating both Christian socialism and religious diversity into the stated goals of their community. In 1843 in Trumbull County, Ohio, a group of aspiring Fourierists assembled to discuss their shared interest in Fourier’s theory of community, eventually leading to the formation of their communal experiment known at Trumbull Phalanx. Physically based around a saw mill and housing numerous industrial centers on the property, Trumbull Phalanx represents one of the most industrially diverse Fourierist communities, but its members expressed a Christian socialism that was not uncommon across this communal network.

This Christian socialism is outlined in the community’s founding documents, in which community leaders presented a biblically justified defense of the laborer over the capitalist. In their Constitution and List of Resolutions, organizers argued: “Resolved, that the present system of commercial business is a system of oppression and consequently discouraging to the poor, and is a positive answer to the question or a sort of affirmation of the Apostle, ‘Do not the Rich oppress you?’” Another resolution condemned the United States’ economic system as morally defective: “Resolved, that the evils of the present system are beyond the reach of political reform, as the history of the past does abundantly prove.” In a more just system, the resolutions outlined that “industry and economy should be the index of real worth rather than wealth and fine equipage.” The primary failure of society was identified as unchecked market competition, which led to inequality and oppression of the laborer. Self-interest as the basis of economic pursuit was not
condemned by Fourierists (nor by Fourier), only the unbridled ability of capitalists to underpay and overwork laborers. As the community concluded, “As industrial labor, whether man’s, woman’s, or child’s, is sure preventive to many evils, it should be rewarded, according to its productiveness, [and] consequently encouraged by being reputable and attractive.”22 From its beginnings, Trumbull Phalanx’s defense of the laborer rested partly on biblical authority, as interpreted by the founders of the community.23

The community’s challenge to economic inequality and class disparity was partially expressed through its cooperative labor model and shared dormitory-style housing. As was common for Fourierist communities, members at the Trumbull Phalanx shared housing and determined financial compensation for labor based on its importance to community survival, not on market forces. These housing and labor structures were informed by the larger religious outlook of community members, even if the practicality of the arrangements did not always please community residents.24 The primary reform agenda of Trumbull Phalanx (and the other Fourierist communities) is made clear from their founding documents: economic reform would constitute the community’s primary concern, which was justified through their Christian socialist convictions, though no particular denominational loyalty was required for membership.

Though it was only a secondary goal, the community’s dedication to religious tolerance became a cause of discord during the community’s existence. Church services were held on the property every Sunday and the religious preference of most members was the new and relatively radical group called the Disciples of Christ, though the community also included Presbyterians, Methodists, and Unitarians.25 The dominance of Disciples of Christ, who proposed a post-denomination world in which all Christians would be united under a single group of believers, reveals the disdain for inter-denominational conflict among Trumbull Phalanx members. In addition to on-site church services, Trumbull Phalanx acted as host to numerous lecturers, reformers, and conferences meant to bolster support for religious reform movements. One convention hosted at Trumbull Phalanx in particular highlights the precarious balance between religious tolerance and the commitment to a singular vision of Christian socialism that created tension within the community. On 12 August 1847, Trumbull hosted a “convention of reformers,” advertised by the organizers as being aimed at those who wished to become “messengers of Jesus.” The lecture series hosted at the community was millennialist in bent, and the guest speakers proclaimed that “the millennial dispensation of ‘good will and universal peace’ amongst all mankind will be established upon this earth.” The convention was organized by Peter Kauffman, an Ohio businessman, reformer, and communitarian, along with Andrew Smolnikar, who
identified himself as “formerly Roman Catholic Priest...now messenger of the Dispensation of the Fullness of the Times.” Though they were not members of Trumbull Phalanx, the community hosted Kauffman and Smolnikar and their convention in the spirit of religious tolerance and social reform.

The Kauffman-Smolnikar convention claimed no denominational loyalty, but was aimed at attracting those reformers who had left churches that did not adequately pursue social reform. These groups of ardent reformers were common in communal experiments, and came to be known as “come-outers.” They included women’s rights advocates and Garrisonian abolitionists who felt that religious institutions were not doing enough to progress society through reform activism. As Smolnikar wrote to Kaufmann before the conference in an attempt to disparage religious leaders, “Ladies now step forward to be Christ’s messengers, while preachers neglect their duty.” For these conference organizers, religion and social reform were intimately connected, a spiritual outlook with which Trumbull Phalanx members could relate.

In a letter to Peter Kauffman written 29 August 1847, just after the convention was held at the community, Trumbull Phalanx resident Electa Newton informed Kauffman that she expected to be evicted from the community for defending the principles Kauffman had advocated during his lecture at the convention. Despite disapproval from the rest of the community, Newton encouraged Kauffman to “go on with your worke (sic) of love, walking in the footsteps of your Master, having the everlasting gospel to preach to them that dwell on the earth.” Newton’s correspondence reveals the tension caused by the seminars, conventions, and religious gatherings hosted at the community. In their attempt to achieve Fourier’s blueprint of a religiously diverse community, Trumbull members encouraged religious reformers to visit their community, and thus, in their minds, move the community toward the ideal of “free toleration.” However, this free toleration was resisted by some members, and when it came to marginal religious figures, the limits to toleration were revealed. Come-outers’ rejection of formal religious institutions was a point of contention for community members at Trumbull Phalanx.

Trumbull Phalanx would dissolve as a communitarian experiment after less than a decade of existence, though its dissolution had less to do with religious friction than financial debt, which plagued most Fourierist communities. The community provided a space where diverse religious perspectives could be heard, but where universal support for those perspectives could not always be found. Though the community did not dissolve over this event alone, the discordance it created serves as a reminder of the limits to religious diversity, even within communal spaces.
To the east of Trumbull Phalanx, another socialist community was formed in 1842, one which provided a more welcoming space for come-outers and other radical reformers. Founded by abolitionists, the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Massachusetts offered both economic equity and a post-slavery vision for American society. One of the few racially diverse communal experiments in the nineteenth century, Northampton was also a religiously skeptical experiment. With close ties to Garrisonian abolitionism (the founder of the Northampton Association, George Benson, was William Lloyd Garrison’s brother-in-law), most members were critical of the weak role that churches had played in condemning slavery in the United States. As a result, the community expressed its own form of Christian socialism, with the community itself playing the role of the church. Members planned community meetings, social gatherings, and celebrations that, in effect, replaced the church’s role in conducting ritual and organizing social life.

Northampton Association provided a space in which both practical and spiritual needs were addressed within the community grounds. Everyday life was organized around the community’s primary revenue creator: silk production. An on-site silk farm and factory was purchased along with the communal property. Silk production was the center of labor for most community members including children, who split their time between traditional education and practical education in silk worm farming. The silk factory also doubled as housing for most community members, who resided in rooms above the factory. Life at the Northampton Association was also designed by community members to challenge and upend the religious traditions of their surrounding society to which they most objected. To the frustration of the largely Congregationalist surrounding town of Northampton, the Northampton Association members eschewed Sunday church services in favor of community gatherings. Such gatherings, often organized under a large tree on the community grounds, were led by men and women alike, further upsetting local clergy who objected to women speaking to “mixed audiences” of men and women. The decision to hold meetings on Sundays was a conscious rejection of Christian understandings of the Sabbath as a day of rest, and Northampton Association members became known as “Sabbath breakers” in the surrounding area. Topics of these meetings could be as diverse as dietary restrictions, community business, or education reform, demonstrating the often-overlapping realms of social, religious, and bodily reform among communitarians. Their commitment to religious tolerance and their rejection of the clergy’s authority led them to reorganize their weekly schedule to focus on community matters, while reframing...
members’ loyalty to mean respecting communal authority over that of the church.36

Regardless of the community’s criticism of Protestant churches, Northampton Association nevertheless was home to deeply religious individuals. The travelling preacher and former slave Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) resided at the Northampton Association and often served as a moral enforcer in the community.37 Her evangelical Christian worldview informed her conservative stance on social activities (“amusements”) within the community, including her disapproval of dancing, playing cards, and flirtations between younger members.38 Factions emerged between members who approved of these social activities and those who opposed them, the latter including Truth. Her impassioned speeches and charismatic lectures against social extravagances won over the residents, and members who had previously voiced their support of these activities left the community.39 Truth’s ability to determine social decorum within Northampton Association demonstrated that her personal identity as a black female did little to diminish her influence within the community. In fact, her experience as a preacher and her growing investment in the abolitionist movement seems to have led her to receive greater respect among community members. This combination of anti-slavery activism and personal religious conviction were the qualities that Northampton Association members found lacking in most Protestant churches of the period, and which they found embodied in Truth. When social reform and Christianity were placed in tandem, Northampton Association members’ disdain for Protestant preachers and their churches vanished.

For Northampton Association members, Christianity and abolitionism were treated as mutually reinforcing ideologies. This interpretation was expressed by Sojourner Truth, as well as by her friend and fellow community member, Olive Gilbert (1801–1884). Gilbert, a white, female abolitionist, identified as a Unitarian, and like Sojourner Truth, she was drawn to Perfectionist ideas of the period. Their shared belief in humanity’s potential for continuous spiritual advancement bridged Gilbert’s Unitarianism and Truth’s Methodism.40 Before arriving at Northampton, Gilbert had attended the reformer Samuel May’s church in Brooklyn, Connecticut, where May had advocated social and legal equality for African Americans. Through Gilbert’s association with May’s church, Gilbert became involved in defending white schoolteacher Prudence Crandall, who had spurred public backlash by allowing an African American girl to attend her Canterbury, Connecticut, school in 1833.41 Gilbert’s history of blending social reform activism and Christianity made her a good fit for the Northampton community, as well as for friendship with Truth.

Their similar religious worldviews and shared dedication to the anti-slavery cause drew Truth and Gilbert together, and over the course of
the next four years, Truth would dictate her personal history of slavery to Gilbert, which would result in the publishing of Truth’s influential slave narrative. As evidenced in letters exchanged between Gilbert and Truth, the significance of their religious faith to their personal identities and everyday lives seemed to unite them even into old age. Discussing the high death toll of young soldiers during the Civil War, Gilbert wrote to Truth: “And oh! it makes me almost speechless when I contemplate the hosts of men, and those the flower of their country, that were thus sacrificed to Moloch. There is but one reconciling thought, and that is, The Lord is all-wise and reigneth over all. He sees and knows what we observe, and not a sparrow falls to the ground without his notice.”

Truth and Gilbert were brought together through their abolitionist ties, but their common religious outlook would sustain their friendship for years afterward. In 1857 Truth moved to a Spiritualist community in Michigan called Harmonia, then finally to the nearby town of Battle Creek, Michigan, where her daughters lived and which also served as a popular settling place for Spiritualists. Her membership at the Northampton Association serves as an example of members’ receptivity to ideologies that incorporated social reform, and conversely their hostility to Protestant churches that had failed to advance those reform movements.

As evidenced in the topics discussed at the Northampton Association’s Sunday meetings, communal religious alternatives involved connecting the health of the individual body with that of the social body. As numerous social reformers of the antebellum period believed, both the social and individual bodies must be healed to enact societal transformation. Though largely seen as an emerging science more than a purely spiritual endeavor, the practice of water-cures found expression at Northampton. David Ruggles, a black abolitionist and member of the community, worked as a water-cure agent (hydro-therapist) first in the Northampton Association, then through an independent office nearby after the dissolution of the community. Water cures were rapidly gaining popularity in the 1840s, partly due to their appeal to reformers who saw a connection between bodily and societal reinvigoration that could be accomplished through this ritualized practice.

Ruggles’ water cure facility tapped into the opaque relationship that tied ritual, science, and reform together in the mid-nineteenth century.

Health practices were widespread in communitarian environments, where they were often explicitly tied to the spiritual evolution of the individual, as well as the reinvigoration of the social body. As one antebellum health reformer, Sylvester Graham (who lectured at one of the Northampton Association’s Sunday meetings) explained: “The intellectual and moral philosophy of man cannot be understood without a knowledge of the nervous system as a whole; and it is only by attention to the physiological laws of the domain of organic life, that we
can hope to have such an effect on the brain, and other parts, as will secure health, wisdom, virtue, and happiness.”45 Health practices for reformers such as Graham included vegetarianism, abstaining from alcohol, and using particular bathing methods.46 This intertwining of the physical body, social environment, and virtue was explored by Northampton Association members in their effort to make the community into a place of both religious expression and social reform.47 Though infighting over ethical behavioral standards caused strife within the community, the common vision of transforming ineffective Protestant churches remained a point of agreement for the reformers at the Northampton Association.

CERESCO

The culmination of the body-spirit connection for mid-century reformers arguably found full expression in the séances and spirit manifestations of the Spiritualist movement. The leaders of the third community of this study, the Ceresco community in territorial Wisconsin, cultivated a Spiritualist network within the community, often to the chagrin of fellow community members.48 Ceresco was founded by a group of social reformers in the spring of 1844. The term “Ceresco” came from “Ceres,” the Roman goddess of agriculture. As the name suggested, the community relied on agriculture to bring sustenance and profit. Like most Fourierist communities, members at Ceresco also primarily shared housing in the community’s dormitories, including one long and narrow building referred to by members as the “Long House.”

Like other Fourierist communities, the guiding documents of the Ceresco community did not require adherence to any religious belief as a prerequisite for becoming a member. However, unlike most Fourierist communities, Ceresco founders expressed both a dedication to individual ethical reform as well as openness to new religious expressions. They explicitly prohibited labor on the Sabbath and established strict ethical requirements for members in the community’s constitution, threatening expulsion from the community for any violation of these regulations.49 An additional bylaw was added after the creation of the community, which prohibited members from bringing any alcoholic beverages on site, thereby turning Ceresco into a temperance community.50 Yet despite its beginnings as one of the most ethics-regulating Fourierist communities, Ceresco would evolve into a community that cultivated support for new religious movements.

At its outset, the community’s original members were largely aligned with Protestant denominations, and multiple Ceresco residents were even clergy members: one founding member, Uriel Farmin, was a Methodist preacher, and another, George Stebbins, was a Baptist
Like at Trumbull Phalanx, itinerant preachers also visited Ceresco on occasion. However, when Protestant ministers visited Ceresco, they often complained of an anti-Christian sentiment at the community. When Reverend Wesson Gage Miller travelled through the area to evangelize to settlers, he found himself warmly welcomed at Ceresco by Rev. Uriel Farmin. Despite this warm reception, Miller was unimpressed by the community’s apparent lackluster commitment to Christianity. He later wrote his mixed review of the community: “Though not a few of the leading men were professed Infidels, they always received ministers gladly and treated them with consideration.” Miller was invited to offer a sermon for the community during his stay, but he nevertheless sensed religious dissent among the groups’ leaders. Franklin Sherrill, another travelling preacher, also took issue with Ceresco, praising the eventual dissolution of the community but lamenting its legacy: “The bitter fruits of infidelity and irreligion which Fourierism has left behind it, leave us much to contend with. Infidel meetings are still held, whose chief object seems to be to bring into disrespect the truths of evangelical religion.” Even after the community’s demise, Protestant Christian leaders found fault with Ceresco members and their dabbling in religious trends. Much of these complaints can be traced back to the Spiritualist leanings of one of the community’s founding members, Warren Chase (1813–1891).

Chase’s personal bias against Christianity was not expressed publicly in the early days of the Ceresco community, when he happily reported that “we have a Sunday school, Bible class, and divine service every Sabbath by different denominations, who occupy the hall (as we have but one) alternately; and all is harmony in that department, although we have many different members of different religious societies.” But throughout the years of Ceresco’s existence, Chase’s increasingly outspoken hostility to Christianity, and simultaneous dedication to alternative religious forms, would create tension in the community. Even before Chase became a cofounder of Ceresco, he had shown interest in new religious movements that were gaining popularity across the United States, first through a fascination with mesmerism or “animal magnetism.” Reflecting back years later, Chase saw mesmerism as initiating his personal path toward Spiritualism, a path which was guided by the writings of Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Spiritualism was in its infancy as a religious movement in the United States in the 1840s, but by the 1850s séances and belief in a spirit-infused world had gained prominence among progressive social reformers. To Chase, the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg and the experiments of Franz Mesmer (1734–1815) offered philosophical and scientific insight into humanity and the universe, unlike the “superstitious” doctrines of Christianity. Chase became a self-described “opponent of theology, and the defender of new and unpopular truth.” Chase’s disparaging of
Christianity stemmed partly from the churches’ seeming unwillingness to promote social reforms that Chase found moral and just, similar to the critiques made by Northampton Association members. However, the alternative he proposed at Ceresco was neither a reinterpretation of Christianity nor a refocusing on the community as a center of religious activity, but instead an exploration into new religious forms altogether.

Numerous Fourierists found similarities between the spiritual writings of Emanuel Swedenborg and the utopian blueprints of Charles Fourier. Both men interpreted the social world through a scientific lens, highlighting patterns that could explain and provide order for humanity just as science was increasingly doing for the material world. For Chase, Swedenborg’s writings served as the perfect bridge connecting Fourierism and Spiritualism. Chase formed a Spiritualist group at Ceresco, in which community members read Swedenborg’s writings alongside Spiritualist periodicals. With Chase’s encouragement, some members became drawn to the tantalizing experiences of clairvoyants and their communion with the spiritual world. By leading Spiritualist meetings and subscribing to Spiritualist periodicals at Ceresco, Chase and his fellow communitarians created an incubator for Spiritualism, bringing adherents together and sparking interest in the burgeoning movement.

Chase’s integration of Spiritualism and Swedenborg placed him outside of the norm of more orthodox Protestant community members. Ceresco disbanded in 1850, for reasons that remain unclear to historians, though some have claimed that religious discord lay at the base. After the dissolution of Ceresco, Chase would go on to become a traveling Spiritualist lecturer. In 1853, Chase moved his family to Battle Creek, Michigan, a gathering place for Spiritualists and the same town to which Sojourner Truth had moved a few years later. Regardless of the reasons for its demise, Ceresco provided a space for the exploration of new religious expressions among social reformers, even more so than Trumbull Phalanx and the Northampton Association.

UTOPIAN RESPONSES TO RELIGION

Each utopian socialist community examined here challenged the normative Protestant Christianity of antebellum-era United States in distinct ways. In their attempt to reform traditional Protestant churches some socialist communities, such as Trumbull Phalanx, urged the adoption of Christian socialism. The Northampton Association went further in carving out a surrogate religious institution within the community itself. Finally, Ceresco members experimented with new religious movements while maintaining ties to ethical reforms based on their shared Protestant backgrounds. In common, their communitarian ideology...
posed that religion and social reform must operate in tandem in order to shift individual perspectives and initiate lasting change in society. The constitutions and other founding documents of these communities reveal this worldview, in which Christianity and social reform were often conjoined despite simultaneous calls for religious diversity and experiments with new religious expressions.

As examined above, in Fourierist communities Christian socialist principles were often expressed by reiterating a shared commitment to the economic theories of Charles Fourier. As a result, celebrating the birthday of Charles Fourier or the anniversary of the community’s founding sometimes took on religious undertones. Ceresco offers a clear example. As Warren Chase reported to the *New York Tribune* in 1846, the annual celebration of Ceresco’s founding included a variety of religious “exercises,” from reading biblical passages to praying for fellow communitarians. Chase described the agenda as including prayers for the Earth, The New England Fourier Society, and “Life of Harmony, Unity, Industry, and Plenty: in perfect accordance with the laws of the Bible, of Nature, and of Mind.”65 The religious reference point for socialist communitarians thus continued to be the Protestant Christian tradition, though by placing Fourier at the center of their shared rituals, communitarians avoided openly advocating for any particular denomination. Fourier became the remedial link between Protestant Christian churches, which did not adequately challenge current societal ills, and the societal transformation that communitarians were seeking within their communal experiments.

The multifaceted approaches to religion that were explored by the socialist communities of the 1840s offer a glimpse into the broader transformation of religion occurring across social spaces during the nineteenth century. Though some Fourierist communities tolerated religious expressions that departed from traditional Protestant Christianity more than others, each community nevertheless created space for new interpretations of religion drawn from a shared commitment to social and economic reform. The entangling of physical health, social transformation, and theology often made these communal practices appear to fit into a category other than the traditional realm of religion, and yet they were influential in transforming religious expression in the United States.66 Their model of intertwining religion and reform was later adopted by religious leaders and political agitators, leading to the development of Christian socialism in the United States and the political reforms of the Progressive Era in the early twentieth century. Their experimentations stemmed from a liberal Christian worldview, and thus when some communitarians strayed too far from this shared perspective, backlash was swift. But if communitarians did not always succeed at producing religious pluralism within their communities, their initial tolerance for religious experimentation and
their dedication to societal transformation introduced a model through which reformers could address the perceived shortcomings of their society for generations to follow.\textsuperscript{67}

ENDNOTES

1 While many definitions of an “intentional community” have been proposed by scholars, the prevailing definition was offered by Timothy Miller, who defines intentional communities as including the following criteria: a sense of common purpose and of separation from the dominant society, some form and level of self-denial, a voluntary suppression of individual choice in favor of the good of the group, geographic proximity of members, personal interaction, economic sharing, real existence, and critical mass (at least five people who are not all related). See Timothy Miller, \textit{The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond} (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), xxii–xxiv. A clear summary of the definitions offered by communal studies scholars is also provided by Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yaacov Oved, and Menachem Topel, eds., \textit{The Communal Idea in the 21st Century} (Boston: Brill, 2013): “All in all, communal societies have gone by many names depending on their time, place, and economic arrangements. All can be broadly defined as voluntary social units, whose members usually share an ideology, an economic union, and a lifestyle.” (6).


6 The notion of distinct “utopian” and “scientific” forms of socialism was introduced by Friedrich Engels in his attempt to uplift Karl Marx’s socialism as the only modern, rational response to capitalism. See Friedrich Engels, \textit{Socialism: Utopian and Scientific} (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1918 [originally published 1880]); see also Jonathan Beecher’s introduction of the term


8 According to Fourier, individuals could be grouped into personality types based on their allocation of each of these God-given instincts, which he called “passions.” If society were to be organized in a way that allowed individuals to adequately express their instincts, all aspects of life, from love to labor, would create happiness and fulfillment for the individual and harmony for the society. Twelve basic passions were expressed in humanity, Fourier argued, with each person experiencing a dominant passion(s) that contributed to forming his or her personality. If allocated correctly, previously tedious labor would become “attractive,” or enjoyable, once each individual was matched with the type of labor best suited to his or her natural passions. Fourier describes the passions and passionate attraction in Theory on the Four Movements, eds. Gareth Steadman Jones and Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 74–78. For more on Fourier’s understanding of humanity, see Beecher, Charles Fourier, 66.


11 Brisbane’s writings on Fourier appeared in the New York Tribune, his journal The Phalanx (to be renamed The Harbinger in 1845), as well as his books, including The Social Destiny of Man (Philadelphia: C.F. Stollmeyer, 1840); Association: Or a Concise Exposition of the Practical Part of Fourier’s Social Science (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1843); A Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association, or Plan for the Re-Organization of Society (New York: J.S. Redfield, Clinton Hall, 1843); and Theory of the Functions of the Human Passions: Followed by an Outline View of the Fundamental Principles of Fourier’s Theory of Social Science (New York: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1856).


13 The Free Love movement of the nineteenth century included advocacy of more liberal divorce laws, women’s legal equality within marriage, and increased access to birth control and other family planning methods. Though most Fourierists in the United States avoided the Free Love movement, those figures who were associated with both Fourierism and Free Love were relatively well-known social reformers, thus strengthening the perceived tie between the two.
movements to outside observers. Outspoken Free Love activist Mary Gove found
affinity with Fourier’s ideas, and Ceresco leader Warren Chase wrote approv-
ingly of divorce and women’s equality within marriage, essential aspects of the
Free Love movement. On Mary Gove, see Jean L. Silver-Isenstadt, Shameless: The
Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University
Press, 2002). Warren Chase expressed his support for the Free Love movement
in his pamphlet, The Fugitive Wife: A Criticism on Marriage, Adultery and Divorce
(Boston: B. Marsh, 1861). On Fourierists’ initial resistance of the Free Love
movement and eventual embrace by some members, see Guarneri, The
Utopian Alternative, 352–363.

14 Letter, Emerson to Thomas Carlyle, 30 Oct. 1840, in The Correspondence of

15 Brook Farm gained a reputation as an idyllic expression of mid-nineteenth
century romanticism in the vein of Henry David Thoreau’s idyllic depiction of
Walden Pond. This reputation brought the community disproportional atten-
tion by historians over the years. Former members’ generally positive recollec-
tions of their time at Brook Farm also brought public and academic attention to
the community as a model of a successful communal experiment, despite its
closure after six years of existence. Some published works on Brook Farm
include: John Thomas Codman, Brook Farm: Historic and Personal Memoirs
(Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1894); Zoltán Haraszti ed., The Idyll of
Brook Farm: As Revealed by Unpublished Letters in the Boston Public Library (Boston:
The Trustees of the Public Library, 1937); Joel Myerson, The Brook Farm Book: A
Collection of First-Hand Accounts of the Community (New York: Garland Publishing,
1987); Myerson, Brook Farm: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide (New
(Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958); John Van Der Zee
Sears, My Friends at Brook Farm (New York: Desmond FitzGerald, Inc., 1912);
Edith Roelker Curtis, A Season in Utopia: The Story of Brook Farm (New York:
Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1961); Sterling Delano, Brook Farm: The Dark Side of
Utopia (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004);
Richard Francis, Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook
Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Lindsay
Swift, Brook Farm: Its Members, Scholars, and Visitors (New York: The Macmillan
Company, 1900).

16 I am here referring to Charles Taylor’s notion of the “nova effect” described

17 Some scholars trace the popularity of Fourier’s ideas directly to the Panic of
1837, stating that the Fourierist communities’ declines also aligned with a new
cycle of economic growth, which made communal living less of an economic
necessity by the late 1840s. For more on intentional communities as emerging in
alignment with economic downturns, see Brian Berry, America’s Utopian
Experiments: Communal Havens from Long-Wave Crises (Hanover: University Press
of New England, 1992). However, communal studies scholar Timothy Miller has
challenged this perceived pattern, stating that the emergence of communal
experiments throughout United States history cannot be directly traced to eco-
nomic downturns, but include a variety of other factors as well, including
population increases, mobility, and political turmoil. Timothy Miller, “Does communal activity come in waves? If so, when have they occurred?” presentation, Communal Studies Association Conference, Zoar, Ohio, 6 October 2017.


20 The community added woodenware machinery, a bark mill, a blacksmith shop, a grist mill, a corn mill, saw mills, an ashery, a carding machine, a tannery, a hatter’s shop, and an oil mill that made linseed oil, among other pursuits. See Grace Sells, *The History of Braceville Township, Trumbull County, Ohio* (Warren Historical Society: 1976), 20; *The Harbinger*, 12 September 1846, 223; and *The Harbinger*, 30 May 1846, 389. Farming and working at the community’s mills served as the primary labor pursuits at Trumbull, though some members also served as educators for the community’s children. For more on Fourierists’ interpretation of Christianity as justifying and necessitating socialism, see Jonathan Beecher, “Fourierism and Christianity,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3/4 (Spring–Summer 1994): 391–403; and Guarneri, “The Associationists,” 36–49.


23 Trumbull community members also attempted to produce greater gender equality in the communal labor structure, though this goal rarely achieved complete gender equality. The community’s constitution established conditions for greater gender equality through the explicit recognition of women’s labor as equal to that of men’s. In reference to women’s labor, the constitution states, “labor performed by females shall be paid as high, in proportion to its produc-tiveness, as that by males.” Constitution of Trumbull Phalanx, article VII, p. 4., Ohio Wesleyan University Library, Cleveland, Ohio. This aspiration perhaps demonstrates the intention of the community’s founders more than the practical application of gender equality. As Kathryn Tomasek argues, work commonly completed by women was often deemed less productive or valuable than men’s work within the Fourierist phalanxes, thereby often leading to lower compensation rates for those tasks. See “The Pivot of the Mechanism: Women, Gender, and Discourse in Fourierism and the Antebellum United States” (PhD Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995), 263–274.


25 This diversity among Christian denominations reflected the diversity of the surrounding county—the county seat of Warren held churches from the First Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, German Reformed, and Disciples of Christ. H.

Letters 9, 10a, 10b, 12, box 7, folder 4, MSS 136, Peter Kaufmann Papers, Ohio History Connection, Columbus, Ohio; *The Kalida venture* (Kalida, Ohio), 3 Aug. 1847.

Smolnikar references his preference for “come-outers” at the convention in his letter to Peter Kaufmann, 18 June 1847, box 7, folder 4, MSS 136, Peter Kaufmann Papers, Ohio History Connection, Columbus, Ohio. The term “come-outer” is a reference to Revelation 18:4: “And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”

Letter, Andrew Smolnikar to Peter Kaufmann, 18 June 1847, box 7, folder 4, MSS 136, Peter Kaufmann Papers, Ohio History Connection, Columbus, Ohio.

A visitor to Trumbull Phalanx, C. Woodnousk, described the community’s willingness to host speakers such as Smolnikar as a sign of their tolerance. See “Correspondence,” *The Harbinger*, 21 August 1847, 163. Trumbull Phalanx resident Nathaniel Meeker also believed the communion of religions at Trumbull Phalanx would lead to tolerance of all, predicting: “They will all unite, Presbyterians, Disciples, Baptists, Methodists, and all; and if any name be needed, under that of Unionism.” As quoted by Brandi Denison in *Ute Land Religion in the American West, 1879–2009* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 52.


Marjorie Senechal explores in detail the process of silk production at the Northampton Association, from the growing and hatching of silk worms to

Women were also given an equal vote to men in community business meetings, typically held on Saturday evenings. See, for example, Meeting Notes 6 July 1844, in Northampton Association of Education and Industry Records, American Antiquarian Society, Vol. 2.


Christopher Clark discusses the conscious rejection of clerical authority within the community to the chagrin of orthodox residents in the surrounding region. Community-wide events held at Northampton Association also indicated the rejection of Christian clergy as authorities of ritual. Marriages and funerals held at the community were purposefully held without a minister, in simple settings, often outdoors. Holding these rituals without clergy was meant to challenge clerical authority, and particularly expose church ineffectiveness in condemning slavery. See Clark, The Communitarian Moment, 112–114.

Truth was drawn to communal experiments: In 1831 she joined the group of followers who made up the religious community called the Kingdom of Matthias. The most complete historical account of the Kingdom of Matthias is Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, The Kingdom of Matthias (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The two most thorough accounts from the period are written by William Leete Stone and Gilbert Vale. See William L. Stone, Matthias and His Impostures; or, the Progress of Fanaticism. Illustrated in the Extraordinary Case of Robert Matthews, and Some of His Forerunners and Disciples (New York, 1835); Gilbert Vale, Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c. (2 vols.; New York: 1835). Matthew’s Wife, Margaret, also wrote an account of Matthew’s life before becoming the Prophet Matthias, titled Matthias. By His Wife (New York, 1835).

Clark, “We Might be Happyer Here,” in Letters from an American Utopia, 3.


Perfectionism was the belief that humanity would continue improving itself in morality and spirituality, as opposed to becoming more spiritually depraved over time. See Margaret Washington, Sojourner Truth’s America (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 181–182.


Water cures involved a series of cold and hot water immersions and wrapping the body in wet cloths, practices that were meant to alleviate numerous ailments. This health practice gained popularity among social reformers during the nineteenth century as it empowered individuals who could adhere to strict ritualized practices to take charge of their own bodily and mental health. Ruggles attracted numerous social reform activists to his water cure center, including abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 191–192; On water-cure as tied to nineteenth-century social reform, see Susan Cayleff, *Wash and be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women’s Health* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).


The connection between bodily control and societal reform was perhaps most explicitly made at Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands community in Massachusetts, which notoriously lasted only seven months due to the rigorous physical requirements placed on members. On Fruitlands, see Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Community members followed strict diets, bathed only in cold water, and restricted their clothing to particular materials that were not products of slave labor, nor derived from animals.

The Ceresco community was originally named the Wisconsin Phalanx, but adopted the name Ceresco upon incorporation.

Prohibited behavior included: “Rude and indecent behavior, drunkenness, trafficking in intoxicating drinks, licentiousness, profane swearing, lying, stealing or defrauding another, protracted idleness, or willfully injuring the property of the Association, knowingly consenting to the injury of the Association or any individual member thereof, gambling, habitually indulging in censoriousness
and fault finding…,” Bylaws of the Wisconsin Phalanx, Article 7, Section 2, Microfilm Reel 2, Wisconsin Phalanx Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

The temperance movement overlapped significantly with other antebellum reform movements, and tied the physical body, society, and virtue together in ways that appealed to many communitarians. Antebellum publications such as The Lily advocated both temperance and women’s rights, arguing for overlap between women’s rights and the avoidance of alcohol. Temperance was often referred to by reformers as simultaneously a virtue, individual health choice, and social good. W. J. Rorabaugh explores the history of the temperance movement in the United States in The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). The temperance movement also found support at Ceresco due to the high numbers of Methodists who joined the community.


Wesson Gage Miller, Thirty years in the Itinerancy (Project Gutenberg, 2004 [1875]), Chapter 5.


On the overlap between Spiritualism and other social movements, see Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

Chase, Life-Line of the Lone One, 104; Sally Morita analyzes the interconnected rise of mesmerism, Swedenborg, Fourier, and Spiritualism among social reformers of the nineteenth century in “Unseen (and Unappreciated) Matters,” American Studies Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall, 1999): 103–104. Morita traces the evolution of mesmerism from the magnet experiments of Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer to the notion of an invisible spiritual force existing within humans.


Carl Guarneri discusses these perceived similarities in detail in The Utopian Alternative, 116–117.

Guarneri, The Utopian Alternative, 350.

Chase, Life-Line of the Lone One, 167.

Theories on the reasons for this dissolution vary from the personal differences of the members leading to low-level perennial disagreements, to members leaving for speculation opportunities farther West, to boredom of the members with the monotony of communal life. On personal differences and speculation, see Gayle A. Kiszely, “Ceresco: Utopia in Fond du Lac County,” in Source of the

63 Chase’s theology also crossed over into health reforms in his search for the spiritual-material connection: Chase reported in 1847 that his fellow community members were in good health, largely due to their increasingly vegetarian diet and reliance on hydropathy, demonstrating the frequent overlap between personal health practices and the aspiration for societal transformation within communal environments. See Letter from Warren Chase, 21 August 1847, as printed in John Humphrey Noyes, History of American Socialisms, 431–432.


67 Subsequent social reform movements in the United States often pulled from Christian socialist principles without requiring loyalty to any particular denomination for involvement in the movement, similar to the Fourierist communitarian model. These reform movements include the prison reform movement, the temperance and prohibition movements, the public education movement, and the abolition and anti-lynching movements.