

THE ROAD TO HARPER'S FERRY:
THE GARRISONIAN REJECTION OF NONVIOLENCE

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS iii

CHAPTER Page

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK11

III. TAKING UNCLE TOM’S BIBLE39

IV. RACING TOWARD HARPER’S FERRY 62

V. CONCLUSION 83

BIBLIOGRAPHY 87

INTRODUCTION

Of the various antebellum reformers agitating for the abolition of slavery, few were as uncompromising and unwavering in their commitment as William Lloyd Garrison and his followers. From the printing of the first issue of their flagship publication, the *Liberator*, in Boston in 1833, to the outbreak of the Civil War almost three decades later, the Garrisonian abolitionists remained steadfast in their opposition to the institution which kept millions of African-Americans in bondage. While coming from diverse backgrounds, and not always agreeing on the other issues of their day, the Garrisonians were of one mind that slavery was an abomination: an insult to the dignity of man and an offense to the God who created him, and they denounced it as such. Their critics might have regarded them as radical and inflexible, but to the Garrisonians, compromise was no virtue on such morally obvious questions.

What is surprising, then, is that the Garrisonians, generally so immovable, underwent a substantial change in their thinking on an issue over which they had been similarly unified and convinced of its moral import. Though never budging on slavery, they executed a remarkable about-face on their opposition to war and violence. From the 1830s, the Garrisonians had been staunchly pacifist, adopting a position they called “Christian nonresistance” and condemning any

and all violence. They even forbid voting as complicit in the state's use of coercive force, instead preferring to use the "moral suasion" they believed Christ had exemplified and taught as a way of transforming society. For years, they had argued that war and slavery were but two aspects of the same evil: the desire of some men to exert control over others. Thus any attempt to overthrow slavery by force would be both immoral and self-defeating. By the late 1850s, however, they had dramatically redefined "Christian nonresistance" to be compatible with supporting antislavery violence. William Lloyd Garrison himself was one of the last holdouts, finally joining his colleagues in condoning antislavery violence with his eulogy for John Brown on the day of Brown's execution, December 2, 1859.

In this thesis, I will consider the question of why the Garrisonian abolitionists shifted away from their early pacifism and came to accept the legitimacy of using violence against slavery. While the causes of this shift in Garrisonian attitudes toward violence are admittedly complex, I argue that this change was facilitated by an earlier change in their religious beliefs, specifically their substitution of a secular natural law ethic for a traditional religious source of authority. Their original understanding of Christian nonresistance had been deeply grounded in traditional religious beliefs about the authority of both the person of Jesus and the text of the Bible. When the Garrisonians abandoned those traditional beliefs in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the authority structure which had undergirded their staunch commitment to nonviolence was no longer available to support it. Instead, they came to ground their beliefs in secular appeals to the authority of natural law and individual conscience, which proved in their minds more amenable to the use of violent means for noble ends. This secularization of Garrisonian ideology was not by itself sufficient to cause them to redefine Christian nonresistance, but it was

certainly necessary to how the Garrisonians conceptualized and justified their acceptance of antislavery violence.

In order to show that the Garrisonians' changing views on violence were connected to their changing religious views, I draw on methodological approaches put forward by historians Daniel Rodgers and Mark Noll, and apply them to the Garrisonians' speeches, editorials, personal letters, and private journals. In his book *Contested Truths*, Rodgers details how various key terms or ideas in American history (such as "nature," "government," "the state," etc.) have been redefined and re-conceptualized by groups challenging the status quo; in this thesis, I will similarly discuss the intra-Garrisonian debates in which the very meaning of "Christian nonresistance" was at stake.¹ Likewise, I will follow Noll's example in his work *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, both in taking religious belief seriously as an object of historical analysis (rather than treating it as a function of underlying social or cultural factors), and in giving a privileged place in my accounts to my historical actors' approaches to the Bible.² My historical actors include William Lloyd Garrison and his colleagues Henry Clarke Wright, Samuel Joseph May, and William Whipper, all of whose writings illustrate the connection of their changing attitude on violence to their changing religious beliefs.³ Conversely, I will also discuss Lucretia Mott and Adin Ballou, two of the few Garrisonians who did not redefine their understanding of

¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987).

² Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), see especially 1-16.

³ These four serve as a fairly representative selection of the Garrisonian spectrum. Garrison of course is necessary to any discussion of the movement he inspired (and he will accordingly receive the balance of attention), while Wright, May, and Whipper provide examples of the wide range of colleagues Garrison attracted. Wright was an evangelical and relative late-comer to the group, joining in the late 1830s, in contrast to May, a Unitarian, who had been involved with Garrison even before the latter had published the first issue of his abolitionist newspaper the *Liberator*, in January, 1831. Whipper joined even later in the 1830s, and as an African-American and a Philadelphian, was an exception to the predominantly white, Boston-based circle of Garrisonians.

Christian nonresistance, and show that their unchanging religious views went hand-in-hand with their commitment to nonviolence.

What distinguished the Garrisonians from their fellow abolitionists was more this commitment to Christian nonresistance than their immediatist abolitionism. Antislavery reform was a broad spectrum, and not all the reformers working against the peculiar institution accepted the view that slavery needed to be ended immediately; but “immediatism” was no more unique to the Garrisonians than it was to the followers of other abolitionists such as Lewis Tappan and Gerrit Smith. Instead, the Garrisonians’ religious and political ideology is what differentiated them from the Tappanites and Smith’s Liberty Party.⁴ Thus, in this thesis, when I classify someone as a Garrisonian, I mean that to indicate not only that they had some connection to the community of reformers clustered around William Lloyd Garrison (what Lawrence Friedman dubbed the “Boston Clique”), but also that they subscribed, at some point, to the ideology of Christian nonresistance.⁵ This excludes both various figures who had connections with and influence on the Garrisonians but did not adopt nonresistance (e.g., Theodore Parker), as well as advocates of different schools of nonviolence thought (e.g., Gerrit Smith associate Beriah Green). Conversely, this definition of Garrisonian includes reformers farther away from Boston, such as Adin Ballou, Lucretia Mott, and William Whipper. It would, however, be a mistake to view these different groups as hermetically sealed off from each other. There was some interaction among the members of the different abolitionist tribes. At the end of the day, though,

⁴ Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Nonviolent Abolitionists from 1830 Through the Civil War* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1970), 1-6; Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1-7.

⁵ Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 6.

it was those different beliefs, the beliefs of Christian nonresistance, which determined the difference between Garrisonian and other immediatist abolitionists.

The Garrisonians' gradual movement away from their initial understanding of Christian nonresistance marked a departure from the nineteenth-century evangelicalism which formed the backdrop for so much of their thinking. A synthesis of Calvinist orthodoxy from New England and the fervent frontier revivalism which sparked the Second Great Awakening, evangelicalism in antebellum period was a contentious religion. It asserted the vitality of faith against the allegedly cold rationalism of the Unitarians, and it advocated good works to an ostensibly unregenerate society. Evangelicals took for granted the need for personal conversion, preached redemption from sin, and upheld the traditional Protestant affirmation of the authority of scripture.⁶ If the world had decided to remain indifferent to this message, then evangelicals would set out to change the world. From this impulse came the bewildering variety of antebellum reform movements (sabbatarianism, temperance, communalism, women's rights, and, of course, abolitionism) all seeking to extend the salvation of the individual to society as a whole. From this backdrop of evangelical reform, the Garrisonians took their means of transforming society, exhorting people to treat one another with benevolence while exemplifying it ("moral suasion"), as well as their end goal, the perfection of society and the realization of God's reign on earth, (the "millennium").⁷ In this light, the Garrisonians' unswerving confidence in their own reform efforts was merely the extension of an evangelical confidence in

⁶ Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3, 109-120.

⁷ Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 21-37; Valerie H. Ziegler, *The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America* (Macon, GE: Mercer University Press, 2001), 11-12.

biblical authority, both as a guide to ethics and as a promise that a coming kingdom without slavery or war was attainable.

Unsurprisingly, this confidence waned as the Garrisonians substituted appeals to the secular authority of natural law for their earlier appeals to religious authority of Christianity. Admittedly, neither the Garrisonians nor any other evangelical reformers would have denied the authority of natural law; far from it, they would cite the supposedly perspicuous “laws of nature and nature’s God” side-by-side with biblical texts. Since at least Jonathan Edwards, evangelicals had been making efforts to incorporate Enlightenment thought into their worldview.⁸ Natural law (the notion that moral truths were accessible to human beings by reason, apart from divine revelation) was one element of eighteenth-century rationalism to which religious believers had proved remarkably receptive. Tomes such as William Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) or Francis Wayland’s *Elements of Moral Science* (1835) were common fare in seminaries, instructing ministers that ethics could be as objective as Newtonian physics, while allowing that any number of particular duties involving faith were known only by divine dispensation.⁹ What was different about the Garrisonian shift toward natural law was that they now embraced it over and against appeals to Christianity or the Bible. They no longer believed that scripture could stand alongside nature as an authority. With that movement in their thought, any number of duties they had derived explicitly from the Bible were thrown into the realm of individual conscience and became questions about which people of good will could arrive at different conclusions. It was coming to this conclusion that led the Garrisonians to rethink their

⁸ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 476-477.

⁹ Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 30, 119; Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94-95, 233-235, 250-251; Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland, Nathan A. Finn and Keith Harper eds., *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 6-10.

understanding of Christian nonresistance, ultimately in ways that would condone anti-slavery violence.

Historians have put forward a number of explanations, of varying merit, to account for the Garrisonian shift on nonviolence. George Fredrickson advanced one of the earliest answers: that a combination of the Garrisonians' self-perception as God-appointed "prophets of perfection" with the actual onset of the Civil War brought about their movement away from nonviolence.¹⁰ While possessing some valuable insights, the latter half of Fredrickson's proposal suffers from the difficulty that most Garrisonians had abandoned nonresistance well before the Civil War. Other historians, notably Carleton Mabee and John Demos, drew attention to the decade of debates and conflicts over slavery leading up to the war.¹¹ They argued that this series of events pushed the Garrisonians toward accepting the use of violent means to oppose slavery, which, while it has a certain plausibility, falls short in denying the Garrisonians any agency in their own shift towards accepting violence. A far stronger explanation was put forward by Lewis Perry, working from the perspective of an intellectual historian.¹² Perry details a long-standing tension in Garrisonian abolitionism between the deliverances of Scripture and the judgments of human nature and reason. According to Perry, the Garrisonians possessed a mentality which led them to question any and all authorities, a skeptical attitude which they eventually turned inwards on their commitment to Christian nonresistance.

¹⁰ George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

¹¹ Mabee, *Black Freedom*; John Demos, "The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent 'Means,'" *The New England Quarterly* 37 (December 1964): 501-526.

¹² Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

Subsequent historians have either followed Perry, such as Valerie H. Ziegler and her description of the Garrisonians as shifting from an “ethic of love” to an “ethic of coercion,” or reject his analysis of Garrisonian thought in favor of psychological and/or sociological explanations, as per Lawrence J. Friedman and his focus on the Garrisonians’ emotional need for community.¹³ Of the two views, Perry’s is stronger than Friedman’s, largely because Perry finds it less necessary to explain away views the Garrisonians express in the primary sources than Friedman does. In Friedman’s view, we cannot take the Garrisonian commitment to nonresistance very seriously, in as much as he explains it merely as a function of their psychological need for a community unsullied by the world of governments and brute force. Conversely, Friedman asserts that their accommodation to violence was born of an emotional need to build bridges to their less-extreme neighbors. This attempt to gauge the *real* motives behind the Garrisonians’ actions seem unwarrantable from the primary sources, in spite of Friedman’s best attempts to arrange the material in a way compatible with his view.

In this thesis, I build on the work of Perry, rather than Friedman, but go beyond Perry by locating roots of the Garrisonians’ shift on violence specifically in their earlier secular shift away from traditional religious authorities, as opposed to a general tension in their ideology present from the beginning of their movement. While I substantially agree with much of Ziegler’s more recent analysis, I argue that the causes of the Garrisonian rejection of traditional religious authority had less to do with the success of Southern biblical proslavery arguments (Ziegler’s view) and more to do with the marginalization of the Garrisonians by mainstream evangelical reformers. To that extent, I incorporate Friedman’s emphasis on community. The community the Garrisonians were excluded from, and the communities they subsequently found themselves

¹³ Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace* ; Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*.

in, had a meaningful influences on their ideology; but recognizing this, however, does not commit me to indulging in psycho-historical speculation. Instead, I am able to make better sense of the Garrisonian acceptance of antislavery violence, as well as to complicate conventional narratives of secularization in American history by showing that they can no longer begin post-bellum, but must include the Garrisonians before the Civil War.

Focusing on the Garrisonians during the late 1840s and throughout the 1850s, my argument falls into three parts, each corresponding to a chapter. Chapter one, “Turning the Other Cheek,” shows that the Garrisonian commitment to nonresistance was inextricably religious in origin, taking for granted the moral authority of the Bible and Jesus of Nazareth. Chapter two, “Taking Uncle Tom’s Bible,” relates how the Garrisonians came to reject the religious assumptions underpinning their belief in Christian nonresistance. Finally, chapter three, “Racing towards Harper’s Ferry,” demonstrates that Garrison and his fellow abolitionists redefined nonresistance in terms presupposing their rejection of traditional religious sources of authority and their acceptance of secular sources of authority.

The significance of this thesis lies in its recognition of the Garrisonian shift on violence as a shift towards secular sources of authority. While not atheistic, in as much as the Garrisonians still believed that God was the source of the moral laws they found in nature through reason and conscience, this perspective was undoubtedly secular in comparison with the Garrisonians’ earlier evangelical Protestant background. Religion no longer provided the grounding for their ethics. Standard accounts of the secularization of American culture place its origins post-bellum, and generally associate it with the impact of Darwinism or biblical textual criticism on educational institutions and political establishments. However, my account suggests that we should trace the roots of secularization further back, to the Garrisonians in the

antebellum years. George Marsden recognizes that the ideology of the post-bellum Republican Party played an important role in the process of secularization, and Lewis Perry acknowledges that after the Civil War Northern Republicans co-opted the Garrisonians abolitionists as representative of their ideals, but my project begins to bring together these two strands.¹⁴ The secular civic morality of late nineteenth-century America has its origins in the shifts the Garrisonians thought through while redefining Christian nonresistance.¹⁵ In as much as American society still wrestles with the balancing of secular and religious perspectives, considering the origins of such debates remains relevant to our circumstances today.

¹⁴ See, for example, George M. Marsden's discussion of the Republican Party's role in secularization in post-bellum America in *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 100, 115, 121; and Lewis Perry's discussion of how the post-Civil War Republicans appropriated pre-war Garrisonian ideology in *Radical Abolitionism*, 6-7.

¹⁵ As such, the Garrisonian privileging of natural law and individual conscience over revelation links the trajectory noted by Nathan Hatch in *The Democratization of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989) with Marsden's trend in *The Soul of the American University*. Hatch speaks of the rising pre-eminence of individual conscience in American religion, while Marsden shows its secular outworking, with the Garrisonians providing the connecting link. This parallels in many respects Molly O'Shatz's argument in *Slavery & Sin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), that antebellum antislavery moderates gave rise to postbellum Protestant liberalism. The chief difference being that I would suggest the immediatist Garrisonians ultimately had a greater influence than the antislavery moderates because of how they were remembered and appropriated in retrospect, even though in their own time, the Garrisonians had significantly less impact than the more numerous moderates.

CHAPTER 1

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK: NONRESISTANCE AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN GARRISONIAN ABOLITIONISM

One of the ironies of antebellum American religious history is that few occasions in the period better illustrate the intensity of its ideological conflicts than the intramural debates among its pacifists. It would be hard to match the levels of verbal violence to which these advocates of peace often rose, especially when the question of which side was *truly* pacifist was at stake. In the late 1830s, when the time came for William Lloyd Garrison and his colleagues to withdraw from what they judged to be the insufficiently-peaceful American Peace Society (APS), Garrison pulled out all the stops. He accused the APS of the deepest hypocrisy, for though it was ostensibly an organization dedicated to peace, it included "upon its list of members not converted but belligerous (*sic*) commanders-in-chief, generals, colonels, majors, corporals, and all." Because it had sullied itself by keeping fellowship with the devotees of war, it could only be considered "radically defective in principle and based upon sand." Just as Garrison had wreaked havoc on the American Colonization Society for its compromises with slave-holders years before by leading an exodus of disaffected members, he now threatened to do the same to the APS. Finally, his rebukes having proved unable to get APS founder William Ladd to come round, in September 1838, Garrison and his friends Samuel Joseph May and Henry Clarke Wright helmed

a Peace Convention in Boston, drafting a "Declaration of Sentiments" to express their uncorrupted vision of pacifism.¹

Having no time for proponents of so-called “defensive” wars, or even for people who did not think that this was an important enough issue over which to divide, Garrison's "Declaration" claimed that no nation had a right to self-defense. Accordingly, "if a nation has no right to defend itself against foreign enemies, or to punish its invaders, [then] no individual possesses that right in his own case." It went on, "We register our testimony, not only against all wars, whether offensive or defensive, but all preparations for war...we deem it unlawful to bear arms or to hold a military office." This absolute condemnation of violence was too radical a stand for the APS, which is why the Garrisonians had weighed the APS in the balance and found it wanting. Garrison accused Ladd of being unwilling to go this far because he did “not understand the philosophy of reform. If you would make progress, you must gain opposition; if you would promote peace on earth, array the father against the son, and the mother against the daughter; if you would save your reputation, lose it. It is a gospel paradox.”²

This chapter will seek to understand what led the Garrisonians to take such a radical stance on non-violence, attempting to answer the question of why they thought it necessary to imperil unity and cooperation among the “sisterhood of reforms” for the sake of this “gospel paradox.” In order to do this, it will be necessary to examine the Garrisonians’ personal backgrounds. To make sense of their leaving the APS, it is important to understand why they

¹ Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 18; Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life told by his Children*, Volume II (Boston: 1894), 222.

² William Lloyd Garrison, “Declaration of Sentiments;” in *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance* (New York: Nation Press Printing Co., Inc., 1924), 23-28; William Lloyd Garrison, “Remarks from Mr. Ladd’s Letter,” *Liberator*, Nov. 23, 1838; quoted in Valerie Ziegler, *The Advocates of Antebellum Peace Reform* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 57.

joined the APS in the first place. Further, the Garrisonians' new peace organization, the New England Nonresistance Society (NENRS), serves to illustrate what they thought pacifism should be, contrasting with the APS. Ultimately, this chapter contends that an analysis of the above shows that the Garrisonians' pacifism was inextricable from their religious beliefs, and that their motivations for leaving the APS and founding the NENRS were profoundly religious as well.

Of the significant amount of literature on the Garrisonians and on antebellum reform movements, this chapter draws from works by Lewis Perry, Valerie Ziegler, and Lawrence Friedman (among others) but will primarily interact with the interpretations of Lori Ginzberg and W. Caleb McDaniel.³ Ginzberg, beginning with her article "Moral Suasion is Moral Balderdash," has refused to take the Garrisonians' radical non-violent stance seriously, and instead has reduced it to a function of their political rhetoric. She argues for this conclusion by pointing to the Garrisonians' later rejection of nonviolence and moral suasion, as though this somehow meant that their earlier position could not have been sincerely and deeply held. On the contrary, I will argue that the Garrisonians' actions and rhetoric do not make sense unless we take their religion and non-violence seriously. I do agree with Ginzberg that the Garrisonian eventual rejection of non-violence (or rather, their redefinition of it) was an instance of secularization. Unlike Ginzberg, however, I do not think that their religious beliefs (which they ultimately displaced, rather than replaced, with secular ones) had only been a veneer covering their political commitments.

³Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*; Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*; Lawrence J Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Lori D. Ginzberg, "Moral Suasion is Moral Balderdash," *Journal of American History* 73 (No. 3: Dec. 1986): 601-622.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that religious and political commitments need not be mutually exclusive. Though the Garrisonians took their pacifism to such an extreme that they forbid even voting as complicit in state violence, this does not mean that they were not also intensely political, as W. Caleb McDaniel has shown. The nonresistant ideology they put forward in the NENRS, while advocating apolitical means, was most certainly pursuing political ends – the transformation of the social order along Christian lines. Thus, the secularizing movement in the Garrisonians’ thought (which Ginzberg picks up on) was not a transition from the apolitical to the political; but rather, it was a changing relationship between religious beliefs and democratic principles, both of which the Garrisonians had held since the 1830s.⁴

The space in the historiography for a project addressing both sides of this changing relationship leaves room for my argument, as well as suggests that its significance lies in advancing our understanding of the secularization of American society beyond current narratives. The Garrisonians’ initial involvement with the American Peace Society, and its founder William Ladd, involved individual “conversion” experiences to the cause of peace reform, inseparable from the religious contexts of these conversions in the Second Great Awakening and the broader antebellum social reform movements. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the Garrisonians invoked “the Prince of Peace” and “allegiance to the King of Kings” when they decided they could no longer continue in good conscience as members.⁵ Garrisonian religious beliefs provided the motivation for them to get in as well as to get out. The activities of their new organization, the New England Nonresistance Society, took for granted both a

⁴ McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 10-18.

⁵ Garrison, “Declaration of Sentiments,” in *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance*.

profoundly religious pacifism and an intense interest in opposing the injustice of current political systems. In order to understand why the Garrisonians broke with the APS and make sense of all these factors, it is necessary to recognize that their pacifism was inextricably religious. That they later moved to a more secular ideology in no way invalidates the authenticity of their original commitments. Instead, it gives us the chance to see the beginnings of American secularization up close.⁶

The primary sources for this chapter include the written and spoken words of the Garrisonians themselves. William Lloyd Garrison's letters, editorials, journals, speeches, etc., receive the fullest treatment, but will be accompanied by an examination of the same types of documents from the following members of his colleagues and friends: Henry Clarke Wright, Samuel May, Adin Ballou, William Whipper, and Lucretia Mott. May, Wright, and Ballou will receive more emphasis before the split with the APS, while Whipper and Mott will be discussed more after the split. I will examine these documents both for what they say explicitly, such as invocations of the Almighty, and for what they do not say but implicitly assume, such as the notion that the Bible or Jesus of Nazareth possess divine authority. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the Garrisonians' writings and rhetoric articulate a religiously-based pacifism, one founded on the perfect example of Christ, and without taking this into account, the Garrisonians actions become unintelligible. The documents certainly support the notion that there was more to their pacifism than this, but it was certainly not less than this either. Though their political concerns come through as well, the Garrisonians' understanding of non-violence was irreducibly religious.

⁶ Further developed in chapter three and conclusion.

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Given the religious intensity with which William Lloyd Garrison and his colleagues converted to the causes of social reform, it is surprising to hear historians such as Lori Ginzberg dismiss such commitments to peace reform and moral suasion as political posturing or tactical maneuvering. She attempts to sustain this interpretation by drawing two important distinctions – first, between “American middle class radicalism in the 1830s and 1840s” and the “religious context” in which it “evolved;” second, between the Garrisonians as nonresistants and other advocates of moral suasion. By separating antebellum social reform movements and organizations from their religious contexts, Ginzberg is able to portray the millenarian ideas about redeeming society through persuasive means as naturally running out, or “exhausted,” by the 1850s, while treating the underlying political goals of transforming society as a constant thread.⁷ Further, by taking the Garrisonians as an exception that proves the rule, Ginzberg can nullify the challenge they would pose to her interpretation that moral suasion was a spent force by the 1850s. This is not to deny her claim that “political changes occurring in the reform world were making an antivoting stance difficult for even women reformers to maintain,” only that these difficulties are far from a sufficient explanation for why reformers, otherwise well-acquainted with difficulties, would come to reject moral suasion.⁸ In effect, Ginzberg represents a synthesis of Merle Curti’s analysis (that the Garrisonian commitment to nonresistance was a mere “enthusiasm” that was quickly “waning”) with George Fredrickson’s argument (that the Civil War itself ended the Garrisonian commitment to nonviolence.)⁹ As Ginzberg would have

⁷ Ginzberg, “Moral Suasion,” 602, 607, 609.

⁸ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000), 85.

⁹ Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 618-619; see Merle E. Curti, “Non-Resistance in New England,” *The New England Quarterly* 2 (January 1929), 55; George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

it, the few Garrisonian hold-outs who failed to admit that moral suasion was a spent force by the 1850s were finally persuaded by the onset of war.

Key to her analysis is the element which is its greatest strength: Ginzberg's account reveals the gendered aspects of antebellum social reform. Reformers had imbued moral suasion with notions of femininity. The then widely-held belief that women's moral faculties were more acutely sensitive than men's inevitably colored efforts at morally reforming society. Ginzberg correctly draws attention to this fact, and rightly observes that women's exclusion from the electoral franchise at that time was accordingly taken to be the proper stance for all reformers, men or women. She writes,

Moral suasion, the chosen means for those who sought nothing less than the transformation of the public soul, conformed both to women's supposed qualities and to the nature of their access to those in power...[thus,] ultraist women called on men to adhere to a single – 'female' – standard of behavior in the interest of social change. Being voteless and, in theory, nonpartisan was part of the radical vision, and votelessness was a choice made with pride.¹⁰

Ginzberg's account on this score is well borne out by the Garrisonians. She repeatedly cites Lucretia Mott's writings to support her case, and further references could be made to Samuel J. May's reflections on the feminine gentleness of Christ: "In Jesus we see as much feminine as masculine grace."¹¹

However, although Ginzberg is right to draw attention to the gendered aspect of moral suasion, it is not the only aspect, nor even necessarily the most important aspect. That the moral sanctity of women ostensibly placed them above the political fray was certainly an element in the

¹⁰ Ginzberg, "Moral Suasion," 602.

¹¹ Samuel Joseph May to Woman's Rights Convention, October 1850; quoted in Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 99, see 95ff.

thought of male moral suasionists who sought to be just as morally pure and morally influential as women. What is far less apparent is that the growing plausibility or viability of women as a political force somehow sapped moral suasion of its appeal, or rendered it unnecessary, by the 1850s. Ginzberg's portrayal of moral suasion as a tactic jettisoned by female reformers when political means began to seem more expedient and attainable, or non-political means less so, is an unwarranted reduction of moral suasion to its gendered aspects.

Ginzberg is not wrong in saying that "For a time, seeking to maintain the language of benevolence, ultraists insisted that men uphold a standard hitherto only expected of women [nonvoting]," but that does not mean that this was the primary motive for accepting moral suasion or nonresistance, nor does it mean that these were ultimately abandoned because they no longer "offered radical reformers a sure road to female power." To suggest, as she does, that reformers like the Garrisonians initially adopted moral suasion because of "a brief period in the 1830s" during which women persuaded them to forgo their male privilege of voting is not so much distinguishing the religious context as radically decontextualizing moral suasion from the religious beliefs of the time.¹² Moral suasion – condemning evil and imploring repentance – was believed to be the method of Christ himself! As already noted, for Samuel J. May, morally suasive means were both feminine and Christ-like; to dismiss the latter aspect as a ploy in support of the former is an interpretive move for which Ginzberg does not provide evidence.

Ultimately, Ginzberg is unable to make sense of the actions or rhetoric of the Garrisonians by asserting the insincerity of antebellum reform commitments to moral suasion and peace reform. Even if they were the late exception to the rule which Ginzberg makes them

¹² Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 96-97; Ginzberg, "Moral Suasion," 602.

out be, the beginnings of their advocacy of moral suasion and peace reform cannot be explained without invoking their religious beliefs beyond a mere acknowledgement of their existence. Part of her mistake seems to be assuming that since many of the reformers, especially the Garrisonians, eventually modified or abandoned many of their religious principles, these principles therefore cannot have been initially central to their motivations for reform. This assumption just does not hold up under scrutiny. While Ginzberg is on the right track in describing a “decline in religious fervor” and a rise of increasingly secular political activism in the 1850s, her treatment of this change is too simple.¹³ To assume the replacement *of* religious beliefs by political ones obscures the change *in* religious beliefs that led to a different, more secular way of relating to politics.¹⁴ Likewise, to assume a constant political motivation which survived changes of epiphenomenal religious convictions simply does not do justice to how the reformers themselves came to the reform movements in the first place (by typically Second Great Awakening conversion experiences) or to how they advocated for moral suasion and peace reform (in rhetoric drenched with biblical language and Christian imagery).

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The Garrisonians began their reform efforts in the midst of the Second Great Awakening’s religious revivals. Like many of their contemporaries from the center of nineteenth-century American evangelicalism, they had undergone intense conversion experiences which they interpreted as marking a radical departure from their previous ways of life. Very few of them had not professed to be Christians before their “conversion;” what distinguished their new way of life as an authentic faith (compared to what they now saw as an

¹³ Ginzberg, “Moral Suasion,” 603.

¹⁴ The change in religious beliefs will be explored in chapter two; the new, secular way of relating to politics in chapter three.

earlier, dead faith) was their commitment to works of general benevolence. In the words of Garrison biographer John L. Thomas, “Faith without works...was not enough. The very certainty of Christian truth dictated the need for an immediate reform of the evils of the world.” Deriving to substantial degree from the teachings of Jonathan Edwards during the First Great Awakening in the mid-eighteenth century, the doctrine of general benevolence was a millenarian belief about how the truly-converted saints could bring about the reign of Christ on earth. By practicing disinterested love towards their fellow men and women, the saints would gradually convert society and usher in the kingdom of heaven. For evangelicals, it was their individual conversion experiences that propelled them to pursue works of general benevolence and participate in the reform movements, and the Garrisonians were no exception to this pattern.¹⁵

Though pursuing general benevolence through the antislavery cause became the Garrisonians’ abiding passion, they converted with equal fervor to the cause of nonviolence (or “peace reform”) largely due to the influence of William Ladd, one of its early advocates. While some of the Garrisonians, such as Lucretia Mott, came from Quaker backgrounds and were already persuaded of pacifism, and others, like William Whipper, were not involved with peace reform until after the APS split, Ladd played a significant role in persuading many of the others, whether directly (as with Garrison, Wright, and May) or indirectly (as with Adin Ballou). Coming from a background of a Harvard education and failed business ventures, Ladd was a relatively recent convert to peace reform, but he was a zealous one, establishing half-a-dozen regional peace organizations on 1827 alone. In his travels preaching the gospel of pacifism, Ladd met personally with many of the Garrisonians, drawing not a few into the ranks of his

¹⁵ John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison – A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1963), 64.

umbrella group, the American Peace Society. Even though they did not remain with him in the APS fold, the Garrisonians' initial acceptance of Ladd's message fits their overall pattern of converting to a cause at the behest of itinerant religious reformers and revivalists. Their ever-increasing "ultraism" was a matter of deeply personal faith, and thus was not reducible to politics.¹⁶

William Lloyd Garrison himself seems to have undergone a series of conversions to increasingly demanding (or "ultraist") reformist camps. Born in 1805, in Newburyport, Massachusetts, to a staunchly Baptist mother and a religiously-indifferent father, Garrison was far more pious in his early years than wayward brother James, but his first cause was not religion but politics. As a printer's apprentice, young Garrison entered the world of Federalist Party journalism, taking great interest in the New England opposition to the War of 1812 and other debates of the period. However, in 1827, the preaching of revivalist Lyman Beecher provoked a conversion experience for Garrison. Under Beecher's influence, Garrison largely abandoned his pet political issues and instead began passionately advocating for Beecher's chief causes – temperance, Sabbath observance, and the outlawing of duels. By this point, Garrison had sold the *Free Press* and begun his stint as editor of the *Philanthropist*, a reform paper. He used his new position as a platform to bring Beecher's message to the masses, which he described as "Truth – TRUTH – delivered in a childlike simplicity and affection." It was Garrison's subsequent conversion to antislavery reform, specifically immediate abolitionism, under the influence of the Quaker Benjamin Lundy, which would provide him with the great reform cause of his life and for which he continues to be best known.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 40-43.

¹⁷ Thomas, *Liberator*, 12-16; Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 129, 136-138.

It was even earlier, though, as the twenty-year old editor of the *Free Press*, that Garrison encountered William Ladd and enthusiastically embraced his peace doctrines, marking his original conversion to a faith of general benevolence. In the midst of a speaking tour of New England, Ladd stopped in Garrison's native Newburyport in July 1826. Years later Garrison would give conflicting opinions of Ladd, unsurprising in light of their eventual split. He sometimes described Ladd as possessing "broad and irresistible humor. He is a strange and huge compound of fat, good nature, and benevolence," but on other occasions he accused him of being "somewhat superficial." At least at their first meeting, however, Garrison was spellbound. He thought that Ladd's "noble efforts" placed him at the very forefront of the reform movement, and Garrison echoed Ladd's call of unwavering commitment to the peace cause: "He who does not give his prayers, his influence, his talents, and, if necessary, his purse, fails in his duty as a Christian and a man." Garrison was unable to keep the *Free Press* going, and soon after he left Newburyport for Boston, but before he sold up shop, he had already learned an important lesson from Ladd in the rhetoric of antebellum reform: to invoke religious belief against even the slightest hint of compromise, challenging the integrity of the faith of those who disagreed.¹⁸

Unlike Garrison, Henry Clarke Wright's first conversion was neither to the cause of peace nor that of anti-slavery reform, but to religious revival generally. Responding to the message of John Truair, a revivalist preacher passing through the "burned-over" district of western New York in 1817, Wright embarked on a career in the ministry, eventually studying for several years at Andover Theological Seminary before taking up the pastorate in West Newbury, north of Boston. Initially skeptical of the Garrisonian abolitionists, he was eventually persuaded

¹⁸ William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah Benson, September 24, 1838, quoted in Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, II, 229; William Lloyd Garrison to Henry E. Benson, March 8, 1833, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume I: 1822-1835*, Walter M. Merrill ed. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 214; Garrison's *Free Press*, July 13, 1826; quoted in Thomas, *Liberator*, 51.

by their arguments. This was essentially a second conversion; as he recorded in his journal on August 29, 1836, he had freshly committed himself “entirely to the promotion of God’s kingdom in this world.” At Andover and afterward during his time behind the pulpit, Wright had struggled with doubts, but his new-found cause, as Lewis Perry puts it in his biography of Wright, “broke through his vocational doubts” and (for the time being) solidified his faith. He threw himself into the Garrisonian reforms, not only abolition out also peace reform. His association with the Garrisonians caused tensions with his fellow Congregational ministers, to the extent that Wright requested to be dismissed (a request his local board granted), but even at this point Wright’s opinions were still too orthodox for the board to put him on trial, ecclesiastically speaking.¹⁹

As he was getting to know Garrison and company, Wright was at the same time becoming acquainted with William Ladd and the American Peace Society. He first met Ladd in 1833, and proved much less hesitant to embrace peace reform than antislavery. Wright’s journal records his certainty on the matter: “Is the belligerent spirit in man directly opposed to Christ? Is any kind of war private or public justifiable on Christian principles? I am satisfied it is not.” After further contact with Ladd, Wright eventually accepted a position as an itinerant peace-peddler for the APS in 1836, making the rounds of local halls and churches in Ohio and New York that summer. Wright was incredibly eager to present his audiences with his conclusion that all war and violence were forbidden to the Christian, but Ladd cautioned him against arguing for too much too fast. While Ladd did not disagree with Wright, he did not want to alienate from the peace cause those who might still cling to some theoretically justified defensive war. Ladd wrote

¹⁹ Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 15, 26, 101-108, 128-130; Henry Clarke Wright, Journal, quoted in Perry, *Henry Clarke Wright*, 14.

to Wright that he should be content to play the role of a “John the Baptist, to prepare the way of the Lord,” or, in this case, to prepare the way for people to come to the conclusion of total pacifism on their own. As Ladd’s disciple, Wright was proving more concerned with the purity of the nonviolent faith than his master was. Wright would not be the only one to come to that conclusion; Garrison also eventually reached that point, as did Samuel Joseph May.²⁰

While not within the bounds of what Henry Wright’s professors at Andover would have considered orthodox, Samuel J. May likewise operated within the context of the evangelical reform movements. Unlike Garrison and Wright, however, May’s conversion followed rather than preceded his involvement with the reform movements. In the Congregational background from which May came, only the conservative wing put much stock in religious experience or enthusiasm, May was raised in Congregationalism’s more rationalistic, Unitarian wing. Accordingly, although May was deeply involved in temperance, educational, and other reforms, he did not have a quintessential conversion experience until he became involved with Garrison and the cause of immediate abolition. Garrison himself was the agent of this conversion, and according to May’s biographer Donald Yacovone, May came to regard him as something of a “Christ-figure.” As May later recalled the first time he heard Garrison speak, “Never before was I so affected by the speech of man. When he had ceased speaking I said to those around me, ‘That is a providential man; he is a prophet; he will shake our nation to its centre [sic], but he will shake slavery out of it.’” As Garrison had been moved by Lyman Beecher, and Wright had

²⁰ Wright, *Journal*, quoted in Perry, *Henry Clarke Wright*, 27; Charles Debenedetti, *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 41-43; William Ladd to Henry Clarke Wright, July 23, 1836; quoted in Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 60.

responded to John Truair, so May was converted to reformist religion by the “preaching” of Garrison himself.²¹

Yet the fact that Samuel May’s involvement in reform, in particular his connection to William Ladd’s peace movement, predates his classically Second Great Awakening conversion experience does not negate the sincerity, or the eventual religiosity, of his reform commitments. Ladd stayed at May’s house in Brooklyn, Connecticut, during his 1827 tour, and the two kept up an occasional correspondence afterwards. Though May had agreed with Ladd’s views, and even founded his own local peace society, he remained focused on his Unitarian parish and on education reform. It was after becoming involved with Garrison’s circle that May came to place greater importance on peace reform. By the late 1830s, his proper conversion to antislavery well-established, May stood alongside Garrison in the split from the APS. If May’s path to a religious non-violence was not a typical one for the Garrisonians, it was in the end no less religious for being atypical.²²

There is a degree of irony in the fact that Adin Ballou, another atypical Garrisonian and one of the staunchest defenders of Christian Nonresistance, seems to have come to this position without the direct influence of William Ladd. Ballou had a history of conversions to ever-more radical religious stances, peace reform being but the latest by the late 1830s. Born in 1803 in Cumberland, Rhode Island, Ballou was baptized at the age of twelve into the “Christian Connexion,” a local denomination started during a recent revival which had attracted his parents. Among its doctrinal distinctives was “Destructionism,” a denial of eternal punishment and an

²¹ Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 38-40; Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1869), 19.

²² Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May*, 29, 50, 105.

affirmation of post-mortem annihilation for unbelievers. Though this notion was intended to straddle traditional views of hell on the one hand and Universalism on the other, by twenty, Ballou had rejected it as inconsistent with scripture, apostatizing from his parents' faith and becoming a Universalist minister. This too, was not to last. In 1831, Ballou's Universalist congregation in Milford, Massachusetts, kicked him out for affirming "Restorationism" – the belief that though all people would be saved eventually, there was still temporary post-mortem punishment in store for unrepentant sinners. He then helped found the "Massachusetts Association of Restorationists," only to become intensely interested in the reform movements, creating tension with the more conservative Restorationists. In keeping with his habit of adopting new views, Ballou developed, by way of abolitionism, an affinity for peace reform. By the time he became acquainted with the Garrisonians – "persons of high character and of a generous, noble, philanthropic spirit," as Ballou remembered them decades later – they as a group had already arrived at the nonresistant position, and Ballou adopted it in tandem with their staunch condemnation of slavery.²³

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For all the variation in their backgrounds and individual stories, William Lloyd Garrison and his colleagues – notably Henry Clarke Wright, Samuel Joseph May, and Adin Ballou – shared in common a religious intensity to their social reform efforts. They came to advocate causes such as peace reform usually by undergoing a form of conversion experience, and they drew on biblical rhetoric and invoked Christian tradition in order to make sense of their new

²³ Edward K. Spann, *Hopedale: From Commune to Company Town, 1840-1920* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 2-12; Adin Ballou, *Autobiography of Adin Ballou, 1803-1890: Containing an Elaborate Record and Narrative of his Life from Infancy to Old Age*, Williams S. Heywood ed. (Lowell, MA: Vox Populi Press – Thomson and Hill, 1896), 306.

commitments to general benevolence. Thanks to the message preached by William Ladd and echoed among his followers, they came to the conclusion that a complete fidelity to the spirit of Christianity demanded that they take an even more “ultraist” stand – one against the violent spirit of the age and for the cause of peace.²⁴

Likewise, the rhetoric which they deployed in their exit from the APS in particular had the drenched-in-religiosity quality to it which renders it incompatible with politically reductionist interpretations. While it may seem credulous to take the Garrisonians’ rhetoric at face value, there comes a point where the opposite approach – a hermeneutic of suspicion – can be just as misguided. Admittedly, it is always possible that some deeply-hidden, subconscious motives underlay not only their religious language, but also underlay their actions of leaving the APS and founding the NENRS. But, given the consistency of their words and actions, and the significant personal investment of time and energy they made in both, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, Occam’s razor points us toward the simpler explanation. The Garrisonians apparently believed what they said. Their religious convictions about pacifism drove them to leave the APS.

Though the Garrisonians’ last year in the APS saw their increasing calls for the organization to uphold its peace principles with greater consistency, notably by restricting membership to those who subscribed to full-fledged pacifism, trouble had been brewing for some time. Much of this tension had been present, though under the surface, since 1833, though more in the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) than in the APS. Unfortunately for the APS, it

²⁴ Thus, Ginzberg’s marginalization of religious motivations cannot do justice to how they came to join themselves to the cause of peace reform in the first place. Further, not only are the Garrisonians’ motives for joining the APS not explained by Ginzberg’s account, but their subsequent departure from the APS and their founding of the New England Nonresistance Society do not make sense unless we credit their religious beliefs.

shared enough members with the AASS that it would have been surprising had the discord not affected both groups. At the 1833 AASS convention in Philadelphia, Garrison and May had collaborated on an earlier “Declaration of Sentiments” laying out the society’s anti-slavery principles. Speaking of the contrast between slaveholders and themselves, one crucial section read:

Their principles led them to wage war on their oppressors, and to spill human blood like water in order to be free. *Ours* forbid the doing of evil that good may come, and lead us to reject, and entreat the oppressed to reject, the use of any carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage; relying solely upon those which are spiritual and ‘mighty through God’ to the pulling down of strongholds. *Their* measures were physical, - the marshalling in arms, the hostile array, the mortal encounter. *Ours* shall be such only as the opposition of moral purity to moral corruption, the destruction of error by the potency of truth, the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love, the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance.²⁵

While no one at Philadelphia seems to have taken issue with casting these ideas in biblical language, some of those present who did not share Garrison and May’s version of peace reform questioned the Declaration’s complete abjuring of violence. Garrison, May, and their allies persuaded the doubters that this did not commit them to full nonresistance, but only to not supporting slave insurrections, and to not using violence to further the goals of abolition. This tenuous peace between differing peace reform factions held for only the next few years. In retrospect, Garrison came to believe that the doubters had failed to “understand how far they had committed themselves.”²⁶

When William Ladd agreed to hold a convention in Boston in 1838, to address the spread of these disagreements to the APS, the new “Declaration of Sentiments” which Garrison drafted

²⁵ Quoted in May, *Some Recollections*, 95.

²⁶ May, *Some Recollections*, 95; Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Nonviolent Abolitionists from 1830 Through the Civil War* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1970), 24; William Lloyd Garrison in the *Liberator*, June 28, 1839; quoted in Mabee, *Black Freedom*, 24.

left no more room for doubt. It explicitly rejected any and all recourse to force, and just as explicitly justified this rejection on religious grounds. On the question of self-defense, Garrison could not have been clearer: “no individual possesses that right in his own case.” As there was no such right for the individual, there could be no such right for the nation – all wars were unjust. The proof of these claims rested on divine revelation. “It appears to us a self-evident truth, that, whatever the gospel is designed to destroy at any period of the world, being contrary to it, ought now to be abandoned.” For Garrison, if the “Prince of Peace, under whose stainless banner we rally, came not to destroy, but to save, even the worst of enemies,” then how much less could his followers ever take up arms? Out “of allegiance to Him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords,” those who subscribed to the Declaration pledged to “adopt the Nonresistance principle.”²⁷ With any ambiguity now gone, the Garrisonians and the APS could not do otherwise than to go their separate ways. Even though Ladd had no desire to force them out, the Garrisonians could not continue in an organization which, by their lights, stood “against the peaceful dominion by the Son of God on earth.”²⁸

While Garrison, Wright, and May were cutting ties in Boston, their stand helped strengthen some of their ties back in Philadelphia, notably with Lucretia Mott and William Whipper. Lucretia Mott had attended the 1833 convention where Garrison’s initial Declaration of Sentiments was adopted, and had initially been concerned that, as a woman, she would not be permitted to speak. The group of reformers convened there, however, welcomed her input, and Samuel J. May remembered years later that “one or two graceful amendments of the language of our Declaration were made at her suggestion” – including de-emphasizing the authority of the

²⁷Garrison, “Declaration of Sentiments;” in *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance*, 24-27

²⁸Garrison, “Declaration of Sentiments;” quoted in Frederick Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, II, 233.

Declaration of Independence and emphasizing God's.²⁹ The pacifism of her Quaker background made her very amenable to Garrison and his colleagues' nonresistance doctrines, and after they left the APS and founded the NENRS, Mott threw her support behind their new organization. As before, she was welcomed to speak by the Garrisonians, journeying to Boston in 1839 to address the first annual NENRS convention. Mott returned to Philadelphia feeling encouraged, both at the peace reform taking place there and at the involvement of women – "The words of truth & soberness were spoken forth there and the meeting was altogether of deep interest to me – On one account, more so than our first Anti-Slavery Convention – That *women* were there by right." Not that Mott saw the two as in competition. As her biographer Carol Faulkner notes, "Mott saw anti-slavery, peace, and women's rights as part of the same reform impulse to liberate the individual from the bonds of tradition, custom, and organized religion." Ultimately, Mott's Quakerism insured the two went hand-in-hand.³⁰

William Whipper also saw these and other various reform causes at ultimately one, in as much as all the evils they opposed sprang from the same root – "the love of power."³¹ Though not raised a Quaker as Mott was, his education had been a Quaker one, so their parallel beliefs on the unity of reform should not be terribly surprising. The son of a white man and a black servant woman, Whipper had already embarked on a successful venture in the lumber industry in Pennsylvania before getting drawn into reform by reading Garrison's *Liberator*. According to Whipper, "[t]he key that opened the moral world to my view" was the *Liberator*'s masthead:

²⁹ May, *Some Recollections*, 92; Mabee, *Black Freedom*, 24.

³⁰ Lucretia Mott to James Miller McKim, December 29, 1839; quoted in Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 83; Faulkner, 108.

³¹ William Whipper, Speech to the First African Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, August 16, 1837; in C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume III: The United States, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 238.

“My country is the world – my countrymen are all mankind.”³² Like Garrison, Whipper believed that blacks and whites must work together to achieve moral reform; it would be inconsistent with their goals to operate in racially separate reform societies or segregated conventions. Just as with his belief of racial solidarity, Whipper also shared Garrison’s pacifism and the religious beliefs that shaped it:

I would not, for a single moment, sanction the often made assertion, that the doctrines of the holy scriptures justify war – for they are in my humble opinion its greatest enemy. And I further believe, that as soon as they become fully understood, and practically adopted, wars and strifes will cease. I believe that every argument urged in favor of what is termed a “just and necessary war,” or physical self-defense, is at enmity with the letter and the spirit of the scriptures, and when they emanate from its professed advocates should be repudiated as inimical to the principles they profess, and a reproach to christianity itself.³³

It would be difficult to find a more succinct explanation of Garrisonian nonresistance than this passage from Whipper. Not only his belief that violence in all its forms was forbidden to the Christian, but also his belief that those who disagreed should be called out as less than true Christians, made Whipper a natural ally of the Garrisonians and the NENRS. At the end of the day, Mott and Whipper’s reasons for joining the New England Nonresistance Society were – like those of Garrison and company for first joining and then leaving the American Peace Society – inextricably religious.

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At the same time, the intensity of the Garrisonians’ religious commitments did not prevent them from possessing important political ones as well. Admittedly, on the surface, it would appear that the Garrisonians were avowedly apolitical. They took their pacifism to such

³² William Whipper, in the *Colored American*, March 3, 1838; quoted in Mabee, *Black Freedom*, 58.

³³ Whipper, in *Black Abolitionist Papers*, III, 239.

an extreme that they forbid voting, eschewing it as complicit in state violence. Nonetheless, they also managed to be an intensely political group of reformers. As W. Caleb McDaniel shows in *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery*, the Garrisonian involvement with liberal reformers on both sides of the Atlantic was indicative of a deep concern for political causes. Though they kept themselves from participating directly in the government of their own nation, the Garrisonians' transnational connections were undeniably political. Further, the nonresistant ideology they put forward in the NENRS, while advocating apolitical means, was most certainly pursuing political ends – the transformation of the social order along Christian (specifically, perfectionistic and millenarian) lines. Thus, the secularizing movement in the Garrisonians' thought (which Ginzberg picks up on) was not a transition from the apolitical to the political; but rather, it was a changing relationship between religious beliefs and democratic principles, both of which the Garrisonians had held since the 1830s.³⁴

From their beginnings as a group, the Garrisonians found themselves in a world awash in transatlantic reform movements. McDaniel makes the case that by explicitly re-situating them in this context, historians will be better able to understand the Garrisonians and avoid the misapprehension that Garrison was a “religious reformer obsessed with moral perfectionism, rather than a political activist,” or that he possessed a “contempt for the democratic process.” Instead, they played an important role in the emerging networks of liberal reform, however overshadowed their role has been in memory by the likes of Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and Giuseppe Mazzini. While many reformers in Europe (those in Britain in particular) looked to the young United States as a shining beacon of democratic freedom, the Garrisonians were able to offer a biting critique of America's slavocracy side-by-side with a strong

³⁴ McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 10-18.

commitment to America's ostensibly democratic creed. They in turn looked to Britain and its abolition of slavery in its domains as an example for the New World to follow. This mutual admiration across the Atlantic gave rise to a number of ocean voyages by Garrison and his colleagues to visit with their European counterparts, solidifying their common commitments both to democracy and to the abolition of slavery.³⁵

Garrison and his colleagues made no effort to conceal their transatlantic liberal politics. As McDaniel points out, the masthead of the *Liberator* was rather explicit: "My country is the world – my countrymen are all mankind." Simultaneously, they appealed to America's own democratic nationalism against slavery, arguing that it was an embarrassment on the international stage. As Garrison put it in his *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1832), the peculiar institution showed "that the American people can never be as republican in their feelings as Frenchmen, Spaniards or Englishmen!" Until the bastion of democracy in the New World rid itself of the hypocrisy of slavery, it would remain behind European monarchies in the cause of liberty. Henry Clarke Wright likewise connected the Garrisonians' efforts against slavery with those of liberal reformers in the Old World, such as the British Chartists. Writing in his journal, he posited an almost Manichean struggle underlying the debates of the age, between "Aristocracy & Democracy, *Slavery & Liberty*." Lucretia Mott provides yet another example, both by her journey to England to take part in an international convention of abolitionists in 1840, as well as by her taking up the democratic cause of women's suffrage after the local British reformers prohibited her and any women from participating. And while not boarding a ship to Britain himself, William Whipper drew attention to the international connections of the American slave's struggle for freedom when he delivered a eulogy on the death of British

³⁵ McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 2-5, 9, 12.

abolitionist and parliamentarian William Wilberforce. Thus, as a group, the political sympathies of the Garrisonians were hardly a secret.³⁶

In order to appreciate how the Garrisonians were able to hold these political commitments in tandem with their religious convictions, it is necessary to understand the millenarian and perfectionist roots of their ideology. As was briefly discussed above, the Garrisonians' background in antebellum religious revivals bequeathed to them a millenarian set of goals. From the First Great Awakening came the notion that Christians, by pursuing personal righteousness and "general benevolence," could gradually reform society and bring about the kingdom of heaven, or the "Millennium," on earth. Further, perfectionism, the doctrine of preachers such as Charles Finney and John Humphrey Noyes in the Second Great Awakening, added to this the notion that sinlessness in this life was not just desirable, but attainable. Crucially, the failure of the saints to achieve perfection in turn prevented them from sanctifying society and achieving the millennial kingdom. For the saints to effect God's reign, they first had to cut themselves off from every impurity.³⁷

This perfectionist mentality provided the Garrisonians with the framework with which they weighed involvement in various reform and political organizations, starting as early as their exodus from the American Colonization Society (ACS). In the early 1830s, Garrison and his colleagues found that they could no longer in good conscience continue to support the ACS as an agent of antislavery reform. In fact, it was their exit from the ACS that led them to start the American Anti-Slavery Society. Garrison, Samuel Joseph May, and Henry Clarke Wright had

³⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Boston: 1832); quoted in McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 39; Henry Clarke Wright, *Journal*, quoted in McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 139; Whipper, quoted in McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 71, 129.

³⁷ Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 11-12.

all been active to varying degrees in the ACS before deciding that its mission – to gradually end slavery by sending freed slaves as colonists to West Africa – was tainted. A substantial portion of its funding came from slaveholders, there was endemic corruption and moral degeneracy in the society’s Liberian colony, and most blacks had little desire to go to Africa. Unlike those who were willing to work within a corrupt ACS for the greater good of eventually abolishing slavery, Garrison and company would not sully themselves with such moral compromise. In his 1832 manifesto *Thoughts on African Colonization*, Garrison judged the ACS to be effectively pro-slavery for indulging in such compromises. The only upright path for those who recognized the evil of slavery, he argued, was to leave the ACS and call for immediate abolition. This was not only a matter of keeping one’s own hands clean, it was also necessary to successfully abolish slavery. Half-measures would never get the job done: as Garrison wrote, “There can be no peace without purity.”³⁸

In a sense, it was this bizarrely pragmatic commitment to principle that the Garrisonians used as a justification for their separatism, organizational and political. While they strongly agreed with the professed antislavery aims of the ACS, they saw achieving those aims as undermined by the organization itself. Likewise, as discussed in some detail above, their split from the APS was not due to a disagreement about the end they were striving for (namely, peace), but to a disagreement on whether the means of the APS (namely, compromise) fatally undermined pursuit of that end. Thus, though the Garrisonians were very much in sympathy with the goals of transatlantic democratic reformers, they could not permit themselves to engage in the political process as a means to that end.

³⁸ Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 14-24, 37-38; William Lloyd Garrison to the Editor of the *Christian Witness*, December 4, 1846, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume III: 1841-1849*, ed. Walter M. Merrill (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), 456, quoted in Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*.

The Garrisonian philosophy of pursuing political ends by non-political (and therefore religiously pure) means found its expression in their founding of the New England Nonresistance Society, and was ably articulated by Adin Ballou in his address to the first NENRS convention in Boston in 1839, “Nonresistance in Relation to Human Governments.”³⁹ For Ballou, Christian nonresistance had in view a governed society as its end goal, but it was to be a “Divine government,” and thus while equality and liberty would be had by all, only spiritual means could be used to bring it about. Otherwise, reformers would wind up perpetuating the system they were trying to transcend – fallible government by men over other men.

What then is the object of non-resistants with respect to human governments—if it is neither to purify nor subvert them? The resolution declares that it is to supersede them. To supersede them with what? With the kingdom of Christ. How? By the spiritual regeneration of their individual subjects—by implanting in their minds higher principles of feeling and action—by giving them heavenly instead of earthly motives.⁴⁰

Christ’s injunctions in the Sermon on the Mount to not resist evil, but to love one’s enemies, forbade Christians from the use of coercive force or even appeal to the coercive force of the state. Thus, recourse to human governments was forbidden precisely because they depended on force, the violent subjection of some men to the will of other men, and because their authority was intrinsically tied to this ostensible right to use force, whether to make war or execute criminals. In whatever sense they might be ordained by God, governments had no such rights, for God never gave men a right to do wrong. Accordingly no true follower of Christ could participate in such a brutal system. Instead, Christians should denounce all wars and the human governments that waged them for being in rebellion against the true will of God – that

³⁹ Adin Ballou, *Non-Resistance in Relation to Human Governments* (Boston: Non-Resistance Society, 1839). <https://archive.org/details/nonresistanceinr00ball>.

⁴⁰ Ballou, *Non-Resistance*, 11

men love one another. When the people of God acknowledged that this was the will of God, practicing nonresistance and showing love to the world by refusing, as Christ had, to strike back, then human governments would be transcended by the coming of the “government of God” – the millennium.⁴¹

However apolitical such Garrisonian perfectionism may sound, they saw these religious beliefs as intrinsically connected to their political goals of abolishing slavery and establishing racial equality. Slavery was the ultimate expression of all of the evil accompanying human government and coercive force, the most flagrant example of man arbitrarily subjecting another to his will in defiance of the will of God. In this light, antislavery was the highest form of nonresistance. Conversely, nonresistance, in rejecting all man-made governments and all assertions of the will of some men over others, was antislavery carried to its logical conclusion and applied to the whole of human society. This close relationship between antislavery and nonresistance had profound implications for fighting slavery. Because slavery and the state both expressed the same sinful human propensity to violence, one could hardly appeal to the latter to restrict the former. That would be resisting evil with evil, a violation of the nonresistant ethic of love. Likewise, one could hardly support slave rebellions, for however much one might sympathize with the plight of the oppressed, that did not grant the oppressed the right to perpetrate the same evil on their oppressors. This was why the only true way to fight slavery was with moral suasion. Moral suasion was the very method of Christ, and there could be no higher calling. Though refusing to resist evil with force might produce martyrs, the blood of

⁴¹ Ballou, *Non-Resistance*, 15-17, 24.

martyrs had proved more effective than the sword of Rome. If need be, it would again prove itself the stronger against the lash of slavery.⁴²

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Just as Garrison, Wright, May and Ballou's reasons for joining the APS and adopting the cause of peace reform only make sense with reference to their religious motives, so too do their leaving the APS and joining with Lucretia Mott and William Whipper in supporting the new NENRS makes little sense without factoring their personal faith into the equation. While there are undeniable gendered and political aspects to their reform causes, their commitments remain irreducibly religious. Their rhetoric saturated with biblicisms, and their actions of separating themselves from doctrinal compromise, both clearly show the religious elements of their activities. With most of them coming to reform through conversion experiences, it is little wonder their personal beliefs and theology shaped and undergirded their efforts persuade America into moral uprightness. The Garrisonians began their advocacy of Christian Nonresistance with all the passion of the faithful defending precious revealed dogma from spineless heretics. This is why Garrisonian peace reformers – of all people – could be so prone to conflict: the truth of God was at stake.

⁴² Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 66-70.

CHAPTER 2

TAKING UNCLE TOM'S BIBLE: CHANGING VIEWS OF SCRIPTURE, HUMAN NATURE, AND AUTHORITY IN GARRISONIAN ABOLITIONISM

By late 1853, Harriet Beecher Stowe, already famous for her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published the year before, found herself at odds with her fellow antislavery crusader William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison seems not to have anticipated her dispute with him. He had been highly complementary toward her work, even claiming her title character as an exemplar of the doctrines of Christian nonresistance.¹ If there was any lingering animosity on Garrison's part involving his falling out with her father and his one-time mentor, Lyman Beecher, it had not shown. They were certainly both intensely committed to the destruction of human bondage and chattel slavery. Nevertheless, Stowe took Garrison to task for certain positions he had permitted to be printed in the *Liberator*. "In regard to you, your paper, and, in some measure, your party," she wrote to him, "I am in honest embarrassment." She went on, "I sympathize with you fully in many of your positions; others I consider erroneous, hurtful to liberty and the progress of humanity."² These were no small accusations. What then had Garrison done for Stowe to take such umbrage with him?

¹ Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life told by his Children*, Volume III (Boston: 1894), 360-361.

² Harriet Beecher Stowe to William Lloyd Garrison, November 1853; quoted in Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, III, 396.

Stowe charged him with making it possible to “take from poor Uncle Tom his Bible and give him nothing in its place.”³ Garrison had allowed various articles advocating “infidelity,” or skepticism toward the supposed authority of sacred scripture, to appear in the *Liberator*, and to Stowe this was a serious lapse in judgment. “In this view I cannot conscientiously do anything which might endorse your party and your paper.” While she intended her rebuke to be a sign of her high “esteem and regard” for Garrison by virtue of being so brutally honest, it was still a stinging rejoinder to his apparently having extended her an invitation to an AASS anniversary convention. For Stowe, however, the issue at hand warranted her blunt response. In her mind, the cause of freedom for the slave in particular and the advancement of society in general were at stake. Hope for progress in these areas was tied up with a respect for the Bible, and in turn with the ability of the slave to appeal above his master’s authority to that of God’s word.⁴

Not terribly long before, Garrison would have agreed. He began his antislavery endeavors firmly convinced of the traditional doctrine of scripture espoused by his fellow nineteenth-century evangelical reformers. Not only Garrison, but his fellow nonresistant abolitionists started from the same place, naturally assuming what nearly all their contemporaries in the religiously saturated society of antebellum America took for granted. Yet by the early 1850s, they had largely rejected this traditional view of religious authority, replacing it with an appeal to the universal laws of nature which God had inscribed on the human conscience. As disturbing as this was to Stowe and various others of their peers, the Garrisonians did not see this shift in their thinking as a rejection of religious faith per se, but merely the removal of its superstitious and unnecessary elements which were no longer plausible (namely, an uncritical

³ Stowe to Garrison, November 1853.

⁴ Francis Jackson Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, III, 396.

acceptance of and reliance upon the authority of scripture). Even with this caveat, Garrison and his followers' shift on this issue cannot be ignored, but cries out for an explanation.

Historians of abolitionism have offered a number of explanations to account for this Garrisonian abandonment of scripture, and while many of them are helpful, they are at best incomplete. One view that can be dismissed rather quickly is the attitude among some scholars that there is little here in need of explanation. The thought is that the Garrisonians were above all else fanatical abolitionists, and whatever other views they may have held or rejected are at most incidental to their fundamental drive to end slavery.⁵ That the Garrisonians were originally severely uncompromising on maintaining scriptural authority, and explicitly tied their reform activities to a traditional view of the Bible, should be enough to undermine this notion. More profitably, Lewis Perry has suggested that the Garrisonians' "come-outer" mentality, their rejection of institutional authority in favor of private judgment, ultimately came to be applied to texts, such as the biblical canon, as well as institutions (churches, reform societies, etc.). Also helpful is the work of Valerie Ziegler, who has pointed to the debates between antebellum biblical interpreters over slavery, arguing that the Garrisonians only gave up traditional notions of scriptural authority after they became convinced over time that they could not answer the biblical case of southern pro-slavery apologists.⁶

Though both Perry and Ziegler's arguments hold weight, they do not take into account just how drastic the Garrisonian shift was, both at the time and for themselves. As the renowned American religious historian Mark Noll puts it, Garrison (and his followers) "abandon[ed] the

⁵ Merle Curti, "Non-Resistance in New England" (*The New England Quarterly* 2, no. 1, 1929): 54-55.

⁶ Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); Valerie H. Ziegler, *The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America* (Macon, GE: Mercer University Press, 2001).

view of Scripture that was everywhere regnant in America,” in fact, a view to which they themselves had been intensely committed.⁷ Further, both the “come-outer” mentality and debates with pro-slavery apologists were issues common to other abolitionists as well, yet they found ways to reconcile in their own minds their condemnation of slavery with their belief in the Bible.⁸ Something unique to the Garrisonian apologists as a group is necessary to account for their exceptional measure of overturning the traditional notions of religious authority ubiquitous in their time.

My answer to the question “What was unique about the Garrisonians that accounts for their changing view of authority, in which scripture is displaced by natural law?” is as follows. I argue that the early marginalization of the Garrisonian abolitionists by mainstream evangelical reformers, and the Garrisonians’ subsequent involvement with non-evangelical groups on the periphery of reform (Quakers, Freethinkers, and Transcendentalists), provided a context which enabled them to reject traditional notions of scriptural authority and to construct secular, natural law arguments against slavery. I will begin by documenting the Garrisonians’ intense commitment to traditional views of scripture, before showing that the factors Perry and Ziegler identify as driving them to abandon the traditional view were not particular to the Garrisonians. Next, I will demonstrate that marginalization by evangelical reformers was exclusive to the Garrisonians among immediatist abolitionists. Finally, that the Garrisonians’ interaction with the non-evangelical periphery of the reform movements is what gave them the conceptual resources

⁷ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 387.

⁸ See Molly O’Shatz, *Slavery & Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

they used to critique, and ultimately reject, traditional notions of scriptural authority as well as construct secular, natural law arguments against slavery

This chapter will continue my focus on William Lloyd Garrison and his compatriots: Samuel Joseph May, Henry Clarke Wright, William Whipper, and Lucretia Mott. Garrison, May, Wright, and Whipper all provide examples of shifting from the traditional view of biblical authority to one grounded in natural law, while Mott is an example of a non-evangelical who helped shape their emerging views. While Garrison, May, and Wright were marginalized for ostensibly religious reasons, and Whipper for more racist ones, all of them were pushed to look for support and ideas on the religious fringe of their day. This predisposed them to be less inclined toward the orthodoxy of Theodore Dwight Weld's biblical antislavery, and more receptive to the heterodoxy of Theodore Parker and Lucretia Mott. Accordingly, Parker and Mott will provide the strong support for my argument that the Garrisonians abandoned their belief in the authority of scripture and constructed a new exclusively natural-law ethic because of their marginalization to and interaction with the non-evangelical periphery of reform.

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In as much as the Garrisonians fit the general evangelical pattern for joining the reform movements, of conversion and subsequent works of general benevolence, it should not be surprising that the Garrisonians shared their fellow reformers' acceptance of traditional ideas about scriptural authority.⁹ Operating as they were from the center of evangelical reform, it would have been far more surprising if the Garrisonians had not argued against intemperance, violence, and slavery from a traditional understanding of the Bible. As their

⁹ For the Garrisonians' Second Great Awakening conversions to the cause of reform, see chapter one.

writings show, prior to their marginalization to the non-evangelical periphery of reform, Garrison, Wright, and May all explicitly appealed to the authority of scripture to justify their views against the recalcitrance and skepticism of their contemporaries.

Drawing on his early mentor Lyman Beecher's principles, Garrison's rhetoric was intensely biblical. In Beecher's understanding of general benevolence, the saints needed to apply the standards of the Bible to the whole of society in order to bring on the millennium, and Garrison's initial views initially were not substantially different.¹⁰ Even years later, after falling out with Beecher, Garrison could write, "my religious views are of the most elevated, the most spiritual character... I esteem the holy scriptures above all other books in the universe, and always appeal to 'the law and the testimony' to prove all my peculiar doctrines."¹¹ On the issue of slavery, Garrison's appeals to scripture were especially overt.

By Garrison's lights, Southern slaveholders had no scriptural ground on which to stand. In 1828, he wrote to a Boston newspaper that "[t]hey do not...go to the bible for proof-texts to support the validity of their practices; they do not care for the bible; but depend on the strength of their manacles, and the severity of their whips."¹² If only they had paid attention to scripture they would not have involved themselves with such a base institution. As Garrison implored a merchant known to have transported slaves, "Sir, I owe you no ill-will. My soul weeps over your error. I denounced your conduct in strong language – but did you not deserve it? Consult your bible and your heart."¹³ When pressed as to how exactly slavery violated the Bible,

¹⁰ Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 39, 138.

¹¹ William Lloyd Garrison to Elizabeth Pease, Boston, March 1, 1841, in Walter M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume III: 1841-1849* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), 17.

¹² Garrison to the editor of the *Boston Courier*, August 11, 1828, in *Letters*, III, 64-65.

¹³ Garrison to Francis Todd, May 13, 1830; *Letters*, III, 93-94.

Garrison had a number of favorite responses. Among a great many crimes, slavery kept slaves illiterate, and thus “Even the ‘glorious gospel of the blessed God,’ which brings life and immortality to perishing man, is a sealed book to his understanding.”¹⁴ Further, ““The infernal engine of African oppression is in perpetual motion – it has no weekly Sabbath,” a violation of the fourth commandment.¹⁵ Accordingly, Garrison demanded immediate abolition, in “compliance with the requisitions of justice, and the precept of our Lord Jesus Christ!”¹⁶

One of Garrison’s strongest biblical denunciations of slavery, however, came in a letter to a minister who had asked Garrison to recommend an antislavery tract. In the following, Garrison goes for a shock-and-awe approach, an unremitting barrage of scriptural proof-texts:

Is not the fact enough to make one hang his head, that *christian men* and *christian ministers* (for so they dare to call themselves) are slave owners? Are there not *Balaams*, who prophesy in the name of the Lord, but who covet the presents of *Balak*? What! shall he who styles himself an ambassador of Christ – who preaches what angels sung, “Peace on earth, good will to man” – who tells me, Sabbath after Sabbath, that with God there is no respect of persons – that my Creator commands me to do unto others as I would that they should do unto me – to love my neighbor as myself – to call no man master – to be meek, merciful, and blameless – to let my light shine before men, that they may see my good works, and glorify my Father who is heaven – to shun every appearance of evil – to rather suffer myself to be defrauded than defraud; – nay, who tells me, as the injunction of my Judge, to love even my enemies, to bless them that curse me, to do good to them that hate me, and to pray for them that despitefully use and persecute me – (alas! how he has needed the prayers and forgiveness of his poor degraded, persecuted slaves!) – I say, shall such a teacher presume to call the creatures of God his *property* – to deal in bones, and sinews, and souls – to whip, and manacle, and brand – merely because his victims differ in complexion from himself, and because the tyrannous laws of a State, and the corrupt usages of society, justify his conduct. Yet so it is. By his example, he sanctifies, in the eyes of ungodly men, a system of blood, and violates every command of Jehovah. Horrible state of things!¹⁷

¹⁴ Garrison to Ebenezer Dole, July 14, 1830; *Letters*, III, 105-106.

¹⁵ Garrison to Ebenezer Dole, July 11, 1831; *Letters*, III, 122.

¹⁶ Garrison to Dole, July 11, 1831.

¹⁷ Garrison to George Shepherd, September 13, 1830; *Letters*, III, 108-109.

In the grand project of evangelical reform – “the wide regeneration of public sentiment,” of which Garrison saw the abolition of slavery as an integral part, when the question was raised “What is our Statute Book?” Garrison could only give one answer – “The Bible!”¹⁸

This answer was uncontested in the early years of the Garrisonian movement, and was certainly one Henry C. Wright endorsed. As a fervent advocate of the abolition of slavery and Christian nonresistance, he constantly appealed to the example and teaching of Christ to defend his ethic of turning the other cheek. From his days in seminary at Andover and his early years in the ministry, Wright came away with an exceedingly high view of scripture and of the importance of its moral authority. Writing in 1833 a guide for parents on how to provide their children with religious instruction, he emphasized above all else the centrality of the Bible. Mothers and Fathers were to teach their offspring “To regard it as the Word of God,” “that it is wrong – a sin – a crime against God – not to believe all that the Bible says is true,” and “To refer to it as an infallible rule.” “God speaks to us in the Bible as if he spoke with an audible voice from Heaven,” Wright assured his audience. Thus, all the more reason to point impressionable young souls again and again to the great exemplary figure of scripture: “refer them to Christ always – in determining what is right and wrong.”¹⁹

Far more than merely instruction for children, the Bible in Wright’s view held the authority to decide on the two great issues of the day – abolition and nonresistance. At the 1836 AASS convention, Wright maintained that “Slavery cannot stand before Christianity,” and claimed that the whole question could be put to rest by appeal to the Apostle Paul’s “Epistle of

¹⁸ Garrison to the “President of the Anti-Slavery Convention to be held at Providence, Feb. 2,” January 30, 1836, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume II: A House Dividing Against Itself, 1836-1840*, Louis Ruchames ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 29.

¹⁹ Henry Clarke Wright, *Journal*, vol. XIV (1833), 26, 29, 40. Boston Public Library.

Philemon,” “the most powerful Anti-Slavery document in the Bible.”²⁰ The biblical doctrine of Divine sovereignty over the affairs of men had even farther reaching implications. “God has a government & Man has a government. These two are at perpetual War. God is trying all means to bring men under his dominion. Man is trying to subject his fellow man to himself. All human governments originate, mainly, in a desire to obtain dominion over his fellow creatures.”²¹ It followed that both slavery and the state were evil; both unlawfully interposed an authority, whether slave-owners or civic officials, between God and the individual. No true Christian could support slavery or the state, but instead could only practice nonresistance and submit to the authority of God in scripture. Though far more radical than the theology taught at Andover, for Wright it was well in line with the attitude his teachers had instilled in him there – that of a defender of biblical authority.²²

The role of a defender of biblical authority probably did not come as naturally to Harvard-educated, Unitarian Samuel J. May as it did to the Andoverian, Trinitarian Wright; nevertheless, May still made use of traditional notions of scriptural authority in his attacks on slavery, just as Wright and Garrison did. Addressing an audience preparing to celebrate the Fourth of July, 1831, May sought to blunt their patriotic enthusiasm by suggesting that by the standards of the biblical prophets, the United States was in danger of condemnation for slavery.

The words of Ezekiel to God’s favored nation of old, may be repeated as justly applicable to us. ‘The people of this land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy.’ Would that this allegation might be uttered to every assembly that may be gathered tomorrow throughout our country, and some fearless prophet send home the truth to every heart. Would that the future anniversaries of our Independence

²⁰ Wright, *Journal*, vol. XXXII (November 29, 1836), 367, 379. Houghton Library, Harvard. (Perry notes in his biography of Wright regarding his journals that “Volume numbers change back and forth between Arabic and roman numerals, and in overlapping series,” 302)

²¹ Wright, *Journal*, vol. XXXII, 302.

²² Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 132; Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 52.

might be days of unfeigned humiliation, until the yoke of the oppressed millions be broken, and slavery be banished from among us!²³

May further argued that scripture taught the fundamental solidarity of the human race, as per “the declaration of the Apostle, that ‘God hath made of one blood all the dwellers upon earth,’”²⁴ and that this rendered the race-based slavery of the South even more repugnant to the Almighty. That May as a “convert” of sorts to evangelical reform was able to make these arguments, in spite of coming from a different theological perspective, shows just how strongly the Garrisonians abolitionists were committed as a group to the traditional view of the Bible as authoritative.

More accustomed to the biblicism of evangelical reform, William Whipper explicitly subscribed to traditional notions of scriptural authority, both when making his case for nonresistance as well as when arguing for an integrationist approach to reform. On the former, Whipper was incredibly straightforward:

‘Whomsoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn unto him the other also’... I rest my argument on the ground, that whatever is *scriptural* is *right* and, that whatever is right, is reasonable...[t]he doctrine evidently taught by the scriptural quotation, evidently instructs us that resistance to physical aggression is wholly unnecessary as well as unrighteous... a willful departure from the moral and Divine law.²⁵

On the latter, he likewise made his argument against separate reform societies for blacks and whites by invoking scripture’s teachings. All races “are made in the image of God, and are endowed with those attributes which the Deity has given to man.” Accordingly, replicating the

²³ Samuel J. May, *A discourse on slavery in the United States: delivered in Brooklyn, July 3, 1831* (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832), 5.

²⁴ May, *A discourse*, 23.

²⁵ William Whipper, Speech to the First African Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, August 16, 1837; in C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume III: The United States, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 243.

world's "hateful and unnecessary distinctions" based on color in Christian reform societies was hardly in accord with God's revealed will.²⁶ On both questions, Whipper upheld the original Garrisonian commitment to the authority of scripture. Also like his colleagues, his marginalization from mainstream reform would lead him to reconsider that commitment.

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Only in light of this staunch commitment to traditional notions of religious authority can we begin to answer the question of what led the Garrisonians to abandon this view in favor of a secular, natural law ethic. The Garrisonians were far too committed to the traditional view for historians to simply write off their jettisoning of it as a fluke or as unimportant. Thus, there remain two chief explanations in the historiographical literature on the Garrisonians to account for this shift. One attributes the shift to the legacy of the Garrisonians "come-outer" mentality and suspicion of authority in general; the other sees the relinquishing of biblical authority as a tactical concession by the Garrisonians faced with an onslaught of proslavery apologists, enabling them to deploy more effective arguments for their strategic goal – the abolition of slavery. Both of these interpretations have merit, but, as will be shown below, at most they capture only part of the reason for the shift. Come-outerism and arguments with proslavery apologists were issues non-Garrisonian abolitionists faced without abandoning scripture; to understand why the Garrisonians shift while their fellow immediatist abolitionists did not, some element unique to the Garrisonians is necessary. As I will argue below, that element is their

²⁶ William Whipper, Alfred Niger, and Augustus Price, Address given at Wesley African Methodist Church, Philadelphia, June 3, 1835; in C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume III: The United States, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 147-148.

marginalization by evangelical reformers and their interaction with the non-evangelical reform periphery.

Approaching the question from the perspective of intellectual history, Lewis Perry points to the Garrisonians' ideological origins as a "come-outer" group to explain their shifting positions. As a "come-outer" group, the Garrisonians had withdrawn from any and all organizations and societies they believed to have compromised the fundamental truths of Scripture. "Having abandoned their churches on the grounds that Biblical Christianity had been forsaken, [they] were apt to argue subsequently that even the Bible must be judged by the 'amount of truth' it contained."²⁷ Again, there is a significant element of truth to Perry's interpretation. He is entirely correct that the Garrisonians possessed a come-outer mentality. For example, as mentioned in chapter one, early in their involvement with antislavery causes, Garrison, Wright, and May decided that they could not in good conscience continue to support the American Colonization Society (ACS). Instead, they founded their own organization – the American Anti-Slavery Society.²⁸ Unlike those who were willing to work within a corrupt ACS for the greater good of eventually abolishing slavery, Garrison and company would not sully themselves with such moral compromise. In his 1832 manifesto *Thoughts on African Colonization*, Garrison judged the ACS to be effectively pro-slavery for indulging in such compromises. The only upright path for those who recognized the evil of slavery, he argued, was to 'come-out' of the ACS and call for immediate abolition.²⁹

²⁷ Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 111.

²⁸ Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 14-17, 22.

²⁹ Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 19, 24, 37-38.

The difficulty for Perry's thesis is that the Garrisonians were not the only ones to come out of the ACS, nor even the only ones to leave the various other reform organizations they managed to split. In addition to the Garrisonians, the leaders of the other two primary groups of immediatists – the evangelical abolitionist Tappan brothers, and the political abolitionists Gerrit Smith and James Birney – left the ACS on principle, but neither the Tappanite abolitionists in New York nor the members of Smith and Gerrit's Liberty Party wound up rejecting the authority of the Bible. Lewis and Arthur Tappan retained their evangelical credentials through the end of the Civil War and beyond, as did the Gerrit Smith circle.³⁰ Thus, it seems unlikely that a "come-outer" mentality was the primary cause behind the shift from scripture to nature law. This is, of course, not to say that the Garrisonians' "come-outer" mentality played no role. In the case of one particular Garrisonian, a certain Charles Stearns, Perry provides good evidence that come-outerism motivated his individual rejection of scripture, but Stearns was a member of a younger generation of Garrisonians, and never really a leader, so it is difficult to show that his case should be taken as representative.³¹ In any case, though come-outerist suspicions of authority seem to have played a part, there is definitely more to the story.

At least one further aspect of the story is the explanation put forward by Valerie Ziegler. She argues that the chief factor influencing the Garrisonian shift from scripture to natural law was their interaction with Southern proslavery apologists. According to Ziegler, the Garrisonians had the worse of these debates, and faced with the choice of compromising on their opposition to slavery or compromising on their doctrine of scriptural authority, they opted for the latter. It is certainly the case that the Garrisonians were faced with formidable opponents in the

³⁰ See Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, chapters 3 and 4 respectively.

³¹ Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 240-246. While not an issue of "come-outerism," Stearns did lay some groundwork for Henry Clarke Wright's eventual view. See chapter three.

debates on the Bible and slavery. South Carolinian and Baptist minister Richard G. Fuller gave a spirited defense of the South's peculiar institution on biblical grounds, and Robert Lewis Dabney, a well-regarded Presbyterian theologian from Virginia, wrote "Here is our policy, then, to push the Bible continually, to drive Abolitionism to the wall, and compel it to assume an anti-Christian position."³² That Moses Stuart of Andover Seminary, the highest-regarded biblical scholar in the North, conceded that the South was correct in their proslavery interpretation of scripture certainly did not make matters any easier for the Garrisonians.³³ As Wright himself wrote to Garrison in 1853, "Your only course was, to deny that the Bible, or any book, has the power to sanction war or slavery; and to affirm that nothing is true because it is in a book, nothing false because it is condemned in a book... What sort of reformer had you been, had you admitted that *man's right to life and liberty depended on the construction and authority of a book written two and three thousand years ago?*"³⁴

Ziegler presents a strong case. To deny that the strength of the biblical proslavery case inclined the Garrisonians to dispense with scriptural authority would be foolish. However, there is still a remainder in need of explanation. The other groups of immediatists faced these same Southern apologists, yet they did not compromise on the doctrine of scripture. Francis Wayland, Baptist minister, president of Brown University, and Richard G. Fuller's sparring partner, refused to concede the Bible to the South and put forward arguments of his own that the Bible correctly interpreted was opposed to slavery.³⁵ Likewise, Theodore Dwight Weld, who while not

³² Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland, Nathan A. Finn and Keith Harper eds., *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008); quoted in Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 106.

³³ Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2006), 38-39.

³⁴ Henry Wright, "The Bible Question" in the *Liberator* (April 1, 1853): 52; quoted in Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 108.

³⁵ Fuller and Wayland, *Domestic Slavery*.

a Garrisonian was married to one – Angelina Grimké, never retracted the claims of his own pamphlet *The Bible Against Slavery*.³⁶ Thus, while the strength, or apparent strength, of the proslavery position certainly seems to have been a significant influence on the Garrisonian abandonment of scriptural authority, it does not seem to have been the overriding influence. Something else is needed to account for the fact that the Garrisonians shifted from scripture to natural law while the likes of their fellow immediatists Wayland and Weld did not yield to Southern biblical proslavery arguments.

Further, if there had been a general connection between abandoning the traditional evangelical view of scripture and capitulating to proslavery apologists, one would expect to find that was the case with Theodore Weld’s eventual rejection of biblical authority. Weld held the line against such arguments for years, insisting that the word “slave” occurring in the biblical text was actually a mistranslation. Per Weld, “servant” was the correct interpretation, and this slavery as practiced in America was an institution unknown to both the Old Testament patriarchs and New Testament apostles.³⁷ Yet when Weld finally relinquished biblical authority in the late 1840s, it seems to have had nothing to do with acknowledging the tenuousness of his biblical argument against slavery. According to his biographer Robert Abzug, Weld was drawn to spiritualism and Swedenborgianism in the wake of burnout from his reform career and marital difficulties at home. Apparently they offered him solace he could not find within the strictures of evangelical reform orthodoxy.³⁸ Thus, while the Garrisonians as a whole did not share the

³⁶ Strangely enough, Garrison was still citing Weld months after he received the letter from Wright quoted above, denying scripture’s authority but still refusing to openly concede it supported slavery. Garrison to Harriet Beecher Stowe, November 30, 1853; in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume IV: From Disunionism to the Brink of War, 1850-1860*, Louis Ruchames, ed. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 285-286.

³⁷ O’Shatz, *Slavery & Sin*, 61-63.

³⁸ Robert Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 246-253.

personal experiences that led Weld to his new views, in looking for what was unique to the Garrisonians to lead them to their new conclusions, it makes sense to look for what might have pushed them beyond the bounds of evangelical reform.

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What was unique to the Garrisonians was their marginalization by the mainstream evangelical reform community, and their involvement with peripheral, non-evangelical reformers. While the marginalization of the Garrisonians did not happen all at once, and they were not always marginalized for the same reasons, from the very beginnings of their existence as a group, the Garrisonians experienced a pattern of hostility from the evangelical mainstream which the two other primary groups of immediatists did not have to contend with. In some cases they were marginalized because of their interaction with the non-evangelical periphery; in others, their marginalization by evangelicals lead to interaction with the non-evangelical periphery. The beginning of the Garrisonians' marginalization involved both.

Just as Garrison was getting involved in antislavery reform, under the influence of the Quaker reformer Benjamin Lundy, Garrison's hero, Lyman Beecher, tried to rein him in. Beecher saw Garrison's radical antislavery message as a threat to evangelical unity, a distraction from reform causes that Christians North and South alike could support, such as temperance. If Garrison would be "the Wilberforce of America," Beecher told him, he must "give up [his] fanatical notions" and submit to clerical authority.³⁹ Garrison was unwilling to compromise or tone-down his message, and as a result during his late 1830 lecture tour, he found most churches closed to him. His only welcome in Boston came from Abner Kneeland, a freethinking, anti-

³⁹ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 152, 160.

religious skeptic.⁴⁰ Flirting with peripheral reform ideas such as Quaker antislavery views both contributed to Garrison's marginalization, but it also led to further interaction with the periphery in the form of Abner Kneeland. This was a pattern to be repeated by Wright and May. Their involvement with Garrison, who had been shoved to the periphery, led to tensions with their congregations. In Wright's case, he asked to leave; in May's, he was asked to leave.⁴¹ They both left, and in turn became more involved with the periphery of reform.

This response is in stark contrast to the treatment the other immediatists received. When Theodore Weld went up against Lyman Beecher on antislavery, unlike Garrison he was allowed to remain within the mainstream. Granted, Weld was part of a majority of students at Lane Seminary, which Beecher was running at the time, who simply left the school when Beecher refused to give them a platform for their antislavery views.⁴² Given when and where Garrison made his stand, he did not have the luxury of being in a majority. Likewise, Garrison lacked the social standing and business acumen which the Tappan brothers possessed and made use of in New York City to further the immediatist cause.⁴³ Finally, unlike Gerrit Smith, Garrison was avowedly non-political, and was unable to tap into a pre-existing voting block to establish a following.⁴⁴ Though the factors listed here need not be the only – or even necessarily the most important – reasons why the Garrisonians were marginalized and the other immediatists were not, but they do at least show that the non-Garrisonian immediatist were working in a mainstream reform community to which the Garrisonians often did not have access.

⁴⁰ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 153.

⁴¹ Perry, *Henry Clarke Wright*, 14; Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 41.

⁴² See Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, chapter 3.

⁴³ See Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, chapter 4.

⁴⁴ Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 158.

What was crucial about the peripheral reform community to which the Garrisonians did have access was not the mere fact of their interaction, but the fact the Garrisonians appropriated conceptual resources from their colleagues on the periphery in order to displace scripture with natural law as their authority for arguing against slavery. The Quakers, Freethinkers, and Transcendentalists with whom the Garrisonians found themselves working provided them a context in which they could both critique traditional notions of scriptural authority as well as construct wholly secular, natural law arguments against slavery. From Quakers such as Lundy and ultimately Lucretia Mott, the Garrisonians adapted for their own ends the doctrine of the “Inner Light,” a subjective-yet-divinely-inspired source of truth.⁴⁵ From Freethinkers such as Kneeland, they gained an appreciation for “infidels” (i.e., religious skeptics), and ultimately came to accept many of the anti-biblical critiques of Thomas Paine.⁴⁶ (Ironically, it generally was not until after the Garrisonians had been marginalized by the evangelical mainstream to these philosophical and theological fringes that the Garrisonians actually came to adopt these new beliefs.)⁴⁷ But even more than Quakerism and Freethought, the Garrisonians incorporated Transcendentalism into their new beliefs on authority.

The Transcendentalist who most influenced the Garrisonians was a minister by the name of Theodore Parker. After falling out with Beecher, Garrison and several of his followers joined Parker’s congregation, and it was Parker who provided much of the remaining basis for the general Garrisonian denial of scriptural authority and affirmation of the superiority of

⁴⁵ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29.

⁴⁶ John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison – A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1963), 352-353.

⁴⁷ See, Garrison to the editor of *Zion’s Herald*, August 27, 1842; in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume III: No Union with Slaveholders, 1841-1849*, Walter M. Merrill ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 97.

reason.⁴⁸ All that was true in Christianity, Parker argued in his 1841 sermon “A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” was accessible through human nature and reason, making appeals to the authority of Christ and the Bible unnecessary. In fact, the very notion of divine authority being invested in a single man or book was made-up by mere men.⁴⁹ These critiques of traditional understandings of biblical authority, and the replacement of scripture with reason and nature, are echoed repeatedly in the Garrisonian attempts to articulate their new understanding of authority and construct appropriate, a-biblical arguments against slavery.

The influence of Transcendentalism and Quakerism on the Garrisonians was combined in the person of Lucretia Mott. Mott’s inner light thought very highly of Parker, and had an especially high opinion of his “Discourse on the Transient and Permanent.” Referring to Parker’s subordination of scripture to conscience, she said “Let us venerate the Good & True, while we respect not prejudice & Superstition.”⁵⁰ Later, she would share the stage with Parker at Boston’s Anti-Sabbath convention in 1848. Using her platform to reinforce Parker’s views, Mott assured her audience “The distinction has been clearly and ably drawn, between mere forms and rituals of the Church, and practical goodness: between the consecration of man, and the consecration of days, the dedication of the Church, and the dedication of our lives to God.”⁵¹ As she had since attending the 1833 inaugural meeting of the AASS, Mott was once again influencing Garrisonian opinion.

⁴⁸ Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 104.

⁴⁹ Theodore Parker, “Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity” (Boston: Freeman and Bolles, 1841).

⁵⁰ Lucretia Mott to Richard and Hannah Webb, February 25, 1842; quoted in Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott’s Heresy: Abolition and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 122.

⁵¹ Lucretia Mott, “Remarks, delivered to the Anti-Sabbath Convention,” quoted in Faulkner, *Mott’s Heresy*, 128.

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It was this interaction with the non-evangelical periphery of the reform movements that gave the Garrisonians the conceptual resources they used to critique, and ultimately reject, traditional notions of scriptural authority as well as construct secular, natural law arguments against slavery. This perhaps comes through most clearly in Garrison's response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's charge that he was helping to rob Uncle Tom of his Bible. It was upon the Bible that Stowe claimed to "ground all my hopes and liberties, not only of the slave, but of the whole human race."⁵² Garrison replied in quintessential Parkerian fashion:

I do not understand how one can 'take from poor Uncle Tom his Bible,' if that book be really a lamp to his feet, and a light to his path; and it seems to me you throw positive discredit on his religious experience and inward regeneration, by making such a proposition... It is for him to place whatever estimate he can upon it; and for you and me to do the same; but for neither of us to accept any more of it than we sincerely believe to be in accordance with reason, truth, eternal right...

Garrison continued by asserting that he was only doing what he believed was right, and Stowe, "Surely, would not have me disloyal to my conscience." He remained skeptical of Stowe's placing her hope in scripture for the liberation of humanity. If this were a credible basis for hope, how then was it that the United States, "a nation professing to place as high an estimate upon that volume as yourself, and denouncing as infidels all that do not hold it equally sacred," managed to hold "three millions and a half of chattel slaves, who are denied its possession, under severe penalties?" Too many interpreters claimed to find sanction for slavery in the Bible for it to be essential to the cause of freedom. Instead, Garrison placed his "reliance for the deliverance of the oppressed universally is upon the nature of man, the inherent

⁵² Garrison to Harriet Beecher Stowe, November 30, 1853; in *Letters*, IV, 283-285.

wrongfulness of oppression, the power of truth, and the omnipotence of God – using every rightful instrumentality to hasten the jubilee.”⁵³

Garrison was careful to not explicitly reject the Bible outright, but he followed Parker in making whatever truth or comfort Uncle Tom, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or anyone for that matter, finds in the Bible to be a function of their own conscience, reason, and experience of the divine in their human nature. Whatever was true in the Bible was not true by virtue of being in the Bible, but by virtue of being true, knowable, and able to be experienced apart from the Bible. The alternative, as Garrison saw it, was acknowledging that the Bible had an authority all its own, which left the proslavery position impregnable. He still had confidence in the omnipotent God, but only as expressed through the nature of man. While not atheistic, this rejection of divine authority as residing in any institution or text is a secular notion, and by embracing this position, Garrison had completely reversed himself from the days when he could say “I have engaged in no reform, promulgated no doctrines, which I have not vindicated by an appeal to the Bible.”⁵⁴

Garrison’s colleagues came to much the same conclusions. Wright, also drawing on Parker, arrived at this position even before Garrison did, as was mentioned above. He contributed several editorials to the *Liberator* in the late 1840s and early 50s, with titles like “Is God Unjust and Changeable, or Men, the Writers of the Old Testament, in Some Things Mistaken?” or “The Bible, If Opposed to Self-Evident Truth, is Self-Evident Falsehood.”⁵⁵ May likewise abandoned the traditional view of scriptural authority, accepting that the Bible

⁵³ Garrison to Stowe, November 30, 1853.

⁵⁴ Garrison to the editor of the London Morning Advertiser, September 19, 1851; in *Letters*, IV, 76.

⁵⁵ Perry, *Henry Clarke Wright*, 144.

possessed “defects, interpolations, mistranslations, and inconsistencies of narrative.”⁵⁶ Even William Whipper substituted Parker-inspired convictions for his older, more traditional ones. Frustrated with the failure of his integrationist approach to reform to take root, and feeling continually marginalized by the racism latent in antebellum American society, Whipper abandoned his commitment to biracial reform societies and rethought the biblical commitments which had undergirded it.⁵⁷ In a letter to Frederick Douglass’ *North Star* in 1849, he laid out his new beliefs. Echoing the Transcendentalists, he proclaimed, “Man is a naturally religious being. His religious nature constitutes his highest element.” The answer to prejudice and slavery was thus not to be found in universal moral principles found in scripture, but in restoring to blacks their natural birthright – a “*distinct religious faith* from that of their oppressors.” Blacks had too long been denied a place in white America’s evangelical mainstream for there to be much use in appealing to an evangelical understanding of biblical authority; to do so would only be denounced as the work of the “devil incarnate.”⁵⁸

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While the Garrisonians’ “come-outer” mentality and their debates with proslavery apologists certainly influenced their decision to reject the tradition notions of scriptural authority they had so long depended on, these are not sufficient to account for such a drastic change. To explain this shift from the Bible to natural law requires acknowledging the role the Garrisonians’ marginalization by mainstream evangelicals and their interactions with the non-evangelical

⁵⁶ George B. Emerson, Samuel May, Thomas Mumford, *Memoir of Samuel Joseph May* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), 271.

⁵⁷ Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Nonviolent Abolitionists from 1830 Through the Civil War* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1970), 57, 134; Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who would be Free* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 252.

⁵⁸ William Whipper, “The National League – Objection” in the *North Star* (November 23, 1849), 3.

reform periphery played in bringing them to the point where they “abandon[ed] the view of Scripture that was everywhere regnant in America.”⁵⁹ Given how intensely their commitments to reform were tied up with their religious beliefs, as shown in chapter one, it should not be surprising that this shift from scripture to nature helped to facilitate a further shift – of redefining Christian nonresistance to accommodate antislavery violence. When the Garrisonians saw their nonviolent stance as no longer deriving from the authority of God, they re-conceptualized their entire understanding of nonresistance in ways that presupposed the authority of nature and conscience, as I will now show in chapter three.

⁵⁹ Noll, *America's God*, 387.

CHAPTER 3

RACING TOWARD HARPERS FERRY: ACCEPTANCE OF ANTISLAVERY VIOLENCE IN GARRISONIAN ABOLITIONISM

On the night of December 2, 1859, the leadership of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) gathered at the Tremont Temple in Boston to mark that day's execution of abolitionist vigilante John Brown. In the month and a half since Brown had failed in his attempt to incite a massive slave revolt, his raid at Harper's Ferry and his subsequent trial for treason continued to grab headlines, stoking the paranoia of Southern slave-holders and encouraging a growing number of abolitionists to take ever-more radical stands against slavery. That night at the Tremont, William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator* and *de facto* leader of the AASS, finally added his own voice to the rising chorus of praise and eulogized Brown. After reading from Brown's statements in court justifying his actions, Garrison proceeded to assure his audience that God would reward Brown with the heavenly "victor's crown" befitting a martyr. Brown had died because he had set himself against the tyranny of the Southern Slave Power, and as it was the Almighty himself who had "instigated...an 'irrepressible conflict' between the soul of man and tyranny *from the beginning*," there was to be no doubt as to where the right stood in this case. In light of all of this, Garrison could only wish "Success to every slave insurrection in the South, and in every slave country."¹

¹ Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life told by his Children*, Volume III (Boston: 1894), 490-492.

Garrison was among the last of the “Boston Clique”² of abolitionists to embrace these views, his followers and colleagues coming to recognize the legitimacy of anti-slavery violence at various points earlier in the 1850s. As recently as the 1858 New England Anti-Slavery Convention, Garrison had decried the rise of a “warlike” spirit among abolitionists, contrasting it with the spirit of “Christian nonresistance” which they had abandoned. They were no longer denying the legitimacy of any and all violence, whether wielded by states or individuals. Their commitment to nonresistance should instead have led them to continue to insist that ultimately the only way to bring about peace was to abandon all recourse to coercive force and instead to practice “moral suasion,” persuasive ethical rhetoric, in order to reform society along utopian lines. This was what the Garrisonian abolitionists had believed before the 1850s, and accordingly was what Garrison had been calling his fellow abolitionists back to in 1858; but by the end of 1859, he had joined them in accepting antislavery violence by praising John Brown.³

Yet at the same time, Garrison refused to reject Christian Nonresistance outright. While delivering his eulogy for Brown, Garrison insisted, “I am a non-resistant – a believer in the inviolability of human life, under all circumstances.” He argued that this was entirely consistent with wishing success to slave revolts, in as much as he could encourage those who did not share his peace principles to fight tyranny as they best saw fit. While he was personally opposed to all violence, he could recognize that the use of violence on behalf of freedom was not morally equivalent with the violence and oppression inflicted on slaves by their masters: “Give me, as a non-resistant, Bunker Hill, and Lexington, and Concord, rather than the cowardice and servility

² A helpful term to describe Garrison and his network of abolitionist colleagues, centered on Boston, coined by Lawrence J Friedman in his *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 6.

³ William Lloyd Garrison, “Mr. Garrison’s Peace Testimony,” *Practical Christian* 19, no. 5 (June 23, 1858), 20.

of a Southern slave plantation.” Instead of rejecting nonresistance, Garrison redefined it – in a way which he had vehemently objected to when his colleagues had done the same earlier in the 1850s.⁴

The question this chapter aims to answer is, in light of the discussion in the preceding chapters, “Why did the Garrisonian abolitionists come to redefine Christian nonresistance in a way that was consistent with legitimizing violence?” Historians have put forward a number of explanations to account for this shift in Garrisonian thinking; however, these have tended to fall short in one of two ways. Generally, they have either portrayed the course of events over the 1850s – such as the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Bleeding Kansas, *Dred Scott*, etc. – as somehow making the Garrisonian acceptance of antislavery violence inevitable,⁵ or they have explained the shift solely in terms of the Garrisonians’⁶ internal psychological drives. Both accounts have the effect of denying the Garrisonians any agency in shaping their own beliefs, and any account moving forward will have to avoid reducing the Garrisonians’ beliefs to merely the functions of some other factor(s).⁷

⁴ Williams Lloyd Garrison, “John Brown and the Principle of Nonresistance” in William E. Cain, ed., *William Lloyd Garrison and the Fight against Slavery: Selections from the Liberator* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 156-159.

⁵ For example, see John Demos, “The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent ‘Means,’” *The New England Quarterly* 37 (December 1964): 501-526; Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Nonviolent Abolitionists from 1830 Through the Civil War* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1970).

⁶ See Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*.

⁷ This study builds on the work of intellectual historian Lewis Perry’s *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), which appeals to conflicting elements within Garrisonian ideology to account for their shift on violence. It goes beyond Perry by locating roots of the Garrisonians’ shift on violence specifically in their earlier secular shift away from traditional religious authorities, as opposed to a general tension in their ideology present from the beginning. Further, it helps to explain the Garrisonian shift from an “ethic of love” to an “ethic of coercion” as described by Valerie H. Ziegler in *The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), and compliments W. Caleb McDaniel’s transnational approach to abolitionism in *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

While the causes of the Garrisonian redefinition of Christian nonresistance are complex, at the ideological level this shift needs to be understood as having been enabled by the Garrisonians' earlier change from a traditional religious ethic to a secular, natural law one. Examining the writings of Garrison and his fellow abolitionists shows that they made sense of their new definition of nonresistance in terms presupposing their rejection of traditional religious sources of authority in favor of secular sources of authority. Their earlier understanding of Christian nonresistance was deeply grounded in their religious beliefs (e.g., Jesus of Nazareth was the ultimate moral exemplar), and their new understanding of nonresistance was accordingly made possible by their rejection of such beliefs in favor of secular ethics, or natural law. In Garrison's eulogy for Brown, this secularization can be seen in two ways - the privatization of his own religious beliefs about violence, and the appeal to ethical truths about freedom revealed in human nature. These two secular elements form a pattern which can be found in most of the Garrisonians' letters, editorials, speeches, journals, etc., throughout the 1850s; further, these secular elements are wholly absent from the very few Garrisonians who remained committed to the original understanding of Christian nonresistance. Ultimately, William Lloyd Garrison and his fellow abolitionists were able to expand their understanding of nonresistance broadly enough to canonize John Brown only because they had previously rejected the traditional religious authorities which had led them to absolutize their beliefs about violence in the first place.

To show how the Garrisonians' changing religious beliefs facilitated their redefinition of Christian nonresistance requires a brief recounting of the Garrisonians' reaction to even the prospect of antislavery violence in 1837, after the murder of the abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy. Their intense condemnations of even considering answering slavery with violence were drenched in the religious rhetoric and imagery underpinning their nonviolent convictions, and as such

provide a helpful contrast to their later markedly less-religious statements defending antislavery violence. The writings of William Lloyd Garrison and three of his colleagues – Samuel Joseph May, Henry Clarke Wright, and William Whipper – from the 1850s document their changing attitude toward violence and draw out its connections with their shifting religious views. Their responses to a number of events from the period brought the issue of antislavery violence to the fore (the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Bleeding Kansas, and ultimately Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry), not because these events somehow predetermined their responses, but because they each gave the Garrisonians both an occasion to reflect on and an impetus to recast their understandings of Christian nonresistance. Contrasting these are the views of Adin Ballou and Lucretia Mott, two of the Garrisonians who remained committed to their original understanding of nonresistance as prohibiting any and all violence, even against slaveholders. Evidence from Mott and Ballou’s own letters and editorials shows that their unchanging religious views went hand-in-hand with their commitment to nonviolence.

While correlation is not causation, the connection between Garrisonians’ changing religious beliefs and changing attitudes toward violence (or lack thereof) are too significant to explain away as mere coincidence. Recognizing that the Garrisonians’ changing religious beliefs facilitated their redefinition of Christian nonresistance helps us to better understand how they came to accept antislavery violence, as well as points us toward a more complex account of the relationship between religious belief and secularization in American history before the Civil War.

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The Garrisonians’ reaction to the Lovejoy murder serves to illustrate both the intensity of their commitment to and the religiosity of their understanding of nonresistance. Elijah Lovejoy

was one of their own, a fellow believer caught up in the fervor of the moral reforms and religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening. He was firmly convinced of the evils of slavery and of the principles of Christian nonresistance, and dedicated himself to agitating for the abolition of the peculiar institution. Moving to Alton, Illinois, in the 1830s, Lovejoy attempted to follow the example of Garrison and start an abolitionist newspaper patterned after the *Liberator*. However, the inhabitants of Illinois proved less tolerant of antislavery journalism than Bostonians, and a pro-slavery mob formed and destroyed Lovejoy's printing press. Undeterred, Lovejoy assembled another and resumed his work. Again, a mob wrecked his second press, and later did the same to a third. Finally, in November 1837, with the mobs' fourth attack on his print shop, Lovejoy cast aside nonviolence and took up arms to protect his press. In response, the mob murdered him.⁸

Many abolitionists proclaimed Lovejoy a martyr to the cause. In fact, it was at a church service commemorating Lovejoy that John Brown uttered his famous oath to destroy slavery. Lovejoy's fellow Garrisonians, however, were far from adulatory. They fixated on Lovejoy's failure to uphold the principles of nonresistance, even in the last resort; and at this point, for the Garrisonians the principles of nonresistance were the uncorrupted teachings of Christianity and the Bible. Garrison's condemnation of Lovejoy's recourse to violence was little more than a patchwork of biblical quotes and allusions. He claimed that while Lovejoy had kept the nonresistant faith and "was sustained by a high and sublime trust of God, not a hair of his was injured, the mouths the hungry lions that sought to devour him were stopped," but when "he forsook this course, and resorted to carnal weapons...he became a victim."⁹ Garrison's

⁸ Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 200-201; Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 61-62.

⁹ William Lloyd Garrison in the *Non-Resistant* (February 16, 1839): 2; quoted in Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 75.

colleague and close friend Henry Clarke Wright claimed that Lovejoy had “forfeited the protection of God” with his recourse to “deadly weapons.” Only God had the right to employ deadly force against his creatures, and by usurping the divine prerogative and neglecting the nonresistant example of Jesus, Lovejoy had chosen to live by the sword. Accordingly, he died by it.¹⁰ Fellow abolitionist Samuel Joseph May unfavorably compared Lovejoy’s recourse to violence to the nonresistant behavior of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and publically urged the AASS to formally condemn the late Lovejoy.¹¹ Non-Garrisonian abolitionists, both the evangelical abolitionists associated with Lewis Tappan and the political abolitionist followers of Gerrit Smith, were busy canonizing Lovejoy, all the while his fellow Garrisonians were providing no more than a sermonizing chorus of disappointment and disapproval.¹²

It helps account for the Garrisonians’ reactions to keep in mind another important event for their group in 1837 – their exodus from the American Peace Society (APS). At first glance this might seem radically inconsistent with their attitude toward Lovejoy – until one learns that the Garrisonians left the APS because it was not pacifistic enough for their consciences to allow them to continue as members. They had become known as “come-outers” for repeatedly breaking off ties with reform organizations they deemed to be less-than ideologically pure. They had done the same years earlier with the antislavery gradualists of the American Colonization Society, refusing to continue to cooperate with reformers who would not call slave-holding sin and demand its immediate abolition. Afterwards, they had founded the AASS; now they were poised to once again found their own organization after leaving the APS. It was in the midst of

¹⁰ Henry Clarke Wright in the *Liberator* (Boston: December 22, 1837); quoted in Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 200.

¹¹ Zeigler, *Advocates of Peace*, 61-62.; Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 108-110.

¹² Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 200.

this upheaval that the Lovejoy murder occurred, and it seems highly likely that this colored the Garrisonians' statements at the time. This is not to say that their rhetoric was solely due to the heat of the moment or was not sincerely believed in, but to suggest that the circumstances perhaps gave their remarks an intensity and lack of charity which they might not otherwise have possessed.

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In the decades following the Lovejoy murder, the Garrisonians drifted away from the intense religiosity and biblicism which had fueled their censure of his choice to resist the proslavery mob with force. For a variety of reasons – whether acting from an inborn tendency to challenge authority, retreating before the biblical case of Southern proslavery apologists, or responding to their marginalization by mainstream evangelical reformers,¹³ the Garrisonians rejected their earlier traditional understandings of religious authority. In order to understand how Garrisonians were able to redefine nonresistance from where it was used to denounce Lovejoy to where it was consistent with praising Brown, we must first appreciate the secularizing movement in their rhetoric. So long as the Jesus of the Bible was held to be the unquestionable moral exemplar and the coming of the millennium was thought to hang in the balance, the claims of nonresistance were absolutized; when the convictions of nonviolence were privatized, it was only possible because individual conscience and human nature had become the highest courts of appeal. This becomes apparent from a close examination of Garrison, May, Wright, and

¹³ See chapter two. Perry attributes their religious shift to an ingrained tendency to question authority; Ziegler explains it with reference to Southern proslavery apologists; I would suggest, using Robert Abzug's account of Garrison in *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) as a starting point, that the Garrisonians' changing religious views were largely a response to their marginalization by mainstream evangelical reformers.

Whipper's evolving responses to the crises of the 1850s – the Fugitive Slave Law, Bleeding Kansas, and Harper's Ferry.

Whether the Congressional Compromise of 1850 succeeded in preventing secession and civil war or whether it merely forestalled them, it certainly had an inflammatory effect on abolitionism in the North. The strengthened enforcement of article IV, section 2, clause 3, of the U.S. Constitution, passed as the Fugitive Slave Law, forced Northern states to be directly complicit in the capture of runaway slaves, which in turn only strengthened Northern antislavery sentiment. As long as Northerners could tell themselves they had no part in the South's peculiar institution, they were much less likely to actively oppose it. Now, it had become unavoidable. Those who had been agitating against slavery from long before were even more outraged at these new measures. Garrison's initial reaction was to further entrench himself in the nonresistant position of condemning all earthly governments, denouncing Senator Daniel Webster in particular for his capitulation to Southern suasion.¹⁴ However, perhaps in part because of the respect he had gained for the political abolitionism of Gerrit Smith, Samuel Joseph May was not so willing to retreat to familiar nonresistant positions.

While most of Garrison's circle had remained in or around Boston, May had taken up the pastorate of a Unitarian church in Syracuse, New York, which, in addition to putting him into contact with Gerrit Smith and his followers in the Liberty Party, also gave him the opportunity to participate in the famed "Rescue of Jerry." Jerry McHenry was a run-away slave who had fled from Missouri to Syracuse in 1843, and had worked there as a cabinet maker ever since. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, McHenry's old owner sent out an agent to recover him,

¹⁴ McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 195.

compelling the local magistrate to arrest McHenry on October 1, 1851. When word got out, Gerrit Smith mobilized the forces of his Liberty Party into an impromptu “convention” (or mob, depending on one’s point of view), which forced its way into the commissioner’s offices where McHenry was being held. They noisily insisted that McHenry be released, doing their best to shout down the slave catcher and disrupt the proceedings. McHenry bolted, but was soon recaptured. May had been the one to speak up as a diversion for the first escape attempt, and now was sent into the prison to tell McHenry that rescue was on the way. In the wee hours of the following morning, a proper mob armed with bricks and stones broke McHenry out of the prison and quickly sent him on his way to Canada beyond the jurisdiction of the man-stealers.¹⁵

While May does not seem to have taken up a torch or pitchfork himself to free Jerry, plotting with Gerrit Smith’s cohort to employ coercive force to free McHenry left May feeling conflicted. When faced with the evil and oppression of slavery in his own backyard, as it were, he found himself far less hesitant to use violence for a just cause – setting the captive free. May wrote to Garrison in the months following the “Rescue of Jerry” of his struggles, alternating between certainty and doubt. At first, May suggested that Garrison had been with him in spirit,

so that you knew what I was intending to do, and I know that you were consenting to it all. In the whole course of our struggle with the Monster Slavery, I have never been so bold, active, tranquil and happy. I have felt the strongest assurance that our government was...in the wrong, and could not maintain its position except by the greatest abuses of its power...I have seen that it was necessary to bring the people into direct conflict with the government, that the government may be made to understand that it had transgressed its limits and must recede.¹⁶

This is a far cry from the dogmas of the New England Non-Resistance Society. Instead of appeals to scripture or divine example, May the minister is here preaching a sermon on the

¹⁵ Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May*, 143-147.

¹⁶ Samuel Joseph May to William Lloyd Garrison, Syracuse, November 23, 1851. Boston Public Library.

text of his own soul. Not only has the notion of transcending earthly governments been replaced with the thought that the kingdoms of this world must be contested on their own terms, but the ground May gives for his confidence in this is his own personal feelings. His conscience is not merely clear; it is exuberantly sure he has done the right thing. However, he was not able to sustain that confidence indefinitely. On occasion, it flagged, at least with regard to Garrison's opinion, but on the whole he could not turn back.

Perhaps you will think I go too far in enjoining it upon all me to act against the Fugitive Slave Law, as they conscientiously believe to be right, even if it be to fight for the rescue of its victims. But I know not what other counsel to give them. And let me confess to you that, when I saw poor Jerry in the hands of the official kidnappers, I could not very earnestly preach non-resistance to the crowd that was clamoring for his release. And when I found that he had been rescued without serious harm to anyone, I was as uproarious as anyone in my joy.¹⁷

Nonresistance had been weighed in the balance against Jerry's freedom, and on the scales of May's conscience, nonresistance had been found wanting. All other things being equal, he would have preferred a nonviolent solution, but circumstances as they were, he could only be glad that encouraging men to fight did not lead to bodily injury. More specifically, May encouraged men to fight if their conscience so led them. This was perhaps the greatest change in his understanding of nonresistance. Originally, the injunction to turn the other cheek held the absolute authority of a divine command. The words of Christ in scripture were morally binding; an individual's feelings about the commandments were not considered an exemption from them. So May had not only come to grant principal authority to conscience, or the feelings of human nature, but he had also privatized, or secularized, that authority. One man might conscientiously carry the fight against slavery farther than another, and neither of them were necessarily wrong.

¹⁷ Samuel Joseph May to William Lloyd Garrison, Syracuse, December 6, 1851. Boston Public Library.

As long as they were acting in accord with their consciences (and as long as those consciences were not comfortable with the objectively immoral institution of slavery), May could only enjoin them to do what they thought was right.¹⁸

As the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law provided Samuel Joseph May with the opportunity to redefine his understanding of nonresistance, so the outbreak of violence in the Kansas Territory between proslavery and antislavery settlers beginning in 1854 provided much the same opportunity to Henry Clarke Wright. What separates Wright from May is that Wright came to his new understanding more gradually, possibly because his ideas were tested by proxy and he did not experience the chaos of Bleeding Kansas in person the way May had experienced firsthand the turmoil wrought by the Fugitive Slave Law. Wright continued to tour the Midwestern states agitating for reform, while one of the Garrisonians on the scene in Kansas, Charles Stearns, appealed to Wright's writings to justify his acceptance of antislavery violence. Ironically, the elements of Wright's theology that Stearns was drawing on were originally intended by Wright as a safeguard against justifying violence.

Though it was not necessarily the case for the other Garrisonians, for Wright the evolution of his religious views was initially an attempt to uphold his commitment to

¹⁸ May allowed that otherwise good men could have consciences blinded to particular truths, but unlike the issue of violent resistance, on which it was acceptable to differ, the issue of slavery was so obviously a violation of human nature that he could only upbraid those who either could not or would not see it. As May wrote to one correspondent who favored obeying the Fugitive Slave Law: "I am not shocked at his rhetoric; but I am shocked, that... a man so well acquainted with the largest and purest minds that have lived, and with what they have left as the best conclusions of human wisdom, regarding the true intention and just powers of government; - that a man who has gone so thoroughly into the study of human nature, done so much to raise his contemporaries from the imbecility of implicit faith and implicit obedience, who has contended so nobly for the independency of the individual soul, and has emancipated himself from spiritual thralldom;...that such a man should for a moment believe that an enactment of any government on earth, enjoining upon one portion of its subjects the utter violation of the unalienable rights of another portion, could have directly or indirectly the sanction of the impartial Father of the whole human family - should believe that God could require, or be well pleased with, his or my obedience to such a law - this, I confess, does astonish me." Samuel Joseph May to Ezra Stiles Gannett, August 7, 1851. Massachusetts Historical Society. See Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May*, 138-139.

nonresistance, but his changing attitude towards religious authorities in turn reshaped his understanding of nonresistance. As early as 1848, Wright began his movement away from the Bible and toward natural law arguments for nonviolence. After lecturing against capital punishment, he mused in his journal, “Death Penalty must be wrong. How to answer Bible argument.”¹⁹ In as much as a straightforward reading of scripture, or at least of the Old Testament, seemed to sanction the death penalty, this was not a simple problem for Wright. His first response was to reject the authority of the Old Testament, but then he proceeded to deny that the Bible had any authority to reject what was self-evidently true, such as that violence was wrong.²⁰ He developed a whole natural law system of ethics along these lines that he published in 1850 under the title of *Anthropology; or The Science of Man: In Its Bearing on War and Slavery*.²¹ He wrote to Garrison that neither “the Bible, [n]or any book, has the power to sanction war or slavery... To God in my soul, and in nothing else, will I give heed.”²² By appealing to natural law and to conscience over and against scripture, Wright thought he had rendered Christian nonresistance unassailable. What he apparently did not foresee was that that conscience and nature could be invoked in the name of violence just as easily as any sacred text could be.

This is precisely what Charles Stearns did to justify his rejection of nonresistance in Bleeding Kansas, and though Wright did not shift his attitude on violence immediately, he

¹⁹ Henry Clarke Wright, Journal, vol. 44 (January 28, 1848). Boston Public Library.

²⁰ Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 141-154.

²¹ Henry Clarke Wright, *Anthropology; or The Science of Man: In Its Bearing on War and Slavery, and on Arguments from the Bible, Marriage, God, Death, Retribution, Atonement and Government, in Support of These and other Social Wrongs: In a Series of Lectures to a Friend in England* (Boston: E. Shepherd, 1850); see Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 106-107.

²² Henry Clarke Wright, “The Bible Question,” in the *Liberator* (April 1, 1853): 52; quoted in Ziegler, *Advocates of Peace*, 108.

adopted Stearns' reasoning himself a few short years later. Stearns took Wright's arguments against the violent portions of scripture and applied them to the pacifistic passages. Writing to Garrison (who by then had accepted Wright's religious innovations) in 1856, Stearns admitted that the New Testament taught nonresistance, "but, as you say, these sayings are not authoritative." Accordingly, they were subject to judgment by reason and conscience. Reason could conceive of – and Stearns claimed to have experienced firsthand in Kansas – a number of situations in which "Non-Resistance was seen to be impracticable" and which thus demonstrated "the absurdity of the doctrine."²³ Stearns' conscience told him that the proslavery "Missourians were not men" to whom he owed respect or compassion, but rather they were "wild beasts, and it was my duty to aid in killing them off."²⁴ While hardly as enthusiastically endorsing violence as Stearns (at least initially), Wright acceded to the priority of conscience to which his own views – as shown by Stearns – led him.²⁵ If a man was persuaded in his own mind that he should fight to free the captives, that is precisely what he should do.

In the midst of these crises, William Whipper continued his work with the Underground Railroad. Initially he maintained his original position of nonresistance, though he justified it rather differently than he had in the 1830s. As the Fugitive Slave Law began to be enforced, and violence broke out in Kansas, the black population of Whipper's hometown of Columbia,

²³ Charles Stearns, in the *Liberator* (January 4, 1856): 2; quoted in Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 241.

²⁴ Charles Stearns, in the *Practical Christian* (January 26, 1856): 4; quoted in Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 241.

²⁵ Wright seems to have changed his views on violence so gradually that there is some confusion as to when he accepted the legitimacy of antislavery violence. In his biography of Wright, Lewis Perry portrays Wright as having reached this position by the 1850s (56), and Adin Ballou accused Wright of the same in 1850 ("Pro-War Anti-Slavery." *Practical Christian* 11, no. 17 (December 21, 1850): 66). However, Ballou lumps Wright together with Stephen Foster, who by this point had definitely accepted antislavery violence, and Perry in his *Radical Abolitionism* notes that Wright was still arguing against Foster's position as late as 1855 (251). Part of the confusion stems from the fact that Wright could accuse those who supported war but opposed slave revolts of hypocrisy without actually enjoining them to be consistent and support antislavery violence. I would argue that Perry's discussion in *Radical Abolitionism* (235-237) of Wright's 1857 contributions to the *Liberator* suggests that this is when Wright shifted his views.

Pennsylvania, fell from 943 to 487, many former slaves fleeing to Canada. When slavecatchers showed their faces in town, some blacks understandably favored meeting them with violent resistance, or even attacking white residents indifferent to their plight. Recalling the feelings at the time many years later, Whipper wrote, “Some were in favor, if again attacked, of killing and slaying all within their reach; of setting their own houses on fire, and then going and burning the town. It was the old spirit which animated the Russians at Moscow, and the blacks of Hayti.”²⁶ In contrast, Whipper sought to be the voice of reason and moderation, but he no longer made appeals to the Divine injunction to turn the other cheek or to the power of moral suasion. Instead, his argument was far more pragmatic. While he acknowledged that “self-interest” in protecting his lumber yard played some role in his moral calculus, it was also his “sense of humanity” that led him to urge them “for their own sakes” to flee rather than fight. “I told them that they knew the strength of the pro-slavery feeling that surrounded them, and that they would be overpowered, and perhaps many lives lost.”²⁷ Granted, Whipper was still advocating nonviolence, but his reasoning was now based in results rather than duties, and accordingly marked a movement toward his eventual acceptance of antislavery violence.

Garrison remained steadfast. Neither the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law nor the bloodshed in Kansas persuaded him to alter his understanding of Christian nonresistance. He was, however, very distressed that recent events had caused his colleagues to do so. He took the opportunity of the 1858 New England Antislavery Convention to appeal to his fellow abolitionists to return to their original commitment to nonresistance:

When the Anti-Slavery cause was launched, it was baptized in the spirit of peace. We proclaimed to the country and the world, that the weapons of our warfare were not carnal,

²⁶ William Whipper to William Still, December 4, 1871; in William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872; reprinted New York: Arno Press, 1968): 737.

²⁷ Whipper to Still, December 4, 1871; in Still, *Railroad*, 737.

but spiritual, and we believed them to be mighty through God to the pulling-down of even of the strong-hold of slavery... Alas! ... in my judgment a sad change has come over the spirit of anti-slavery men, generally speaking. We are growing more and more warlike, more and more disposed to repudiate the principles of peace... I do not believe the weapons of liberty ever have been, or ever can be, the weapons of despotism...the sword, the revolvers, the cannon, the bombshell... In proportion as we allow the spirit of violence or retaliation to take possession of our minds, and make ourselves familiar with the idea of killing slaveholders and tyrants, I apprehend, the Divine Spirit will go out of us... I am for going on as we have hitherto done – proclaiming the truth, applying the truth, relying upon the truth, - conquering by the truth, and not attempting to use the sword... Our work is with the conscience, and the only weapon that God puts into our hands, rightfully to use, is his truth... I pray you, Abolitionists, still adhere to that truth. Do not get impatient.²⁸

A little more than a year later, Garrison was eulogizing John Brown for his raid on Harper's Ferry. In Garrison's thinking, God had gone from giving only one licit weapon to the abolitionists to having "instigated...an 'irrepressible conflict' between the soul of man and tyranny *from the beginning*."²⁹ He was now less concerned with the departure of "the Divine Spirit" than he was with affirming the spirit of "Bunker Hill, and Lexington, and Concord."³⁰ Whatever his personal motives, or to whatever extent he felt provoked by the events of his day, it is quite clear that Garrison was now able to say both that he believed "in the inviolability of human life, under all circumstances" and that he wished "[s]uccess to every slave insurrection in the South, and in every slave country" because his underlying religious views had changed.³¹

Not too long afterwards, though exactly when is unclear, William Whipper joined Garrison in his approval of John Brown and antislavery violence. During the Civil War, Whipper contributed a thousand dollars a year to the war effort, and was involved in recruiting free blacks into the Union army. It was after the war, though, in reevaluating certain events from

²⁸ William Lloyd Garrison, "Mr. Garrison's Peace Testimony."

²⁹ Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, III, 490-492.

³⁰ Williams Lloyd Garrison, "John Brown and the Principle of Nonresistance;" in Cain, *Garrison*, 156-159.

³¹ Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, III, 490-492; Williams Lloyd Garrison, "John Brown and the Principle of Nonresistance."

the 1830s, while he had held to his original nonresistant position, that his opinion of Brown became clear. He recounted an incident in which one Joseph Purvis, a free black, undertook a daring armed rescue of a captured runaway slave. Looking back, Whipper described Purvis as “one of nature’s noblemen” and praised him for “his youthful ardor in behalf of freedom,” but the only person he with whom he deigned to compare him was the antislavery vigilante of Harper’s Ferry:

The youngest of a family distinguished for their devotion to freedom, he was without superiors in the trying hour of battle. Like John Brown, he often discarded theories, but was eminently practical. He has passed to another sphere. Peace to his ashes! I honor his name as a hero, and friend of man. I loved him for the noble characteristics of his nature, and above all for his noble daring in defense of the right. As a friend I admired him, and owe his memory this tribute to departed worth.³²

At the end of the day, the greatness of individual human “nature” and its “practical” results outweighed whatever claims religious and ethical “theories” like nonresistance might have on a person. Whipper could even note that Purvis’ effect on a local minister had been to make forceful resistance against tyranny “part of his religion,” without arguing that true religion demanded turning the other cheek.³³ Instead, he respected religious beliefs on the ground that they were held sincerely. Like his colleagues William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel Joseph May, and Henry Clarke Wright, William Whipper’s redefinition of Christian nonresistance was facilitated by his displacing of biblical authority with natural laws inscribed on the human heart, and by the accompanying privatization of religious conscience.

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³² Whipper to Still, December 4, 1871; in Still, *Railroad*, 738-39.

³³ Whipper to Still, December 4, 1871; in Still, *Railroad*, 738-39.

Conversely, those few Garrisonians who remained unchanged in their understanding of Christian nonresistance are notable for not having undergone the shift in religious thinking experienced by their peers, and their continuing commitment to their initial nonviolent position presupposed their unchanged attitude toward religious authorities. Both Adin Ballou and Lucretia Mott remained opposed to John Brown's methods, and even though they did not possess quite the same attitude to traditional religious authorities, both their attitudes (towards religion and towards violence) were remarkably static throughout the 1850s and beyond. From the inaugural meeting of the New England Non-Resistance Society in 1839, at which both were present, down to the raid on Harper's Ferry, Ballou and Mott denied the legitimacy of antislavery violence and advocated exclusively peaceful means of opposing slavery.

From his experiment in utopian community in Hopedale, Massachusetts, Adin Ballou kept abreast of his fellow Garrisonians' activities, and when they began to depart from what had once been the group's orthodoxy, he used his biweekly newspaper, the *Practical Christian*, as a platform to critique their ideological innovations. In particular, Ballou took umbrage with Henry Clarke Wright's *Anthropology*. When it was published, Ballou objected to Wright's goal of protecting nonresistance from biblical objections by establishing it on the foundation of human nature, for at least two reasons. First, he found the biblical objections to nonviolence to be much weaker than Wright did. Ballou wrote, "we differ somewhat from our friend... We are at one with him in unappeasable abhorrence of War, Slavery, and the giant evils of our age and country... We differ from him, however, in not allowing the enemy so exclusively to monopolize the name of God, the Bible, and religion, to fortify and sanction the prevailing iniquities."³⁴ Second, he suspected (rather presciently, as it turned out) that natural law and human conscience

³⁴ Adin Ballou, "Letter from H. C. Wright – Remarks," *Practical Christian* 11, no. 1 (May 11, 1850): 2.

would not prove a stable foundation for nonresistance. “If we could get entirely rid of God, the Bible, and religion, as now venerated, and the question were – ‘what does humanity dictate?’ – would not the answer be as multiform and contradictory as ever?”³⁵ When humanity and nature proved just as able to be invoked for violence as scripture, Ballou denounced his colleagues’ praise of Brown, and repeatedly pointed them back to the pacifistic example of Jesus found in the New Testament. Taking aim at Garrison in particular, Ballou sarcastically admitted that lauding antislavery vigilantes was “undoubtedly much more congenial to the ears and the spirit of the assembly, than one of the non-resistant precepts of the non-resistant Jesus would have been,” but insisted that this was “utterly contrary, in spirit and moral influence, to the Sermon on the Mount.”³⁶

Lucretia Mott came to nonresistance from a different starting point than Ballou, but she proved just as resolutely committed to it. Raised as a Quaker, Mott has always been accustomed to subordinating the Bible and other religious sources of authority to her conscience, or “inner light.”³⁷ Consequently, the religious beliefs underpinning her nonresistance were not identical to Garrison’s or to most of their colleagues’, and they sounded remarkably like the religious position most of the Garrisonians eventually came to adopt. For example, at the 1848 Anti-Sabbath Convention in Boston, Mott distinguished “between mere forms and rituals of the Church...and the dedication of our lives to God,” and according to her it followed from this distinction that every “man should judge of his own self what is right... [w]e are not called to follow implicitly any outward authority.”³⁸ However, while for most of her fellow abolitionists

³⁵ Ballou, “Letter from H. C. Wright – Remarks.”

³⁶ Adin Ballou, “The Way up to Non-Resistance,” *Practical Christian* 20, no.17 (December 10, 1859), 86.

³⁷ Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott’s Heresy: Abolition and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 110, 121-122.

³⁸ Lucretia Mott, “Remarks, delivered to the Anti-Sabbath Convention;” quoted in Faulkner, *Mott’s Heresy*, 128.

of the Boston Clique these sentiments represented a secularizing movement away from tradition, they were to Mott the only tradition she had ever known. The Quaker roots of Mott's pacifism left her attitudes towards violence unaffected by the currents buffeting her non-Quaker colleagues. She did not experience any change in her religious beliefs that would have facilitated a change in her nonresistant ones. Thus, she consistently condemned violent responses to the passages of the Fugitive Slave Law and to Bleeding Kansas.³⁹ Of John Brown, Mott and her group of women's rights supporters in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society declared that "moral reforms are accomplished only by moral power," and that Brown had sinned by availing himself of the "weapons of physical warfare."⁴⁰

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The road from Alton, Illinois, the site of Elijah Lovejoy's murder, to Harper's Ferry was a long one for the Garrisonians, filled with internal struggle and intramural debate, but it was a road most of them were able to travel because they had already paved the way by substituting a secular, natural law ethic for a more traditional, religious one. William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel Joseph May, and Henry Clarke Wright all came to the conclusion that natural law could not sustain an absolute prohibition of violence, so they decided to privatize the nonviolent convictions of their own consciences rather than insist on them as the forever-binding commands of God. Instead, they applauded those who could violently strike at slavery with a clean conscience. Those few Garrisonians who did not experience a shift from the secular to the religious – whether they maintained the Garrisonians' original religious views, as Adin Ballou did, or whether they had already held nontraditional religious views, as in the case of Lucretia

³⁹ Faulkner, *Mott's Heresy*, 161-169.

⁴⁰ "Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society Resolution on John Brown;" quoted in Faulkner, *Mott's Heresy*, 172.

Mott – remained unchanged in their understanding of Christian nonresistance. The redefinition of Christian nonresistance that enabled most of its adherents to go from condemning Lovejoy to praising John Brown is both an important element in understanding how the Garrisonians came to accept antislavery violence, as well as perhaps the beginning of a new story complicating how we should think about secularism and religious belief in America before the Civil War.

CONCLUSION

One Sunday in July 1862, as the Civil War raged on into its second summer, Adin Ballou yielded his pulpit in Hopedale to William Lloyd Garrison. It was not the first time Garrison had been invited to speak to Ballou's flock. He had regularly delivered orations at Hopedale's yearly August 1st festival to commemorate the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, on occasion bringing along Henry Clarke Wright, Frederick Douglass, or even Sojourner Truth.¹ Garrison's own connection to Hopedale was even more personal. He had sent his son George to school in Hopedale, writing to him there that "There is no place in the world, away from home, where I feel you could be so well guarded as to your morals, and cared for as to your happiness, as in the Hopedale community."² Ballou for his part had a great deal of respect for Garrison, but Garrison's sermon in Hopedale that July ultimately led to the two of them falling out. For Garrison had used his time in Ballou's pulpit to express views that Ballou himself would never

¹ "Garrison and Thompson at Hopedale," *Practical Christian* 11, no. 20 (February 1, 1851): 83; "First of August at Hopedale," *Practical Christian* 18, no. 8 (August 8, 1857): 31; William Lloyd Garrison to Adin Ballou, Boston, July 24, 1851, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume IV: 1850-1860*, ed. Louis Ruchames (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 66; Garrison to Maria W. Chapman, Boston, July 23, 1857, in *Letters, Volume IV*, 459-460.

² William Lloyd Garrison to George Thompson Garrison, Boston, February 18, 1851, in *Letters, Volume IV*, 48.

condone – the fallibility of scripture and the compatibility of Christian nonresistance with antislavery violence.³

As I have shown, accepting the fallibility of the Bible and redefining Christian nonresistance to permit violence went hand-in-hand with one another. Initially, Ballou, Garrison, and their colleagues' pacifism was inextricable from their religious beliefs. They had been willing to imperil unity and cooperation among the "sisterhood of reforms" because of the intensity of their theological convictions. Just as they had joined the American Peace Society because of their Second Great Awakening conversion experience, so they left in order to maintain the purity of their perfectionistic religious fervor. In its place, they founded the New England Nonresistance Society to express their own vision of how to relate their faith to the goal of transforming society into the kingdom of heaven on earth - a political end they pursued by apolitical means. When Ballou delivered the opening address at the first NENRS convention, he and Garrison were of one mind on the necessity of submitting their reform efforts to the authority of the word of God.

As Garrison and his colleagues became increasingly marginalized by mainstream evangelical reformers, however, and found themselves cooperating with Quakers and Transcendentalists, they drifted farther and farther from the views Ballou managed to maintain while cloistered away in his Hopedale commune. Garrison adopted the ideas of Theodore Parker and Lucretia Mott, substituting the authority of natural law and the individual conscience for the authority of scripture. While there were certainly many contributing factors to this shift in Garrison's religious beliefs, it cannot be reduced to merely a capitulation to the biblical

³ Adin Ballou, *Autobiography of Adin Ballou, 1803-1890: Containing an Elaborate Record and Narrative of his Life from Infancy to Old Age*, edited by Williams S. Heywood (Lowell, MA: Vox Populi Press – Thomson and Hill, 1896), 438-449.

proslavery arguments of Southern apologists, nor to only a persistent skeptical mentality. Given the communities Garrison was excluded from and included in, he did not retain the confidence he had once held in the authority of the Christian religion. Ballou, by contrast, dealt primarily with the community of his followers, and underwent no substantial change in his religious thinking.

Accordingly, Garrison, who no longer possessed a basis for Christian nonresistance in revelation, redefined it on the basis of reason, in terms presupposing his rejection of revelation's authority. Conversely, Ballou, who refused to acknowledge any disparity between natural law and the teaching of the New Testament, continued to uphold the authority of scripture for defining what counted as Christian nonresistance. It was only because Garrison believed "that it is untruthful, improper, superstitious, and pernicious to call the bible a holy book," and "that it is wholly by or from human nature that we must finally settle all ethical questions," which enabled him to further affirm "that although Non-resistance holds human life in all cases inviolable, yet it is perfectly consistent for those professing it to petition, advise, and strenuously urge a pro-war government to abolish slavery solely by the war power." It was because Ballou denied the former premises that he was both unable and unwilling to affirm Garrison's conclusion.⁴ In short, as exemplified by Garrison and Ballou, the Garrisonian abolitionists' shift away from their early pacifism and acceptance of the legitimacy of using violence against slavery was facilitated by their earlier change in their religious beliefs, specifically their substitution of a secular natural law ethic for a traditional religious source of authority.

The secularization of the Garrisonians' ideology had an impact well beyond simply provoking the ire of Adin Ballou. While marginalized in their day, the Garrisonians were

⁴ Ballou, *Autobiography*, 439.

remembered as far more representative of the sentiments at the time than they actually were. Thus, Lewis Perry writes, “Abolitionism was regarded as evidence of the moral superiority of the victorious North. But union troops and governmental actions had ended slavery, and the Republican Party held a pre-emptive claim on the legacy of moral superiority...the movement had existed mainly to give voice to the ‘Northern Conscience.’”⁵ Likewise, Brian Allen Santana speaks of “the popular culture transformation of William Lloyd Garrison and his form of abolitionist activism from a fringe antebellum religious movement into a representative example of New England’s antislavery legacy that emphasized Garrison’s selfless sacrifices on behalf of the slave and the Union.”⁶ While there is undoubtedly more work to be done on these topics, it can hardly be an accident that the post-Civil War Republicans who brought secularization to the American academy were, in advancing their own “millennial dreams,” appropriating the image and the ideology of the Garrisonian abolitionists.⁷ The roots of American secular society can be traced back to the Garrisonians, and reflecting on these roots will remain relevant so long as American society continues to wrestle with the places of reason and faith in the public sphere.

⁵ Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 6.

⁶ Brian Allen Santana, *William Lloyd Garrison and American Abolitionism in Literature and Memory* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 57.

⁷ George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 121.

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