

Protestantism, Protestant Revolutions, and the Place of Religion in Genesee County History

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Introduction

Numerous historians have written about the history of religion in western New York – and especially about the varieties of Protestantism found there. While the importance of Protestantism cannot be stressed too much as a component of Genesee County’s development as a part of western New York history, what can be easily overlooked is just how varied that Protestantism was – and continues to be. Its multifaceted expressions – be it Methodist, Baptist, or Congregational – not to mention attendant movements such as Mormonism, the Millerites, or even spiritualism and communalism – suggest much about not only the region’s complex religious heritage but, in addition, the economic, political, and cultural landscape of what would eventually emerge as modern Genesee County. To say that all of this – and more – had implications for both the State of New York and for the nation as a whole is to risk an understatement bordering on the meaningless.

Accordingly, this talk will hopefully provide a framework for seeing the pivotal role that Protestantism and its offshoots played in the development of Genesee County. Indeed, to have a greater appreciation of other religions in Genesee County’s past – namely, Roman Catholicism and, to a lesser degree, Reform Judaism, it is vital to make explicit the relation those two religious systems had to what was, and remains – the central motif of Genesee County religious history – the core system of Protestantism. But of course an extensive comparative analysis of that sort will have to wait for another study.

I am not arguing that Protestantism is being privileged here as a particular religious perspective. Nonetheless, I am arguing that Protestantism played a central role in the county’s history. As a result, other religions, particularly Roman

Catholicism, were perceived by others in the county through a lens that was clearly Protestant. The same could be said about the numerous economic, cultural, and political developments since the founding of Genesee County in 1802. Clearly, that same Protestantism – schisms and all – in turn drove those developments in predictable, and at times, even unpredictable ways.

In order to *explain* the dramatic role Protestantism played in our county's past it will be crucial to speak of the relations different Protestantisms had to one another and to the wider non-Protestant society as well. To start in this direction it is important to explore the earliest Protestants in what emerged as early Genesee County by the opening decade of the nineteenth century. This means at least touching upon the "Great Awakening" that split the Congregational Church wide open decades before the American Revolution. This spawned a western movement from the hill country of New England into the area that became Genesee County before the dawn of the nineteenth century.

What will begin with what can be called an historical dimension will then take on a decidedly theological aura. Regardless of the particular strand of Protestantism, the search for a perfect soul constituted the foundation of the religious movement under examination. This was manifested in a variety of ways, be it the many pamphlets, books, and magazines extolling the need to perfect the soul – or a local newspaper such as *Batavia's Republican Advocate* on July 27th, 1827, where we see the long-standing effort to combat sin in the individual as opposed to fighting sin in society at large; in fact, the quest for the perfect soul was one capable of producing a better world:

The Christian religion is more benevolent in its exertions – there is more of our thoughts in Heaven in the unconfined freedom of opening the heart and hand to all the family of man, and with the eye of a brother beholding and feeling for the whole community of every sex, and colour, and clime.

But how best to perfect the soul – and in the process, society as well – was a dynamic in Protestantism that inherently produced the many schisms discernible in the history of Genesee County Protestantism. What appeared to be simply theological debates about an issue such as how best to perfect the soul was, in reality, a dialogue about what collective religious life should look like. This of course meant yet another level of discussion - how should human life itself be organized? It is not surprising, then, that these debates translated into heated arguments about what life in Genesee County should look like.

As we shall see, issues such as slavery by the 1830s produced competing visions of how best to organize society – and the concerns of groups such as Universalists – along with their opponents – engaged in heated exchanges about social questions ranging from phrenology to land reform. While a number of these issues faded from view as the county entered the twentieth century, the divisions remained in more muted form as controversies yielded to a perceived need for stabilization. This was especially the case in the aftermath of World War One and its many international and national consequences – disruptions that were clearly felt in county life. As a result, Protestantism exhibited a quest for order; for social balance, that had not been detectable in the 1800s.

Nonetheless, one should not oversimplify the process of stabilization in the Protestant world of Genesee County from the 1920s on. Also in evidence was an ambivalence that once again transcended purely theological concerns. Protestants from the 1920s on – and especially in the 1920s itself – were torn between a very American faith in the necessity and desirability of progress on the one hand, and an equally pronounced impulse for nostalgia on the other. This tension was seen as early as 1906 in the heresy trial of Reverend Algernon S. Crapsey in Batavia, and manifested itself in the many public statements of anxiety about the future direction of life in Genesee County as it entered the modern age of increased cultural diversity, technological innovation, and a scientific culture that seemingly called into question long-held beliefs about biblical accuracy. Some of the dread concerning the direction of the county – within the context of Protestantism – was anchored in despair about the perceived growth of a materialism that was part and parcel of modern America. Not surprisingly, we find

a reference to this in the “Official Journal” of the *Genesee Conference Minutes* published in 1923. Protestant leadership itself was threatened at the very moment that the need to overcome historic schisms was so needed. How does the Church compete with a modern marketplace featuring employers capable of offering higher salaries? In those *Minutes* we therefore find that

It may not be out of place to mention some of the things noted in a study of the churches, and the first matter which comes to me is the lack of adequate salary.

The article goes on:

When a young man can receive a dollar an hour for working in a garage, it is not surprising that he should hesitate to accept \$1,000 in the ministry. When a man can get \$1,800 a year for distributing mail and be comparatively safe in his position, he hesitates to accept a position paying \$1,200 when such a position is dependent upon pleasing some two hundred people, some of whom have never been pleased up to date.

Hence the concerns arising out of both a need to overcome historic differences within Protestantism *and* the necessity of finding a viable place in what was rapidly becoming a new Genesee County by the 1920s was one with clear implications beyond county borders. The impact of new technologies such as the radio, the automobile, and movies; advances in the physical sciences; and radically different moral codes governing such aspects of life as courtship were just some of the areas of life being shaped by – and in turn influencing – the different strands of Protestantism.

Therefore, the perceived need to engage in progress was one that produced the contradictory view of nostalgia – a cultural pressure within Protestantism that brings us up to our own day. Regardless of the Protestant denomination from the 1920s on, sermons pertaining to marriage, or consumption, or young people –

again, to name but a few of the areas of concerns expressed by county Protestant clergy throughout the twentieth century – there remained a visible pull between a perceived earlier golden age and the current demands of contemporary life. Combined with the relationship between Protestantism and other religions evident in the county – principally Roman Catholicism – a complex network of ambivalence was at work that ultimately called into question just what role Protestantism was destined to play as Genesee County moved forward into the twenty-first century. But before exploring all of this in some detail, it is necessary to start at the beginning – with the Protestant backdrop to Genesee County culture that was already in place even before the formal creation of the county at the start of the nineteenth century.

The Protestant Background

The intensity of Protestant religious excitement in Genesee County after the War of 1812 had its immediate origins in what historians have called The Great Awakening. This religious movement is first visible in the colonies of Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York in the 1740s. Its hallmark was a resistance to established churches. This opposition was directed against the styles of preaching – rather than the religious doctrine itself. A perception had grown in many congregations that Protestant churches had become too unemotional; too sterile. This trend was moved along in the 1740s with the arrival in the colonies of George Whitefield. This English revivalist was an early leader of the Methodist movement, and he held open field services from New England through Georgia in order to accommodate the large number of people in attendance. These meetings produced thousands of conversions. In one instance, Whitefield referred to a group of young women, upon which a “wonderful power” descended, producing this response:

(they) began to cry out and weep most bitterly for the space of half an hour . . . Five of them seemed affected as those that are in fits.

Such emotional scenes at open field services – and elsewhere – proved to be frightening to Protestant traditionalists. The argument here was that the

ministerial flair of someone such as Whitefield was more theatrical than substantive. In turn, this obscured the idea that God alone granted grace. Not surprisingly, there was a political dimension at work in this regard, as traditionalists were apprehensive about the egalitarian implications of the Great Awakening – emotional fervor weakened the authority of doctrine and therefore the authority of local elites – such as the clergy. A challenge against the Church hierarchy was a threat to authority as a whole. It should not surprise us that as The Great Awakening unfolded colonies began to enact legislation addressing the obvious challenge to power. For example, in Connecticut, “An Act for regulating Abuses and correcting Disorders in Ecclesiastical Affairs” made it a criminal offense to preach in another minister’s parish in the absence of express consent. In other words, unauthorized services could produce fines, imprisonment, expulsion from a colony, and the withholding of tax revenue for clergy in Connecticut.

It then comes as no surprise that divisions emerged regarding authorized and unauthorized preaching – which in reality was a split between traditionalists and revivalists. In New England – and in New York – this division split what had been united religious institutions into competing congregations and Protestant denominations. To say this in another way, the relative consensus that had been in evidence was broken; disrupting what had been a relatively homogenous Protestant culture.

As I have already suggested, the religious fervor that manifested itself in Genesee County by the early nineteenth century – while in part a legacy of The Great Awakening – was also a product of the radical changes apparent in the social and economic condition of western New York in general. What were these underlying social and economic transformations?

Maybe most crucially here was the year 1825 – the year of the Erie Canal’s completion. The Canal served to intensify the rapidity of economic change throughout the entire state of New York – not to mention Genesee County. While the consequences of the Canal as a watery thruway linking the Great Lakes and the seacoast is obvious, what is less obvious at first glance – though equally

important – is the role played by the Canal within the state itself. At the risk of oversimplification, the Canal had a dramatic effect on the area's economic development. Farmers found it far easier to market their goods as a result of the Canal's construction. Even though by 1825 the area of western New York traversed by the Canal was no longer in Genesee County proper, it is indisputable that the Canal had a great impact on the economy as a whole. While the Canal had a clear effect on transportation – along with the marketing of goods stage coach lines began to disappear – it also produced another consequence – that of a rise in population. Subsequent to the completion of the Erie Canal the population of Genesee County – like that of western New York in general – grew dramatically. Even conservative estimates suggest that for the five counties enveloping the western portion of the Canal the population surged by 135 percent by 1830.

Not surprisingly, then, greater population density translated into growing numbers of people potentially involved in religious schisms over any of a number of controversies. Overall, there is an identifiable pattern. That configuration is this – the established churches accepted the status quo, while new sects did not. The sects constituting the Protestant schisms that we will turn to shortly typically had a very narrow focus – slavery, for instance, or land reform. One of the groups evident in this period – the Methodists – is an illustration of how schisms developed. In their case, as I have already alluded to, camp-meeting Methodists stretching back to George Whitefield sought a more emotional religious experience led by lay leaders. But as Methodism evolved in the 1800s in Genesee County it came to include more middle-class congregations that were guided by seminary-trained clergy. This produced ruptures within the Methodist movement, itself a movement with roots in The Great Awakening that had positioned itself against established Protestant churches. The *Genesee Conference* records from the 1850s tell us about clergy lamenting Unitarians viewed as *too* liberal in their doctrine and practice. Some of these Methodists evolved into the Free Methodists who viewed “pew rentals” as insensitivity towards the poor and of a mainstream Methodism displaying an excess of “executive power and ecclesiastical machinery” by the mid-nineteenth century. Reacting to the

exuberance of dissident Methodists, the *Genesee Conference* records of 1854-1855 (Section VII), tells us this:

It was thought by some observing minds that many came too near falling into the error of taking holiness “out of its proper connections;” that in their zeal for entire holiness they were almost impatient of hearing anything on the subject of repentance, justification, regeneration, adoption, as if these things did not form the very basis of a complete Christian character . . .

The intensity of Protestant schisms only accelerated as Genesee County moved out of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. More people, including those within a particular church, only succeeded in stretching a religious niche. This eventually forced it to break, leading into ever more schisms. Understanding this, church leaders often tried to adhere to an unchanging doctrine, or at least an unchanging church structure, or, in some cases, an unchanging prophet. But sometimes this proved to be untenable. Hence a Joseph Smith, whose role in the creation of Mormonism is a stark example of the effects of schisms complete with new prophets.

Therefore, much of the “Protestant Background” to a history of Protestantism in Genesee County is one of schisms having such underlying social and economic factors as a radical change in transportation networks – the Erie Canal – and population increases that accompanied such a technological and economic revolution. But before we turn to a sampling of the Protestant groups undergoing repeated schisms – revolutions – in nineteenth century Genesee County we will turn initially to what all of Protestantism had in common in the 1800s, regardless of denomination – or sect. That commonality was a search for a perfect soul. That quest manifested itself in the very definition of sin itself, along with the role of tract societies, literary efforts, and the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus.

The Search for a Perfect Soul

In the opening decades of the nineteenth century the Methodists were known in particular – as I have already suggested – for their overt emotionalism. This trait was part and parcel of their fervent search for an intimate relationship with God via closeness with Jesus. The “perfect soul,” or what some Protestants in this period had long called the *Inner Light*, was a strong sense that Jesus had taken root in one’s life. This, believers maintained, led one away from sin and towards salvation. Pivotal here was the view that sin is most effectively fought against in the individual – and not in a crusade against the ills of society. Along these lines, alcohol abuse, a social problem, was one anchored in an individual’s intemperate behavior. Correct the *moral* failing of the person, and the social evils attendant to alcohol abuse would naturally wither away.

This perspective on sin’s location is manifest in many accounts of individual struggles in Genesee County in the nineteenth century. Sources consistently indicate the presence of large public gatherings; a method of promulgating teachings about the necessity of acknowledging an *Inner Light* not dependent upon systematic theology – an approach most commonly associated with Methodists in western New York. So it should not surprise us to find this account of the *Genesee Conference* held by the Methodists in

. . . Batavia, N.Y., in 1853, (in which) Bishop M. Simpson presided. The Conference was delighted with his presence and presidency. On (the) Sabbath the bishop preached to a very large congregation in an immense tent near Main Street, toward the eastern part of the village.

In this History of the *Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* published in 1876, we also discover graphic depictions of an individual’s growth into holiness. This time the site was Bergen and the year was 1855. The achievement of holiness, of that “Inner Light,” was possible only with a good deal of patience – the blending of an individual and Jesus could not be rushed:

It was thought by some observing minds that many came too near falling into the error of taking holiness

“out of its proper connections;” that in their zeal for entire holiness they were almost impatient of hearing anything on the subject of repentance, justification, regeneration, adoption . . .

The reader then was told that

some were urged to profess Christian perfection quite too early after their conversion . . .

But despite debates about how fast the process of perfection should be, the stress remained upon the necessity of transforming the individual; a process that led to a transformation of society. As the nineteenth century moved into its final ‘years, this quest for soul perfection came to be seen as an emergency – for American society – including that of western New York – was undergoing rapid and disconcerting changes. For writers in the *Genesee Conference* volumes, this transformation was not positive. For instance, look at this excerpt from the “Genesee District” of the *Eighty-Fifth Session of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* in 1894:

Our District feels the drain resulting from the drift of country populations to the city . . . In all our rural districts we find large numbers of the people practically outside of all direct religious influence.

The description continued:

The people rarely attend church. Sunday is a day for riding, visiting, and lounging. From this element of our population come the votes which carry our towns for license and furnish the patrons of our saloons when they are licensed.

The question, then, was how to best bring people to a higher level of spiritual awareness that would in turn spawn a reformed society. Regardless of the

Protestant denomination, it is here that we see the role played by the dissemination of religious literature – Bible tracts – in the effort to achieve the perfection of the soul. In 1824 a state tract society was organized in New York with the express purpose of bringing the bible to people who otherwise lacked access to it.

It was not a coincidence that the census of 1824 – the same year of the organization of the state tract society – revealed about 1,200 families in western New York who lacked a copy of the Scriptures. While the trepidation among those who were the most committed to the maintenance – and expansion – of Christianity in western New York was beginning to reach fever pitch by 1824, it should not be forgotten that the effort to get at least portions of the bible into the hands of those lacking it had started even earlier. In the 1857 publication entitled *A Brief History of the American Tract Society, Instituted at Boston, 1814, and Its Relations to the American Tract Society at New York, Instituted 1825*, we discover that the New York Religious Tract Society “was formed” in February of 1812, and that in April of 1812,

it purchased from the former Tract Society the remainder of their stock on hand, consisting of 7,986 copies of Nos. 1 to 11, which numbers were continued as the first of the series of the New York Religious Tract Society.

Despite denominational differences, the tract society had a goal that explicitly transcended differences between Protestants:

Constitution of the American Tract Society

Article 1. This Society shall be denominated the American Tract Society, the object of which shall be to promote the interests of vital godliness and good morals, by the distribution of such Books and Tracts as may be calculated to receive the approbation of Christians of all denominations, usually termed evangelical.

Along with the transcendence of doctrinal differences, the tract effort also exhibited an ethnic inclusiveness that spoke to the sincerity of this Protestant effort. Hence in *A Brief History of the American Tract Society* we find that

The last Report, for 1825, gives a list of 192 Tracts in the principal English series, 15 French, and 10 Spanish . . .

The enthusiasm surrounding this effort to perfect the soul through an evangelization effort conducted via tract publications was one that was celebrated in Genesee County media in the decades before the Civil War. Hence in the January 20th, 1826 issue of Batavia's *Republican Advocate* we see in its entirety the "Constitution of the Genesee County Bible Society." Along these lines, that same newspaper featured a wide variety of tracts and magazines designed to bring religious education to those who did not necessarily have regular access to the Bible or to other religious materials. For example, in the August 4th, 1826 issue of that same newspaper we find an advertisement for the *Religious Advocate and Missionary Intelligencer*, a magazine portrayed, in part, as one that

. . . will contain all the missionary and Religious Intelligence of the day, foreign and domestic – a comprehensive view of descendants of Israel, and the progress of Christianity among them – a history of the FATHERS, and other religious essays . . .

The strong emphasis placed upon the distribution of religious tracts and such periodicals as the *Religious Advocate and Missionary Intelligencer* reminds us of a core value of Protestantism in nineteenth century Genesee County – that of the central place of literacy. As one historian of western New York religion put it, "a minimum education . . . had long been a virtual birthright for New Englanders, and New York's common schools rose chiefly from the universal habit of settlers to establish classes as soon as a meeting had been organized." This scholar,

Whitney R. Cross, in *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*, then added this:

. . . the New York common schools so broadened the bases of popular knowledge that by the time measurement can be taken very few native-born adults remained illiterate. In 1850, three western New York counties equaled or exceeded the Massachusetts literacy record for the native born, highest of any state in the Union . . .

Of these three, Genesee County was one.

It should then not surprise us that in one Genesee County village after another schools had been quickly established. In 1805 Alexander founded a school in which Charles Austin served as one of the early teachers. Four years earlier Thomas Layton opened a private school in Batavia. Classes were conducted in private homes in Bergen. When the first schoolhouse was built a Yale College graduate, Harvey Kelsey, was hired as a teacher. In 1816 one resident of Darien, Lydia Woodward, spoke of a teacher, William Humphrey, who taught forty students. Elba had a school by 1811, and LeRoy had established a school a decade earlier – in 1801. These and other schools not being named reveal a central theme in Protestant values stretching back to the Reformation's origins.

The tract societies depended upon literacy. The schools were a necessary component here – to read the written word was to read the Bible and various religious materials. The schools inculcated a Protestant tradition of decentralization – a literate Christian community was not in need of a dominant priesthood. The true source of Christian belief was the Holy Scripture – writings that could be studied by a literate person not in need of specially-appointed clergy. This could lead to outbursts of religious frenzy, as it did throughout western New York in The Great Revival of 1819-1820. This expression of religious enthusiasm – and the final stage of a perfected soul – reached a peak by 1843 when William Miller predicted that as a result of studying the revealed revelation

of the scriptures it could be concluded that Jesus would return to earth – and that the return would take place sometime in 1843 or 1844.

On July 25th, 1843, Batavia's *Spirit of the Times* ran an article entitled "A Millerite in Italy." This Millerite stated his belief that "Christ was to appear and set up his kingdom." The writer of this article then added that this follower of William Miller

. . . was solemn as eternity, and fully believed what he said. Nothing could stop him, as he said he could not detain the Lord Jesus Christ . . .

The reporter could not help but to add that "it was a fearful thing to see a man risking all on one single belief . . ."

Where did such certainty come from, and how did it play out in Genesee County? The unquestioned belief in the immanent return of Jesus was anchored in the views of Miller. When people in a place such as Batavia called for Miller to come and speak, their excitement had been generated by Miller's study of the scriptures – and particularly the Book of Daniel. Miller's calculations allowed him to conclude that Jesus would return on the 22nd of October, 1844.

It is not the place here to explore in detail the specifics of Miller's calculations. Suffice it to say that as the belief in the return of Jesus spread, religious fervor gripped Genesee County and indeed, western New York as a whole. Camp meetings in such places as LeRoy generated attendance in excess of a thousand people, all clamoring to proclaim their belief in the end of time as we know it and of the need to perfect their soul through a display of their abandonment of all worldly concerns.

Accordingly, on November 8th, 1844, *The Spirit of the Times* ran an article entitled "Millerism." It was an essay highly critical of the frenzied excitement discernible in Genesee County regarding the belief in the immanent return of Jesus. No words were minced – it was described as "the delusion of 'Millerism' . . ." The writer of this piece then elaborated:

. . . to our great astonishment, we now find the delusion resuming its sway with, if not more general extent, with more extravagance than ever . . .

We find the believers carried into the most strange conduct, and the most pitiable perversion of all rules of duty, and of all the obligations, both of religion and of prudence.

The article goes on:

We hear of women arrayed in “ascension robes,” deserting the care of their households, and sitting down in upper rooms, some even in unfinished garrets, to be as near to heaven as possible . . .

Finally, this Batavia newspaper tells the reader that

the disciples of Mr. Miller and his followers (are) closing their stores, giving away their goods, and pasting notices on their shutters, that their shops are closed to wait “the coming of the King of Kings.”

The failure of Jesus to return led to what some called *The Great Disappointment*. But it also led to an intensification of schisms that had long characterized the history of Protestantism. One itinerant preacher wrote to Miller from LeRoy that in “our boasted land of liberty (we have never known) so much religious persecution in so short (a) time . . .” Adventist meeting places throughout western New York were attacked – in some cases encouraged by Methodist ministers. Once the shock of disappointment and persecution lessened, many Protestants – those who had followed Miller and those who had not – sought new expressions for what Whitney R. Cross termed “the most pious victims of every religious excitement since the Great Revival of 1800 . . .” Therefore, by mid-century, the search for a perfect soul was slowly but surely being transformed into a variety of moral quests.

Protestant Schisms as a Moral Quest

The history of Protestantism in Genesee County mirrors that of Protestantism as a whole in terms of the tendency to produce schisms. The larger, more centralized denominations – such as the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists – saw factions separating themselves into what can be termed sects. The sects were driven by what I am calling here a *moral quest* – the desire to pursue specific goals not necessarily in alignment with established denominational desires.

The specific goals driving some of these sects – for example, a stand on slavery – had the effect of influencing the doctrine and policies of the established denominations. The Methodist Episcopal Church is a telling example of an issue – in this instance slavery – propelling a faction that emerged as a sect of an established denomination. As the Methodist Episcopal Church witnessed an increasingly fervent abolitionist movement by the 1830s, those opposed to abolitionism or to the granting to African-American preachers and their congregations the same recognition as their white coreligionists eventually formed a sect that quickly assumed mainstream denominational status – the proslavery Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The intensity of the debate surrounding slavery – and how it led to the formation of a schism – is captured in an extended discussion of slavery recorded in the *History of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* published in 1876. In Section IX, 1837-1838, we find a detailed summary of a conference in which “the much-agitated subject of American slavery” was a focus.

The Conference concluded that “slavery is a ‘great evil.’” We are then told that

The Churches are agitated by it. Our own beloved Zion has entered the fiery ordeal; and though, as finite beings, we cannot tell how she will come out of it . . .

But despite this agitation, the Conference members were reminded that

Our system of operations, together with the peace and integrity of the Church, forbid us as itinerant Methodist preachers to neglect any part of our regular work for the purpose of calling the public attention to this or any other object which, however important, we must hold as subordinate and not paramount to the high and awful ends of that ministry to which we are voluntarily and solemnly devoted.

The debates surrounding abolitionism – and the resultant schisms that it produced over slavery – were found along other fronts as well. One of these frontiers takes us into the heart of the nineteenth century tension between science and religion – can the two be complimentary? While some in the various Protestant movements did not think so, others did. For them, what began as an excursion into the role played by God in the natural world culminated in a movement that grew out of a Protestant schism and was depicted as a science founded upon natural law itself – phrenology.

Like the fervor discernible in abolitionism, phrenology too was pursued as a moral quest. It both grew out of, and helped to perpetuate, Protestant schisms in Genesee County and indeed throughout western New York. Phrenology, or the study of the human skull in order to ascertain a person's psychological characteristics, took different forms in different societies stretching back to antiquity. However, it is its development as part of Genesee County Protestantism in the years before the Civil War that concerns us here. In particular, Universalists in the late 1830s and early 1840s were instrumental in the promotion of this movement which sought to synthesize science and Christianity.

Universalists worked to achieve an improved society, which placed them at the forefront of a variety of social movements. In the process, they distanced themselves from other Protestant denominations. Not to be confused with Unitarians, the Universalists believed that because Jesus had died in order to atone for humanity's original sin that there is no otherworldly means for separating those saved and those who are not. Instead, social and individual redemption lay in an expansion of morality. In other words, individual sin for the

Universalists was not the result of inherent evil in an individual. Instead, individual sin was the consequence of social malfunctioning. Fix society, Universalists maintained, and the individual will be morally perfected. So along with their attacks on debtor prisons, capital punishment, harsh working conditions, and a host of other social ills, Universalists also led the reform movement of phrenology.

God's purpose for humanity therefore lay in a science seen as anchored in nature. Criminals suffering from brain dysfunction were "moral patients" better treated medically instead of being punished in a prison. Protestant phrenologists believed that they had discovered insights into a person's mind that can be used to resolve debates about human nature itself. This promised greater precision in the Protestant understanding of the innermost thoughts of people – and that those thoughts could not be separated from the social environment people inhabited.

The study of a person's skull by phrenologists was inseparable from a strand of Protestantism – Universalism – achieving spectacular intensity in western New York by the early 1840s. The link between brain activities and Christianity was obvious for the phrenologist. Phrenology was conceived of as proof of God's existence in and of itself. Why? Because such phrenological areas of the brain, such as "wonder," or "veneration," displayed the *organic* function of feeling reverence when pondering God. Indeed, such awe reveals a physiological foundation for a desire to worship God. Further, phrenologists viewed the brain's capacity for desire and greed as proof of innate depravity – a depravity that could best be countered by a reform efforts designed to counter social ills. With growing numbers of western New York Protestants finding themselves attracted to phrenology, it is no accident that by 1837 George Combe began to attract larger and larger crowds – and the controversy that went along with it.

Combe was a lawyer from Scotland who was a leading advocate of phrenology. A founder of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society in 1830, he was the author of a widely-received book, published in 1828, and entitled *The Constitution of Man*. In this work, Combe captured the synthesis between a strand of Protestant faith and

phrenology. This theological strain stood at the center of an emerging Protestant article of faith before the Civil War – one that emphasized the intimate relationship between the intricacy of physiological complexity and the existence of God. In *The Constitution of Man* Combe argued that

When I speak of man's highest interest, for example, I uniformly refer to man as he exists in this world; but as the same God presides over both the temporal and the external interests of the human race, it seems to me demonstrably certain, that what is conducive to the one, will in no way impede the other, but will in general be favourable to it also.

In other words, as phrenology emphasized, the order of the physical world is the result of divine design – who but God could have fashioned such intricate order in the natural world?

Newspaper and magazine accounts of Combe lecturing in Genesee County therefore remind us that there was a thirst among some Protestants to reconcile faith with the emerging sciences. An illustration of this craving included advertisements for phrenological works in such periodicals as *The New Yorker*. On April 15th, 1837, the reader encountered a work entitled:

Practical Phrenology . . . the whole subject illustrated by facts in the lives of eminent persons, among whom are Washington, Franklin, Clara Fisher, and Black Hawk . . .

Anyone desirous of obtaining a general knowledge of the wonderful and important science of Phrenology, may do so by becoming acquainted with the contents of the above small volume.

It is within this context that the crowds clamoring for lectures by Combe embodied the search for a moral quest that helped to spawn Protestant divisiveness in Genesee County. While phrenology and abolitionism – along with ideas about land reform all helped to stimulate Protestant splits, so too did

another development within Genesee County Protestantism – the growth of Universalism and its consequent opponents. But despite these divisions – of which I am only touching upon here – Protestantism in Genesee County found a way to stabilize and move forward into the twentieth century, as we shall turn to next.

The Stabilization of Protestantism in the Twentieth Century

As Protestantism in Genesee County moved into the twentieth century, a degree of stabilization ensued in the wake of the schisms that I have only touched upon in the previous section. This is not to say, however, that tensions both within and between different Protestant groups were nonexistent. But what I am saying is that these pressures were of a more generalized nature with even wider local – and national – implications. For the moment, I will hold off talking about the national implications of Protestant tensions and instead focus exclusively on the local consequences – which mean exploring both the concern with nostalgia and the question of heresy.

The stabilization of the Protestant world in Genesee County – and the resultant pull between what can be called *progress* on the one hand and *nostalgia* on the other – was fully underway after the end of World War One. Protestant leaders were working hard to reconcile the emergence of a modern consumer culture throughout the 1920s with Protestant values more common earlier in the county's history. On a national level this played itself out in astonishing ways. Protestant messages combined with the outlook of a consumer-oriented, corporate culture to produce books such as *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925). Authored by the advertising executive Bruce Barton, it depicted Jesus as a popular, convivial Rotarian who was “the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem,” who “picked up,” as Barton put it, “twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world.” The attempt to blend a belief system in which Jesus remained central – while also acknowledging the pervasiveness of a corporate, consumer culture that was a main component of Protestant post-schism stabilization – remained a

feature of Protestantism nationally in the 1920s. And what was taking place nationally in the 1920s was also discernible locally, in Genesee County.

This was consistently visible in the *Genesee Conference Minutes* of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the period between the end of World War One and the onset of the Great Depression. For example, in the 1928 issue of the *Minutes* we find a standing committee named “Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals.” The thrust of this group was to combat what was perceived as a decadent popular culture that had a particularly bad effect on young people. “Public morals” addressed what was understood as a moral destructiveness promoted by such activities as movies. These movies had titles such as “Forbidden Fruit,” “Week-end Wives,” “Children of Divorce,” and “Madness of Youth.” All of these films in the end concluded with “traditional” endings, e.g. disloyal spouses reformed their behavior and reunited with forgiving husbands and wives. But such happy endings were not enough for a committee concerned with popular morality and the behavior that led to eventual reconciliation. As that same 1928 *Minutes* put it:

To “carry on” in wartime parlance meant to keep doggedly at the grim business of overcoming the enemy and winning the war. In the face of a sometimes no-less-determined resistance it belongs to the Ministers of Christ’s Church to continue in the conflict against the world, the flesh and the devil – ever faithful to the Captain of their Salvation, until release shall come in the victory of a final coronation.

This tension between Protestant values such as self-restraint, prudence, hard work, and delayed gratification stood in stark opposition to the dictates of a consumer-oriented corporate culture calling for instant gratification, spontaneity, and riches achieved by the easy deal in lieu of sustained, purposeful hard work. The deepening prosperity may have seemed like material progress – but that progress appeared to come at too great a cost for traditional Protestants as found in such committees as those alluded to above. Stabilization emerged out of the

effort to overcome the tension between a yearning for the past and an anxiety over where the community seemed to be going. But maybe the effort to achieve post-schism stability within the Protestant world of Genesee County was even more evident in a narrow theological event that took place prior to World War One. That occurrence was the heresy trial of Reverend Algernon Sidney Crapsey, held in Batavia in 1906. Reverend Crapsey served as the Rector of Rochester's St. Andrew's Church. The trial was a focus upon some of the statements and sermons presented in his book, entitled *Religion and Politics*. His detractors saw Reverend Crapsey's advocacy of nonviolence – and particularly – the objection to government-sponsored violence – as divisive and politically subversive. This divisiveness was viewed as manifest both within Protestantism and throughout American society as well. Therefore, this dissent had to be eliminated. Those objecting to Reverend Crapsey's radical call for nonviolence as capable of precluding Protestant stabilization – and hence community stabilization – focused upon such passages as this:

Jesus was wise enough to see that physical force can only decide physical questions. He knew as well as Bonaparte that God is always on the side of the strongest battalion and the more skillful commander.

As the result of his conviction for heresy Reverend Crapsey was stripped of his ministry. Ironically, the Reverend's use of Jesus as an example of the need to question the wisdom of political leaders – especially as it concerns war – was one that had to be set aside in the name of achieving a deeply desired Protestant stabilization. The avoidance of future schisms was attainable by a centralized promulgation of views that did not call into question the authority of either Church or secular authorities. The insistence on an ideological and even behavioral conformity was set forth in the clearest of ways in the "Decision of the Court – Ecclesiastical Court, Diocese of Western new York. In the Matter of the Rev. Algernon S. Crapsey:"

The doctrines of the Church are set forth in the

authorized standards and formularies which the Church has adopted as the expression of its faith and doctrine . . .”

Accordingly, the Ecclesiastical Court goes on to add that

It may be admitted that every clergyman is bound in his public teaching to yield to the paramount claim of conscience. But the Church as the guardian of the Christian faith as it has received and declared it, cannot, without betraying its trust, when called upon to act, permit doctrines which it holds essential and fundamental to be impugned by those who minister at her altars, however pure their motives or sincere their convictions.

The long-term consequences of a nineteenth-century Protestantism replete with schisms throughout western New York had produced – first with the 1906 heresy trial and then with such activities as committees concerned with public morals in the 1920s – a Protestantism largely insistent upon order – theological and otherwise. Much, though not all of Genesee County Protestantism, was clearly moving in the direction of a political conservatism that mirrored the conservatism of American society at large by the middle of the twentieth century. Chaos and disorder can only be overcome through coherent, centralized dogma submitted to without hesitation. As the “Report of the Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals” put it regarding alcohol consumption in the *Genesee Annual Conference Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church* in 1938,

Where members of our churches have become involved in liquor selling or in renting property for that purpose, we pledge ourselves to render them every assistance within our power to divorce themselves from the unwelcome position.

We then see this statement:

If, however, they fail to do this, then it is manifestly right that churches do not continue to elect such persons to official positions.

As America moved deeper into the twentieth century upheavals of various kinds – wars, economic downturns, and rapid social change – all produced a sense of uncertainty. Combined with the yearning for a calmness not featuring schisms, it should not surprise us that Protestantism in twentieth century Genesee County exhibited the same drive toward stability seen in the nation at large by the end of the twentieth century.

*The Merging of National Purpose and Protestantism in Twentieth Century
Genesee County*

The call for a revitalization of Protestant values as the county moved deeper into the twentieth century was one that was inseparable from the perception of a national purpose that was itself anchored in a struggle against an international and domestic foe posing a grave threat. That enemy was of course communism. Much of the Cold War was played out on terrain that can be called religious – anticommunism was rooted in the perception that the conflict between America and the communist world was one exhibiting a deep philosophical tension. It was believed by many that Communists held no fixed moral principles outside of a determination to conquer the noncommunist world. If they were successful, America would be destroyed. Accordingly, a vital weapon in the arsenal of democracy was religion – and in the case of the United States, that meant Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular with Catholicism running a close second. Nonetheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that this was not a mere academic debate – for families in Genesee County the national crusade against atheistic communism was personal – witness, for example, a *Daily News* article appearing a week before Christmas on December 18th, 1951. It commenced with this headline:

Fate of Seven Area Soldiers May be Clarified
by New List of Chinese Red War Prisoners

Roster Supplied by Communists Flown to Tokyo for Relay to America

The article then went on to say this:

Announcement by Communists in Korea that they hold 3,195 American prisoners of war placed a new burden of strain on several Batavia and area families today as they began anxious waiting to determine (the) possible fate of their sons.

Such anxiety-ridden depictions as that shown above served to intensify an already anxiety-ridden culture in 1951. Hot wars in Korea illustrated an assault from an external enemy – but, as much of the Protestant establishment stressed, the opponent was also an internal one. This vantage point fueled the sense of national purpose permeating a Protestant nationalism by the middle of the twentieth century. Not coincidentally, it also heightened an ideological and cultural conformity as well. In that same *Daily News* of Batavia in 1951 we therefore discover an article regarding an alleged defection of an East Elba soldier to the Communists. The young man's former principal at Elba Central School, H.W. Vanderhoof, rejected the idea of a defection to the communist cause, telling *The Daily News* that the young soldier had “showed no sign of any communist tendencies . . .” Concern about the infiltration of communist ideas abounded in such articles – and it was precisely this aspect of the conflict that motivated a number of Protestant clergy and lay people to equate anticommunism and Christianity as one and the same.

For instance, look at the anxiety discernible in the culture regarding those Americans not fully supportive of this national purpose – which only served to strengthen the sometimes desperate quality of Protestant-led denunciations of both communism and dissent. Several weeks before the inauguration of newly-elected President Dwight D. Eisenhower on January 6th, 1953, *The Daily News* ran a front-page article lamenting the actions of those “Deserters Avoiding Korean

Duty” which the newspaper proclaimed to be “A National Disgrace.” Readers learned that

. . . a large number of runaways were motivated by the desires of young men to secure dishonorable discharges in order to avoid service in Korea.

The newspaper article concluded with this:

. . . on any given day of the year enough able-bodied men to make up two complete combat divisions are classified as deserters or AWOL. That indicates a permanent force of runaways numbering 25,000 to 30,000 men.

Such realities only served to increase the motivation of some Protestant clergy to drive home the link between American nationalism, anticommunism, and Christianity. Along these lines, Bergen’s Methodist church featured its “Festival of Faith” in 1953. The centerpiece of this celebration goes to the core of anticommunism – that communists were atheists and as a result could not be trusted. Accordingly, the Methodist Church in Bergen advertised its “We Believe in God” service on January 8th, 1953 in *The Daily News*. On January 10th, 1953, that same newspaper expressed this view of the communist in its description of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin as “dishonest, sleek, tricky, unreliable and even dishonorable.” Communism could not be negotiated with, as Frederick A. Sperling wrote in a lengthy letter to *The Daily News* on the 16th of January, 1953. It was an angry letter that addressed what was described on the front-page of *The Daily News* only four days before. In an article entitled “Batavia Minister Asks Reds’ Release,” we see an account of Reverend W. Wylie Young’s call for amnesty for eleven Communist Party USA leaders convicted of conspiracy to advocate the overthrow of the United State government.

Sperling’s letter captures what many Protestants in Genesee County and elsewhere in 1953 felt – that communism was an idea so fundamentally un-American and unchristian that it did not deserve recognition as a mere exercise of

first amendment freedom. Instead, it is a movement striking at the very heart of basic American democratic beliefs. As Sperling reminds the reader, this is not simply a Protestant position. In fact, it is the unalterable judgment of a typical American regardless of one's particular religious belief:

The conflict between communism and the American Republic is a conflict of basic ideas. It is a war of faith and freedom against despair and despotism . . . It is this citadel of faith and freedom that the Communists now proceed to undermine with their materialistic dispensation of despair.

Sperling then added this:

The man whom God made in his own image the Communists would remake into a soulless serf.

Reminding the reader that this is not only a Protestant perspective, Sperling then poses this question:

Is it credible that any man who believes in God, be he Catholic, Protestant or Jew, is unaware of the fact that there is going on right now a world struggle between those who believe in God and the Communists who would destroy God and those who exercise the right and privilege to worship him?

Is it any wonder, then, that the anxiousness regarding Protestant schisms combined with the objective threats of communist regimes around the world to produce a yearning for both nostalgia and a commitment to conformity that played itself out in an energetic Protestant nationalism by the middle of the twentieth century?

Conclusion

Even at the height of the Vietnam War by 1968 and 1969 the struggle to equate Christianity and anticommunism continued to manifest itself in the culture of Genesee County. Nostalgia was articulated in popular depictions of a seemingly unchanging social climate believed to be untouched by the forces of dissent swirling throughout American society by the late 1960s. For instance, *The Daily News* was replete with photographs and articles regarding engagement and marriage announcements. A day such as March 2nd, 1968, was typical – “Will Be Bride Of Area Soldier,” or “Betrothed To Navy Man,” all illustrate a deep desire to maintain an ideal of Christian domesticity undergoing an onslaught of questioning by an America in the throes of a cultural revolution by 1969. These articles could have been written in 1950 or even in 1910 – not to mention even earlier. Protestantism in Genesee County, which had earlier stressed a questioning evident in the religious enthusiasms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – not mention the schisms of the 1800s – had yielded to a sense of national purpose with a clear abhorrence of dissent and individual eccentricities. Protestantism – and religion in general – had remained a consistent feature of the county’s history. Nonetheless, its character had clearly changed by the end of the twentieth century.

Protestantism remained an integral part of Genesee County’s past. It played a major role in terms of how the people of Genesee County saw themselves. Whether or not they were Protestant, Protestant values, as I have tried to stress in this admittedly brief overview, served to shape the county’s basic institutions – government, family, churches, and commercial enterprises of all sorts were seen through a Protestant lens. Even though that perspective shifted over time, it remained intact as we move closer to our own day. In 1976 the *United Methodist Church Annual Conference Journal of Western New York* stated in the clearest of terms that

. . . When those who brought this nation into being did so, they openly declared that they saw this as a nation under God. There are varying opinions and ideas as to what the founders meant by that phrase, but that is not what is really important.

Therefore,

What is important is whether or not we see this as a nation under God. As Christians we should. And that being the case, it is our responsibility to see that the Christian influence permeates every aspect of our nation's life; family, social, political, economic, government, etc.

This statement could have been written two centuries before. The resounding confidence of Protestantism in Genesee County was still very much in evidence by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Despite schisms, radical social and political changes, and wars Protestantism had not only survived, but indeed, flourished. It had been a crucial factor in Genesee County's growth and development – and success. This pattern will most likely continue into the twenty-first century and beyond. It has always been – and remains – a deep well of replenishment and sustenance that produced over time a strong and confident society in western New York, and will undoubtedly continue to withstand the many forces of change that continue to swirl through the Genesee County of our own day.

