

University of Nevada, Reno

The Hybrid Apostle: A Religious and Cultural
Biography of Father Isaac Hecker's Early Life
and the Origin of American Catholicism, 1837-
1858

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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May 2011

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We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

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entitled

**The Hybrid Apostle: A Religious And Cultural Biography Of Father Isaac Hecker's
Early Life And The Origin Of American Catholicism, 1837-1858**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May, 2011

Abstract

This thesis explores how Father Isaac Hecker's hybrid religious identity led him to form "American Catholicism" through his experience in various political, religious, and political movements he participated in between 1837-1858. As the son of German immigrants, he grew up in New York City as a member of the working-class. He later participated in reform politics, which led him later to join the Transcendentalist communes at Brook Farm and Fruitlands in 1843. The essence of this study traces the intellectual and cultural movements within Transcendentalism that led Hecker in the direction of joining the Catholic Church. This study demonstrates how he used paradigms, personalities, languages, and literary tropes within Transcendentalism as an account for understanding his conversion to the Catholic Church through a specific movement within American culture. The latter aspect of the thesis demonstrates how Hecker formed American Catholicism through his own understanding of his hybrid religious identity in Transcendentalism and Catholicism during his career as a Catholic missionary priest, book writer, and founder of the first religious community of Catholic priests, the Paulists, in North America.

Dedication

This thesis on American Catholicism is dedicated to the memory of my loving great grandmother, Maria Paz Alvarado, who raised me. She is the source of my inspiration to write about American religious history.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude for all the assistance I have received in writing this thesis. I am indebted to three groups of people. First and foremost, my graduate committee was a continual source of support as they offered me constructive criticism for my thesis: Elizabeth Raymond, Scott Casper, Francis Hartigan, and Michael Branch. Second, I received considerable encouragement and support among my family and friends who I wish to recognize: Jenny Olague, Deriek Olague, Andrew Richmond, Randy James Rubadeau, Michael Meany, Tom Moehn, Henry Denny, Melanio Puzon III, Ron Scalzl, John Reed, Dan and Nancy Lee, Jacqueline McGee; Anthony Francis Rosado, C.S.P., James Dunnuck, Dennis Michael Fesmire, Billy Griffin, Tom Franz, Brandon and Lisa Bowyer, Nikki and Justin Pederson, and “Sarge.” I also wish to express my gratitude to the Paulist community at St. Paul’s College in Washington D.C. for their support, friendliness, and eagerness to see my thesis advance. I am especially grateful for the support of Father John Behnke, C.S.P.

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Prologue

Isaac Thomas Hecker (1819-1888) founded the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle (the Paulists) on July 7, 1858 and subsequently established the first congregation of Catholic priests in North America.¹ Twenty years before the congregation's establishment, its founder did not profess any affiliation with the Catholic Church. He had been raised with a German Methodist piety, joined radical Jacksonian politics within the Locofoco movement, and affiliated with Transcendentalism of New England's Brook Farm and Fruitlands before his final conversion to the Catholic Church in 1844. Six years after his conversion, Hecker joined the Redemptorists. He was soon expelled from that order and later founded the Paulists.

Through the Paulists, Hecker extended an invitation to American Catholics in converting fellow countrymen while affirming the reconciliation of American culture and the Catholic Church: "In the union of American civilization and Catholic faith, a future for the Church brighter than any past."² Among those who responded to the invitation were four American converts: Augustus Hewitt, George Deshon, Francis Baker, and Clarence Walworth. As Catholic priests, the early Paulists shared the same liturgical responsibilities and adherence to dogmatic orthodoxy as all other religious orders. On the other hand, the Paulists, as well as other orders, embraced their founder for whom they are bounded in a common sense of mission, vocation, and identity.

Walter Elliot, an early Paulist and disciple of Hecker in his old age, wrote a painful letter to French biblical scholar, Abbé Felix Klein, about the Paulist situation twelve years after the death of their founder: "We are afraid of our shadow. You do not know how near we are to a

¹ I wish to emphasize that before Hecker all Catholic religious orders in the United States were founded in Europe, i.e. the Dominicans and Jesuits. These orders held ties to provincials, superiors, and traditions across the Atlantic.

² John Farina, ed., *Isaac T. Hecker, The Diary: Romantic Religion in Ante-Bellum America* (New York, Paulist Press, 1988), 87. (Hereafter referred to as *Diary*).

veritable panic and yet must keep up the appearance of indifference.”³ This letter was written in a wake of controversy after the first biography of Hecker written by Elliot and translated into a French edition with an added introduction by Klein. The “shadow” of Elliot’s letter refers to Hecker, who had become the center of a controversy known as “Americanism.”⁴ This controversy refers to an American Catholic endorsement of freedom of the press, individualism, liberalism, and the complete separation of Church and State.

Outside of Church circles and fifteen years after the death of Hecker in 1903, the *New York Times* noted the “liberal views” of the original Paulist founders when Deshon (third Paulist superior) died in December of that year. The *Times* remarked that “so liberal were these men, the founders of the Paulist Fathers, that their order became known throughout the religious world as the ‘Protestant Catholics,’” and that Deshon “continued the work of his predecessors”—namely Hecker. The article emphasized that Hecker “was a Protestant before [founding] the order, and was one of the literary men of the New England school which embraced such thinkers as Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, Parker, and Brownson, who also became a Catholic.”⁵ Not only did the article describe the Paulists as “Protestant Catholics,” but identified Hecker in a chain of non-Catholic thinkers such as Emerson, Parker, Channing, and Thoreau. The Paulists were insulted and objected to the article.

The *Times* left a short, but intriguing record of the embattled religious identity of the Paulists and their engagement with American society through the press. Undoubtedly, they felt compelled to defend themselves, breaking the appearance of Elliot’s indifference four years earlier when Paulist superior, George M. Searle, wrote a rebuttal to the editor explaining their

³ Elliot letter to Klein as quoted in Thomas Jonas, “The Divided Mind: American Catholic Evangelism in the 1890s” (PhD dis., University of Chicago, 1980), 321.

⁴ Pope Leo XII issued an encyclical, “Testem benevolentiae” in 1899 on the errors of “Americanism.” Although no proponents were identified, Hecker’s name was clearly associated with the controversy.

⁵ “Death of Father Deshon,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1903.

position: “The Paulist Fathers object to the statement in yesterday’s (Dec. 30) issue of *The Times* which declared that the Paulist Fathers were known throughout the religious world as the ‘Protestant Catholics’... This is a false statement of fact.”⁶ Clearly, they had found themselves in a quandary: defending their Catholic identity while remaining notoriously grounded in Protestant and American roots.

European Catholic conservatives and the Vatican eventually judged Americanism to be incompatible with a fundamental principle of “proper” ecclesiology: obedience to authority and deference to Church hierarchy. Yet American-Catholics—such as Hecker who took for granted personal freedom, democracy, and national pride—found their ideas and work suspect for “attempting” to conform the Church to the “spirit of the age.” The veritable panic mentioned by Elliot and Searle’s rebuttal in the *Times* represent the anxiety felt within the Paulists as their founder had come to symbolize Americanism. Despite the controversy, however, the Paulists continued their ministry of parish and missionary work under the “appearance of indifference” to mask their shadow within the Church, for no order had ever survived the repudiation of its founder.

This study examines how the “Protestant Catholic” identity of the Paulists developed through the life of its founder by explaining what is “Protestant” and “American” about his form of Catholicism. As his most recent biographer, David O’Brien puts it, “Hecker did not build a Catholic America, but he did help form American Catholicism.”⁷ If so, what are the attributes of “American Catholicism” that he made distinctive from other forms of Catholicism? To answer this question, I argue that Hecker’s life and experiences during his young-adult years produced a hybrid religious identity that led him to formulate a distinct form of American Catholicism that

⁶ George M. Searle, “Paulist Fathers’ Position,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1903.

⁷ David O’Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 7.

came to define his work as a charismatic missionary priest. He made it very clear that the Catholic Church is the one true Church and hoped all Americans would convert. However, he also remained indebted to a particular class of American culture embedded in the New England liberal elite of Transcendentalism as the religious and cultural source that led to his conversion.

Hecker's attempt at forming American Catholicism through the reconciliation of the Catholic Church and American culture poses a central problem: his understanding of "American culture" from a man, who, as many of his contemporaries complained, "abused his gift for speculation by throwing himself into thoughts too subtle and paradoxical."⁸ Hecker often expressed himself in too general a manner without making his ideas practical and precise. His notion of American culture proved no different. Approaching Hecker's hybrid identity for illuminating what American culture meant to him in its historical context calls for a particular kind of biography: cultural biography.

My study explores specific historical aspects of Hecker's early to middle life that shaped his hybrid religious identity in the hope of illuminating his understanding of American culture within Catholicism, roughly between 1837 and 1858. The study, however, is neither a "definitive" nor a "standard" biography. While most biographies in the broadest sense of the word offer copious amounts of information on their subject, cultural biography specifically aims to support a specific argument through a subject's life. The events, experiences, and ideas that shaped Hecker's hybrid religious identity are demonstrated by the intellectual and cultural journey that took him from a Methodist German working class family in New York City, through the Transcendentalism of New England's Brook Farm and Fruitlands, to the Catholic Church, and finally to the priesthood. Within his journey, the cultural and social ferment that marked Transcendentalism stands out as a pivotal stage in Hecker's life when he embraced New

⁸ Ibid., 391.

England's liberal elite as his meaning of "American culture" before and after he converted to Catholicism.

I seek to explore his life through the framework of cultural hybridity as laid down by Jenny Franchot. Published in 1994, Franchot's *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Roman Catholicism* studied the rich nineteenth-century cultural tension between American Protestants and Catholics. Her analysis also dealt with a unique outcome of the antebellum Protestant *encounter* with Catholicism: Catholic converts. In exploring the lives of a few Catholic converts such as Hecker, Franchot explains that "because of their hybrid status, antebellum converts spoke a language of competing alliances that offers a fascinating study of the embattled transformation of religious identity."⁹ In this context, a cultural biography of Hecker reveals how his life was consumed by competing religious allegiances as an influential priest.

The dynamic of how hybridity transformed Hecker's life and work is best described by the sociologist, Tony Bennett in his definition of the process: "cultural hybridity...[draws] attention to the fluidity and impermanence of cultural distinctions and relationships...with the implication that cultural activities are caught up in the processes of differing rather than being simply different from the start."¹⁰ Hecker frequently asked in his diary "Who am I?" The answer to that question was often expressed in religious terms as the key factor in how Hecker recognized his self-identity. The transition of religious alliances is demonstrated by his diverse experiences that contrasted and welded together as the dynamic of his hybrid religious identity as the influence that produced the actions that led him to formulate "American Catholicism."

⁹ Jenny Franchot. *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter With Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xxvii.

¹⁰ Tony, Bennet ed., *Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 68.

Franchot and Bennett's cultural and theoretical lens provides the very foundation of the cultural biography I seek to write.

A central question of this cultural biography is how Hecker's hybrid identity developed as a result of lived experiences in a time of great religious diversity and experimentation. Therefore, the study progresses in stages and stitches together many different sources, both primary and secondary, to weave life and historical context within the theoretical framework of hybridity. Hecker's personal diary, letters, sermons, books, memoirs, reviews, and other various writings provide the primary sources necessary in ascertaining the development of his religious identity and the value of American culture within Catholicism. Secondary sources of the nineteenth-century fill in the contextual background of Hecker's cultural and social milieu to form what has been described as "cultural biography."

David S. Reynolds's method for writing cultural biography, through the pattern of *reflection, transcendence, and impact*, enriches Hecker's early to middle life within this study. According to Reynolds, writing a cultural biography is based on the idea that human beings have a dialogical relationship with various aspects of their historical surroundings including politics, society, literature, music, science, and religion. This form of biography is distinguished by its insistence that it can provide a window through a particular individual into political history, social history, economic history, and—for the emphasis of this cultural biography—religious history. His three-part method is formulated around specific questions attached to each category that he describes as a particularly "Emersonian approach."¹¹

When using this method, the cultural biographer would ask, "How does my subject *reflect* his or her era?" The biographer explores the rich cultural and social milieu that shaped a

¹¹ David S. Reynolds. "Cultural Biography: Reflections, Transcendence, and Impact," *Biography and Source Studies*, 7 (2003), 83-89 (pp. 85-96).

subject as a serious matter of inquiry rather than a peripheral sub-narrative. Reynolds sees Emerson's series of biographical essays as a model in *Representative Men*. He wrote about how each of his subject's possessed close proximities to the times in which they lived, and that their environment can remain reflective in the thoughts and actions that motivated them. A person does not develop in a vacuum. Rather various complex situations, often political and social, seep into a person's psyche that are reflected in the life of a particular individual. As Reynolds explains, "The cultural biographer explores the historical 'air' surrounding the subject and describes the process by which the air seeped through the pores of his or her skin."¹² In *reflection*, it is essential to understand how a particular individual was affected by ideas, events, and movements in the vast milieu of his or her surroundings.¹³

If a particular individual reflects his or her milieu, however, the question of why a particular person deserves a biography is unavoidable. Reynolds asserts that the second interest of cultural biography is to demonstrate a person's uniqueness to merit a biography. Every remarkable person stands out for a reason: he or she has powerfully demonstrated uniqueness. The next question to ask is how a particular life *transcends* its era by exploring what the subject did differently or out of the ordinary.¹⁴

The last interest of cultural biography assesses the *impact* that a particular person had on his or her era. Reynolds adheres to Emerson's notion that self-reliant individualism can have a powerful force in shaping society.¹⁵ Thus Reynolds asserts in cultural biography that an individual person can have an impact on his or her society despite impersonal social influences at work shaping the particular time in which the individual lived. Reynolds' method for writing

¹² Ibid., 86.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹⁵ Ibid., 94

cultural biography through *reflection, transcendence, and impact* is closely followed in this particular biography of Hecker.

Chapter one, “Beginnings: Religion, Work, and Reform,” reconstructs the early nineteenth-century world of evangelical forms of Christianity, millennialism, and perfectionist ideas that shaped Hecker’s earliest experiences of religion in the period commonly referred to as the “Second Great Awakening.” This awakening spurred religious revival through the conversion of the heart in gaining personal salvation and the millennial hope of building a better Christian society. This chapter, foundational in nature, illuminates the principles of evangelical Christianity, such as John Wesley’s doctrine of “Christian Perfection,” as the beginning of Hecker’s religious identity in the Methodist tradition of his mother. This experience is explored through his mother’s piety, instruction, moral discipline, and the role of religion in public education that Hecker acquired in his youth.

In a world where society and revival worked side by side, Hecker also experienced failures of Christian principles in their moral application. These failures greatly challenged his faith in evangelical Christianity at the social level due to the growing lack of human dignity among workers by their employers. This chapter sketches working-class conditions in New York City, the extent to which the Hecker family struggled financially putting young Isaac to work, and why he became increasingly attracted to reform politics as opposed to simple religious piety. The challenge evangelical Christianity posed for Hecker is juxtaposed in the relationship between Christian selflessness and materialistic capitalism, which led him into reform politics as an alternative system for dealing with social problems. As a result of his experience in reform politics, he began to search after deeper meaning in his life beyond economic survival that

coincided with his friendship with Orestes Brownson, who led him into the heart of New England Transcendentalism at Brook Farm.

Chapters two, three, and four provide the essence of the cultural biography. Chapter two, “Reflection,” traces Hecker’s movement into the Transcendentalist community at Brook Farm and, briefly, at Fruitlands. The chapter explores to what extent his decision to embrace Transcendentalism reflected the movement’s revolt against materialism and other forms of corruption after the economic downward spiral of the late 1830s. It begins by exploring how he experienced an overwhelming sense of belonging in a community of the “like minded” that sought to “cultivate” the soul and perfect society as a new intellectual and social movement in the ferment that gave rise to reform.

Through Transcendentalism, Hecker discovered a type of cultural revival among its utopian participants through the brotherhood of humanity while engaging in self-discipline, purification, and contemplation. This was the ‘air’ of Transcendentalism Hecker breathed as it seeped through the pores of his skin in the development of his religious identity. Hecker reflected the aspirations of Transcendentalism in his life even after he abandoned the movement. Although Hecker felt privileged to belong to this “special class” of Americans, he felt greater disappointment than before as a result of the communal breakdowns at Brook Farm and later Fruitlands. For Hecker, Transcendentalism laid the foundation for a fuller spiritual and religious life that he sought after in the market of free religion.

Chapter three, “Transcendence,” begins with Hecker’s departure from Transcendentalism and his turn toward the “church question,” which caused national tension as evident in the landmark Methodist split over slavery in 1844. This chapter explores how Hecker used his experience and knowledge of Transcendentalism to approach the church question with an

emphasis on the organic nature of the “church.” He continued to voice in his diary and correspondence the painful experience of internal transformation as he struggled with his situation as a restless seeker who crossed intellectual, political, and religious boundaries before he found peace in transcending such movements through his conversion to Catholicism.

In many ways, he achieved uniqueness through his Catholic conversion in August 1844 during the surge of anti-Catholic movements raging from literary exposes to propaganda, riots, and the political activism of the Know-Nothing party. Hecker’s embattled religious identity is also evident in his hesitancy to join the Catholic Church as a result of American anti-Catholic nationalism. He was not, however, the only Catholic convert from Transcendentalism such as Orestes Brownson. In comparison, Hecker extended his experiences in the Transcendentalist movement and their goals as an account for his own conversion to Catholicism as a unique outcome in transcending various intellectual, political, and religious movements he had participated in. This began his attempt at reconciling Roman Catholicism and American culture as a unique project that separated him from the rest of society.

The final chapter, “Impact,” assess Hecker’s impact on American society and the Catholic Church in the immediate sense. This chapter measures two things: what he did differently from the “state” of Roman Catholicism in America and how his New England experience transformed his life and work as a charismatic missionary preacher between 1850 and 1858. Taken together, this led what Franchot describes as an “embattled transformation of religious identity.” The aspect of his religious identity that was “embattled” relates to his experiences and ideas in a hybrid sense that produced actions that led him to the priesthood, his work as an evangelist, the literary style of his two works *Questions of the Soul* (1856) and *Aspirations of Nature* (1857), and his organization of the first congregation of Catholic priests in

the United States: *The Paulists* (1858). His work as a Catholic evangelist and his style of Catholic literary works were significant contributions to American Catholicism in his own time, but the fact that Hecker is remembered over time through the Paulists suggests the clearest sign of Hecker's overall impact and his enduring legacy.

In the epilogue, I hope to demonstrate that Hecker is an important religious figure in American cultural history. This claim is demonstrated by his hybrid religious identity, which produced actions that led to a unique and original version of American Catholicism after his own journey through the social and cultural milieu that gave rise to Transcendentalism and other reform movements. Hecker's "hybridity" had significant consequences for the Catholic Church in his attempt at forming "American Catholicism" and his later association with "Americanism." This legacy can only be understood by Hecker's unique relationship with Transcendentalism and Roman Catholicism in his own lifetime. Only then can we understand what it meant for the early Paulists to be called the "Protestant Catholics" after their founder's death.

Chapter I

Beginnings: Religion, Work, and Reform

“Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect”—Matthew 5:8

“Ye cannot serve God and mammon”—Matthew 6:24

Reconstructing the early life of Isaac Hecker is difficult, but important for understanding Hecker’s early influences. He was born of German immigrants in 1819 and grew up in a vast and bustling city of New York. In his youth, he embraced the evangelical impulse of the Second Great Awakening that swept across society. He encountered and participated in various political platforms and reform movements. He experienced the failure of Christian morality in society while he and his brothers struggled to keep the family bakery business running. Many of these experiences led Hecker to deeper philosophical and religious questions that influenced his sense of the American potential. As Hecker’s most recent biographer explains “It is impossible to understand the life of any American of the mid-nineteenth century, and particularly the life of a born evangelist like Isaac Hecker, without understanding what it meant to be an American.”¹⁶ Understanding what it meant to be an “American” for Hecker begins with categories of religion that marked his early life in New York City through his family history, evangelical awakenings, and working-class politics and reform.

In 1822, a fierce yellow fever epidemic swept across New York City and claimed thousands of lives. During the epidemic, Isaac Hecker had been taken down with smallpox at the age of three. The illness quickly spread and his mother reluctantly told him about the inevitable. He replied: “No, mother, I shall not die now; God has a work for me to do in the world, and I shall live to do it.” At such a young age and throughout his later years, the words Hecker uttered

¹⁶ O’Brien., 8.

to his mother resonated with his lifelong occupation of fulfilling God's providential will. As he later recalled, "From my childhood God influenced me by an interior touch of His Holy Spirit."¹⁷ This interior touch that Hecker experienced spread across the nation as countless souls sought the will of God in their own lives.

Men such as Lyman Beecher, Lorenzo Dow, Timothy Dwight, and Charles Grandson Finney dedicated themselves to the religious fervor known as the "Second Great Awakening," which swept across the nation during Hecker's youth. If he strengthened that sense of "interior touch," then his early experiences of home, school, and work illuminates the very world in which society and religious awakening worked together. Yet little is known about his youth apart from the economic, political, social, and religious context that imbued his early sense of life's meaning. What can be known about Hecker's youth is reflected on in fragmented dialogues he had in his old age with his friend, disciple, and fellow priest, Walter Elliot.¹⁸

The early life of Hecker and his family is obscure. "He provided little information about his life before the age of twenty," writes O'Brien, "save to exaggerate his youthful involvement in reform politics."¹⁹ A person could compare Hecker's stories about himself to those of an orphan for he never mentioned his father and only occasionally his mother. The lack of parental acknowledgment suggests that he confirmed "that he was like other Americans, as he saw them, free from the prejudices and fixed ideas from the past...self-directed, and determined to only respond to those ideas that met the yearning of his heart and the demands of his reason."²⁰

Hecker emulated self-determination and the image of the "self-made" man. Despite such an

¹⁷ Walter Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker* (New York: Columbus Press, 1891), 14.

¹⁸ I wish to note that Walter Elliot served as Hecker's first biographer while he was still alive. Elliot joined the Paulists after he had heard Hecker lecture in Detroit, Michigan in 1867. He developed a close relationship with Hecker in his later years and used his conversations as well as other written sources to write his biography. Published in 1892, *The Life of Hecker* is an important source of information on Hecker's life for scholars.

¹⁹ O'Brien, 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

intended appearance, however, other written evidence suggests that his family had a strong influence on his early life.

Hecker's family came to New York City at the end of the eighteenth-century. His father, John Hecker, was born in 1782 in Schwalbak, seventy miles southwest of Bonn. His ancestors were Dutch Lutherans who lived in Germany for two hundred years. John left the Old World and immigrated to the United States in 1800 and found employment as a metal worker in a New York foundry and machine shop where he worked on Robert Fulton's steamship, the *Claremont*. The employment opportunity allowed him to meet his future wife, Susan Caroline, while traveling on the ship's maiden voyage. They married on July 21, 1811, and the wedding took place in the Old Dutch Church of Garden Street in New York City.²¹

After their marriage, John and Susan Hecker moved to Hester Street in New York City. John started a brass foundry. They had their first child, John, in 1812. Their second son, Henry, died in infancy. Elizabeth was born in 1816 and George in 1818. Their last child, Isaac, was born on December 18, 1819. Three years later, he barely survived the smallpox, which would leave a portion of his face pockmarked. Despite a large family, John provided for them. The foundry business seems to have prospered in its early days and the Hecker residence was in a desirable location. All seemed well for a while until a mysterious turn of events – still unknown to this day – reversed the early days of happiness and prosperity.²²

The rapid turn of events in the family business caused a significant convergence in Isaac's view of his father and mother and their role in his life when the foundry shop closed in 1824. The family soon moved five blocks away to Eldridge Street. As O'Brien notes, "In 1828 the shop reopened uptown at 269 Broome Street; two years later it disappeared from the city

²¹ John Farina, *An American Experience of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 10.

²² O'Brien, 14.

directory, never to reappear. The father all but disappeared from the family's life."²³ In a letter to his family dated September 18, 1845, Isaac urged his father to abandon his "wicked passion."²⁴ Again, he wrote to his father, "I know of nothing that gives me more pain than when I think of the habit that has governed you for so many years past. Surly if you do not conquer it you cannot expect to see heaven... You can overcome it by prayer."²⁵ The "passion" and "habit" that John suffered perhaps implies the abuse of alcohol for two reasons: Isaac's lifelong commitment to temperance suggests he had learned to avoid his father's "wicked" example, and the overall reality of alcohol abuse in the early nineteenth century.

Isaac's father and mother represented two different social contrasts of their son's youth. The mother stood as a dominant figure in the family's household and a source of religious inspiration for young Isaac. The father, however, remained aloof from the family. The force and power of awakenings in religion can hardly be separated from the overall narrative of the nineteenth-century as the development of denominations, sects, reform movements, volunteer and tract societies put religion into the daily lives of ordinary individuals. Evangelical Christianity underwent dramatic makeovers in religious experimentation. Sydney Ahlstrom has argued that Evangelical Protestantism was "Reformed in its foundations, Puritan in its outlook, fervently experiential in its faith, and tending, despite strong countervailing pressures, toward Arminianism, perfectionism, and activism."²⁶ Other scholars such as Nathan O. Hatch have argued that the transitional period between 1780 and 1830 left as indelible an imprint upon the structures of American Christianity as it did upon those of American political life.²⁷ For Hatch, democracy played an integral part in the formation of Christianity as every structure in American

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hecker to family, September 18, 1845. Quoted in O'Brien, 14.

²⁵ Hecker to Father, 1847. Quoted in O'Brien, 16.

²⁶ Sydney Ahlstrom. *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 470

²⁷ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 6.

society underwent a democratic makeover.²⁸ In the development of evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening, revival proved to be a powerful force in shaping the national landscape at every level. The religious impulse of the nation also swept over Caroline. As a Methodist, Caroline became a vital source of religious upbringing for her children.

John did not heed the evangelical calling of his wife. On the opposite side of religious awakening, people turned to vice and the abuse of alcohol surged to the alarm of many. The drinking patterns that would emerge between 1790 and 1840 demonstrate a dramatic increase in alcohol use greater “than any that occurred at any other time in American history.”²⁹ The use of alcohol spanned across a wide range of activities such as entertainment, work, and congenial friendship meetings. The availability of whiskey and hard cider ensured that the annual per capita consumption of alcohol “exceeded five gallons.”³⁰ As a result, violence frequently erupted as a serious concern of public health. Thus reform movements sought to combat alcohol use through temperance crusades and religious revival.

The religious revival that flourished in the second quarter of the nineteenth century was strongly reflected in Rochester, New York. At once a small town built beside the Erie Canal, Rochester evolved into a prosperous yet morally decadent city. For the citizens of Rochester, their problems resulted from the abuse of alcohol to the extent of violence and murder.³¹ Those who harkened reform and subsequently summoned revival sought not to tame but to “eliminate sin from society and pave the way for Second Coming.”³² In the millennial discourse of the nineteenth century, revival sought to trigger Christ’s Second Coming by perfecting every level of

²⁸ Ibid., 7

²⁹ W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), xi.

³⁰ Ibid., 8.

³¹ Paul E. Johnson. *A Shopkeepers Millennium Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 60.

³² Ibid., 3.

the individual and hence society. If the American nation were to usher in the millennium it would have to be found worthy. Thus the doctrine of “Christian perfection” propelled the believer toward God and vice versa. The development of this doctrine and its social urgency formed Hecker’s early sense of the American potential through his mother who instructed him in the teachings of John Wesley.

As followers of Wesley, the Hecker family incorporated the doctrine of Christian perfection in their daily lives. A brief account of this doctrine demonstrates the ideal that Methodists followed. According to Wesley, “the general prejudice against Christian perfection may chiefly arise from the misapprehension of it... [We] declare there is no such perfection in this life.” He then explains what is meant by “perfect” as one “in whom ‘is the mind which was in Christ;’ and who so ‘walketh as Christ also walked;’ a man...that is ‘cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit.’”³³ Wesley is keen on the misapprehension of “Christian perfection.” His explanation describes a process rather than an independent state of existence outside of a religious context. The end goal is sanctification through Christ, which allows a person to achieve “perfect love” of God and neighbor as echoed in the scriptural demand, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.”³⁴

The challenge of the Methodist ideal, however, is putting Christian perfection into practice. For this reason Methodists placed a strong emphasis on community, for the “followers of Wesley took seriously the idea of being their brother’s keeper. Methodists viewed themselves as a people specially called by God to lead America to a higher, more holy Christianity.”³⁵

Caroline and her children attended the vibrant Forsyth Street Church in New York City, which

³³ Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 383.

³⁴ Matt. 5:8.

³⁵ Farina., 12.

embraced Wesley's teachings.³⁶ Isaac developed a familiarity with Methodist liturgy, attended family bible studies, and listened to enthusiastic "in home" preachers. Moreover, Caroline taught her children the moral discipline necessary to pursue Christian perfection: "The influence of his mother was of the most powerful kind."³⁷ Isaac recalled when the temptation to smoke once confronted him, "Mother forbade it and that was enough for George and me."³⁸ Isaac and his siblings knew the rewarding affection and rebuking signs of their mother. They sought her favor at all times.

Isaac's mother held a special place in his heart. A contemporary of Isaac once said, "I never knew a son who was like his mother."³⁹ Isaac's early sense of God and community found nourishment in his mother's faith and piety. He expressed gratitude for his upbringing, which he grew very conscious of in his adulthood: "Mother, I cannot express the depth of gratitude I feel towards you for the tender care and loving discipline with which you have brought us up to manhood, without which, Oh! What I may not have been."⁴⁰ The relationship between mother and son resonated with Isaac's long understanding of God, community, and self.

³⁶ Ibid., 18.

³⁷ Elliot., 11.

³⁸ Vincent Holden, *The Early Years of Isaac Thomas Hecker, 1819-1844* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1939), 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ *Hecker Papers*, Letters to his family, IIa, May 16, 1843. Quoted in Holden, 16.



Fig 1.

Susan Caroline Hecker, Mother of Isaac Hecker. Picture taken at an unknown date. Courtesy of Paulist Archives, Washington D.C.

Despite Hecker's loving relationship to his mother and to her faith a later recollection portrays a different portrait: "Born of Protestant parents and in the midst of a Protestant community, no positive religious instructions were imparted to me in my youth, and my religious belief, therefore, was left for me to decide."⁴¹ Yet on another occasion Elliot recalled that "speaking of his past life [Isaac] *never once said he had been a sinner* in a sense to convey the idea of mortal sin."⁴² Given the appreciation he had for his mother's Methodist faith in his upbringing, it is hard to understand why he denied any positive religion if he avoided mortal sin.⁴³ This seems to suggest an early expression of embattled religious identity within the

⁴¹ Document submitted by Father Hecker to his directors and others , Rome, 1858. Quoted in O'Brien, 17.

⁴² Elliot., 10.

⁴³ O'Brien., 15.

understanding of his past. Nonetheless, the Hecker family continued to shape Isaac's early experiences of religion through school and work.

Isaac attended Public School No. 7 while his brother, John, worked to support the family. The school was opened in September of 1826 by the New York Public School Society "to establish a single school for the benefit of poor children not provided for by the schools maintained by various churches."⁴⁴ Isaac's admission suggests that his family had been struggling financially, for the students made a portion of those "who are the proper objects of a gratuitous education."⁴⁵ Isaac's education resembled the Lancastrian system in which "scholars themselves aided the teacher in the education of other pupils."⁴⁶ Pupils who had mastered various subjects could teach other less learned pupils to reduce cost to the Society, for only the teacher's salary had to be paid.⁴⁷

Reading, writing, and arithmetic formed the basis of the school curriculum. A fourth subject, religion, also had its place in the curriculum: "From the very beginning the bible was read daily in the school but no specific religious instruction was given during class hours or as part of the school schedule."⁴⁸ In the atmosphere of public education, students read from the King James Version of the bible as a standard text regardless of any religious affiliation. Thus at a very young age Isaac read and familiarized himself with the scriptures in a Protestant sense. The school also required students "to attend some form of public worship regularly."⁴⁹ The school made this an obligation and parents had to ensure that their children knew the basic principles of their family's faith.

⁴⁴ A. Emerson Palmer, *The New York Public School: Being a History of Free Education in New York*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁶ Holden., 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

For Isaac and many of his classmates, enrollment did not proceed beyond primary education due to financial demands. At the same time, the dream of pursuing further education never left him. He remembered that his mother once said when lying on the floor, “in a kind of unconscious speech”: “John, let Isaac go to college and study.” Her words, said Isaac, “cut through me like liquid fire, but John rejected the idea.”⁵⁰

With the decline of Isaac’s father’s foundry business, his sons had no choice but to seek employment. Isaac’s oldest brother, John, found employment with their uncle, Christopher Schwab, who had his own bakery in 108 Hester Street. George and Isaac eventually joined their older brother. But at the tender age of thirteen, Isaac found his first job with the Methodist periodical, *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald* in 1832. He had the responsibility of preparing and sorting weekly newsletters in reaching their delivery to their proper addresses. The journal had “a weekly circulation of fifteen thousand copies, the largest it was claimed, then [sic] reached by any newspaper in the world.”⁵¹ The journal reached countless souls in the Middle Atlantic States through the efforts of itinerant preachers. Isaac’s first employment opportunity is owed in part to the communication revolution of the nineteenth century in which religious literature moved swiftly across the nation.⁵²

In 1828, the *Christian Advocate and Journal* merged with *Zion’s Herald*, a Methodist publication for New England. The merger helped reduce the expense of publishing two journals.⁵³ After the merger during the winter of 1832, Isaac worked in the offices of this paper at 14 Crosby Street. He worked his first job at the journal for a little over a year. In 1833, the offices of the journal moved to more spacious quarters in 200 Mulberry Street. He then worked

⁵⁰ O’Brien., 15.

⁵¹ Holden., 23.

⁵² Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), 117.

⁵³ *Christian Advocate and Journal*, August 29, 1828.

briefly in a brass foundry in Thames Street. Again, he did not remain there long, but soon entered the baking business with his older brothers.

From childhood, the Hecker brothers played important roles in each other's lives. As an older biographer portrays it, "One entered enthusiastically into the plans and hopes of the other. Arm in arm, they seemed to go through life, supporting and encouraging each other."⁵⁴ After Isaac's first two jobs at sixteen, he gained the experience and maturity necessary to join his brothers as a baker. John Hecker's entry into the baking business brought him nominal success. In 1834, he opened his own business and rented a place in 56 Rutgers Street. With his younger brothers they worked together on this project and realized "that the bakery was their hope for the future, so Isaac was taken from the foundry and put to work with them in the shop."⁵⁵

Isaac learned the basic skills of his new trade. He began by pushing a cart loaded with bread to various homes of customers and tended the ovens at the bakery. When time permitted he learned more and more about the trade from his brothers and eventually became an equal partner. John named their new bakery, "Hecker Brothers." Within time, John skillfully built a stable business with a growing reputation of quality. Yet Isaac still felt the strain of labor. A later recollection of this experience would recall, "How I used to work carrying the bread around in my baker's cart! How often I got stuck in the gutters and in the snow! Sometimes some good soul, seeing me unable to get along, would give me a lift."⁵⁶ Elliot recalls an earlier episode when walking with Isaac of a poor woman they saw pushing a heavy basket of bread. Hecker recalled, "I have had the blood spurt out of my arm carrying bread when I was a baker."⁵⁷

Through the demands of the baking business, Isaac experienced the problem of working-class

⁵⁴ Holden., 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁶ Elliot., 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.

conditions that played a large part in his participation in reform politics. This began a radical change for Hecker as he lost a sense of his religious identity that he inherited from his mother.

Isaac's transition from school to work changed his religious beliefs to doubt. In Elliot's words, "There came a period, however, beginning in all likelihood about his fourteenth, and lasting until his twentieth year or thereabouts, in which he certainly lost hold on all distinctively Christian doctrines."⁵⁸ The change that had taken hold occurred during a crucial time when he reached the verge of his adulthood. His childhood experiences of school and home quickly met the reality of harsh working conditions. This transition took its toll. It is during this period that he questioned the meaning of his life beyond economic survival. Often, when lying on the shavings before the oven in the bakery, he would start up, roused by some great thought, and run out upon the wharves of the East River to cast his gaze upon the water and muse over the questions of his soul: "What does God desire from me? How shall I attain unto Him? What is it He has sent me into the world to do?"⁵⁹ With these questions he sought the answers he hoped time would solve. These questions led him to reform politics aimed at the plight of the working-class.

America's economic and material prosperity in New York and in other cities produced a large, mainly immigrant, poor class. New York City reached an unprecedented growth of industry during Isaac's young adult years. In 1835 the city suffered from a fire that destroyed many buildings after a two-day inferno. Moreover, overcrowded blocks became breeding grounds of cholera and other epidemics that plagued the city. This created serious social and economic problems on the eve of the panic of 1837. The Hecker brothers sought to improve the conditions of poor workers and the unemployed while wealthy classes of industrialists continued to profit. Isaac abhorred this system and made "common cause with those loudly crying for

⁵⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

reform.”⁶⁰ According to Elliot, “he believed he saw ways and means by which the working class might be morally and socially elevated. He wanted for his class what he wanted for himself.”⁶¹

Reform politics attracted young men like Isaac as the solution to working-class injustice.

The Hecker brothers participated in reform politics through the Loco-Focos. This particular party adhered to Andrew Jackson’s opposition to “monster monopoly,” especially among banks. They issued a declaration of principles calling for “sound money, opposition to monopolies, free public education, and ‘equal rights.’”⁶² The party was composed of what its first historian described as “free trade, anti-monopoly, and hard-money men.”⁶³ A frequent problem endured by workers was the circulation of bad money, which disallowed them from receiving their just recompense. The Hecker brothers denounced the circulation of bad money by printing political slogans on the notes: “Of all the contrivances to impoverish the laboring classes of mankind, paper money is the most effective. It fertilizes the rich man’s field with the poor man’s sweat.”⁶⁴ They had clearly joined the Loco-Focos in their fight against banks and the struggle to gain equal rights for workers.

John Hecker had been politically active well before the 1837 panic. He had begun a career in politics alongside his baking business, and used his bread to support his political convictions when he and his brothers provided free bread for the unemployed. John soon became a minor leader in the Loco-Foco movement.⁶⁵ Although under the legal age of twenty-one to vote in New York, Isaac found other ways to support the political party of his hopes. As he later recalled of his experiences in the 1837 election, “I was too young to vote, but I remember my

⁶⁰ Holden., 28.

⁶¹ Elliot., 25.

⁶² Quoted in O’Brien., 16.

⁶³ F. Byrdsall. *The History of the Loco-Foco or Equal Rights Party* (New York: Clement and Packard, 1842; reprint ed. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), 15.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Elliot, 17.

⁶⁵ Farina., 24.

brother George and I posting political hand bills at three o'clock in the morning... We also worked hard on Election Day, keeping up and supplying the ticket booths, especially in our own ward, the old Seventh."⁶⁶

The fall election of 1837 proved vital for the Hecker brothers as their party attempted to gain control of the Democratic Party. The brothers continued to organize meetings, arranged for speakers, and posted handbills.⁶⁷ Despite their efforts, however, the Loco-Focos failed to win the election and were thus reincorporated into the larger Democratic Party at the expense of their platform. The experience of joining reformed politics played an important role in Isaac's life. Elliot portrays this experience well in his description of Isaac "dogmatizing the principles of social democracy posing as a spontaneous political reformer before a crowded street full of men twice and thrice his years, but bounded together with him by the sympathies common to the wage-earning classes."⁶⁸

After the 1837 political defeat of the Loco-Focos, Hecker moved into the period of social concern and discovered that the "evils of society were not so much political as social, and not much was to be hoped for from political action," and that "the key to social reform was [the] practical application of the moral principles of Christianity to the social relations between men."⁶⁹ This is a crucial turning-point for Hecker. He abandoned hope in political reform while focusing on Christian morality and its fragile relationship with society. If the problem of alcohol had been a serious social concern on the eve of Finney's evangelical revival in Rochester, the problem of liberal-capitalism and Christian morality proved equally troublesome in the urban center of New York City.

⁶⁶ "Dr. Brownson and the Workingman's Party Fifty Years Ago," *The Catholic World* 45 (April 1887): 3.

⁶⁷ O'Brien., 17.

⁶⁸ Elliot., 21.

⁶⁹ "Dr. Brownson and Bishop Fitzpatrick," *The Catholic World* 45 (May 1887): 3.

The problem of market capitalism and Christian morality can be reduced to a central contradiction. In the words of one scholar on the subject, “Americans are and always have been some of the most voluntarily religious people in the world as well as some of the most grossly materialistic.”⁷⁰ In other words, “Americans simultaneously and paradoxically subscribe to both the Christian ethic of humility and selflessness, and the American liberal-capitalist ethic of competition, success, and self-promotion.”⁷¹ While one told them, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon,”⁷² the other “unabashedly encouraged them to pursue lives of material happiness.”⁷³ For Hecker and others, the reconciliation of the two could not happen unless the proper application of Christian morals could transform the hearts of every individual.

After reflecting on inner reform, Hecker asked himself a religious question: “How could man love his neighbor as himself and then accumulate wealth by their toil... Why should not those who profess Christianity imitate Christ in devoting themselves entirely to the spreading of the truth, the relief of the poor, and the elevation of the lower classes?”⁷⁴ Such questions represented his awareness of Christian morality and its conflict with capitalism. Most importantly, however, Hecker developed a deep sense of compassion for the poor who forced him to self-interrogate his own social status in light of the economic hardship and suffering that he encountered in the city. Since reform could only occur at the social level, he wanted to begin with himself. He adopted a simpler lifestyle such as abstinence from “all luxuries, from all flesh meats, and from all drinks but water.”⁷⁵ The turn toward discipline in abstaining from the daily necessities of life began his practices of self-purification from material dependency.

⁷⁰ Stewart Davenport, *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon: Northern Christians and Market Capitalism, 1815-1860*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Matt. 6:24.

⁷³ Davenport., 1.

⁷⁴ Hecker, “Report to Superiors,” 1858. Quoted in O’Brien, 17.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Hecker's turn toward himself in rebuking the social evils of his society resonated with another outspoken reformer: Orestes Brownson. Perhaps no other person spoke more boldly on reform than Brownson. Born in Springfield, Vermont in 1803, Brownson became an orphan at an early age and his grandparents raised him. According to Patrick W. Carey's most recent biography, Brownson's life summarizes a "restless search for a balance between freedom and communion in his relations with God, nature, and community."⁷⁶ Hecker met Brownson for the first time when he heard him speak at a Loco-Foco rally in March of 1841.⁷⁷ The two men instantly became friends while the latter mentored the former. As a Unitarian, Brownson served in churches in New Hampshire before taking the pulpit in Boston at the invitation of William Ellery Channing and George Ripley. In Boston he had the special responsibility of ministering in a new church organized to evangelize the working class. Brownson's passion for reform and intellectual vigor made a strong impression on Hecker.

In 1840 Brownson published a landmark yet controversial essay, "The Laboring Classes." The essay denounced the evils of industrial society and proposed its reform by use of radical means such as the abolition of inherited wealth. He campaigned vigorously for Democrat Martin Van Buren, who lost his election to William Henry Harrison. After the presidential defeat, Brownson looked beyond reform politics to "reexamine his political convictions and to focus more exclusively on religious questions while remaining in active contact with reformers like the Hecker's."⁷⁸ His hope now rested in the "need for a new, more democratic, Christian religion appropriate to the age."⁷⁹ If people could not solve their own problems Brownson felt

⁷⁶ Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), xii.

⁷⁷ O'Brien., 18.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

that they needed divine assistance. The Hecker brothers, moved by the sincerity of Brownson, continued to arrange for him to speak.

Arranging for Brownson to speak allowed Hecker to spend time with him. Moved by the sincerity of Hecker's convictions, character, and self-discipline, Brownson posed a large question to him: how to be "certain of the objective reality of the operations of my soul."⁸⁰ To answer this question Brownson recommended German philosophy such as Kant and Hegel to make sense out of his thoughts. The two continued to correspond through letters, but what is important is the impression of hope Brownson left on young Hecker. During their correspondence Hecker experienced a radical change in his life, arising from the spiritual realm rather than the temporal.

During the late spring or early summer of 1842, as O'Brien explains, "something happened [to Hecker], something so profound that it shook the core of young Hecker's life and drove him to new and unexpected paths."⁸¹ While in a conscious state and seated on the side of his bed, he experienced a mystical vision of a "beautiful angelic pure being, and myself standing alongside of her feeling a most heavenly pure joy...it is as if our bodies were luminous."⁸² The meaning of this experience is difficult to ascertain because of the language of mysticism. Even Hecker understood this problem when he wrote, "I have not yet attained the power to speak it...It rests in me yet undeveloped."⁸³ But as one scholar on the psychology of religious experiences helps elucidate, "Indeed, the nature of this vision and its powerful and long-lasting affect on him could put it in the category of the initial phase of the mystical life, that of the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² *Diary*, May 17, 1843.

⁸³ Ibid.

‘Awakening of the Self to Consciousness of Divine Reality.’”⁸⁴ Already Hecker had been seeking “the objective reality of the operations of his soul” as Brownson posed it, now he was forced to think about the meaning behind a mystical vision.

Hecker relied heavily on Brownson for advice and direction. Time and space prevented the immediate help desired, so Brownson suggested that he join the “like-minded” and enter a community recently established by his friend, George Ripley. There Hecker embarked on a religious and intellectual journey that led him to an awaking of American “self-culture,” which developed in him a strong affirmation of a “special class” of Americans that contrasted from his experiences of hard work and working-class politics. His decision to enter the community resulted from a series of political let downs and inner quarrels about his sense of his life’s work beyond economic survival. Brownson thought the newly established community could cultivate his soul with study, labor, and further self-discipline. Hecker had come to a bridge in his life. Once he crossed it, he left behind a past of simple religious piety and a humble working-class origin for the hope of a new movement that might satisfy his growing perplexities of self-identity.

⁸⁴ Robert W. Baer. “A Jungian Analysis of Isaac Thomas Hecker,” in *Hecker Studies: Essays on the Thought of Isaac Hecker*, ed. John Farina (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 138-139.

Chapter II

Reflection: The Young Transcendentalist

“For those who live according to the flesh are concerned with those things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit with the things of the spirit.”—Romans 8:5

Moving from New York to New England, Isaac Hecker entered the community at Brook Farm in January of 1843, at age twenty-three. His transition into the new movement called the Transcendentalists or, as he called it, “The Apostles of the Newness,” began a new life symbolized by his use of a diary.⁸⁵ Hecker’s diary suggests he had reached an important stage of his life. He wanted to record his experiences at Brook Farm among an “unusual mixture of school, church and reform movement.”⁸⁶ In this “unusual mixture,” Hecker’s sense of religious identity had clearly shifted from the simple piety of his mother’s faith to a spiritual infatuation with New England Transcendentalism. His diary chronicled the beginning of a life-long articulation of Transcendentalist categories such as “Nature and Spirit” which defined the language of his sense of religious identity during his sojourn.

Hecker voiced the transformation of religious identity along class lines. As the child of working-class immigrants, Hecker had no relation to the New England heritage of the Transcendentalists. He did not possess an education beyond the sixth grade in comparison to the Harvard-educated leaders of the movement. His decision to join the Transcendentalists and to adopt their categories, personalities, and ideas as his own language for expressing his sense of religious identity proved remarkable for someone who stood outside the movement in class,

⁸⁵ O’Brien., 23.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 25.

education, and religious origin. If Hecker had come to join the “like minded,” it is important to understand why he found Transcendentalism appealing for defining his growing sense of religious identity.

American Transcendentalism is complex and fluid. As the historian Richard Francis notes, “Its proponents wrote essays on topics ranging from literary circles to civil disobedience...produced political articles, sermons, kept journals, wrote poems, edited magazines and newspapers...joined churches, founded churches, left churches.”⁸⁷ Many of Transcendentalism’s earliest members were “the descendents of the baptized Puritans whose religious fervor had been for generations at white heat.”⁸⁸ The “white heat” describes the decline of Puritanism a generation before Hecker’s own.

Unitarianism rejected Puritan notions of human depravity, predestination, and the arbitrary gift of God’s grace. The man who put Unitarianism on the path of independence, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), set Christianity on a new course out of the depths of stern dogma, church authority, and the depravity of human freedom. This led to a radical reexamination of man’s nature that reached new possibilities. A set of Channing’s writings sets the tone of Unitarianism as the roots of American Transcendentalism.

Channing stressed the universal capacity of moral improvement capable in man through the concept of “self-culture.” His famous sermon in 1819, “Unitarian Christianity,” helped name the new movement. For Channing, Christianity should have “but one purpose, the perfection of human nature, the elevation of men into nobler beings.”⁸⁹ The tone of Channing’s sermon represented a growing movement within New England Congregationalism. Indeed the very word

⁸⁷ Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Elliot., 52-53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

“Unitarian” meant the opposite of “orthodoxy.” Moreover, Channing proclaimed Unitarianism the only form of Christianity adaptive to the progressive improvement of mankind.⁹⁰ Belief in creeds and dogma were all swept away with “reason in sympathy of the scientific spirit.”⁹¹ Thus the Unitarians peeled away the sacred mysteries of God leaving man to “achieve salvation through a rigorous and continuous effort of self-culture.”⁹² The notion of self-culture remained the center of Unitarianism and its departure from “traditional” Christianity.

American Transcendentalism extended Channing’s ideas. Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, and Amos Bronson Alcott preferred the romantic notion of God within nature. Despite evident theological differences, Unitarians and Transcendentalists agreed on the urgency of social reform. The idea of social reform was practiced in many different ways among the Transcendentalists from antislavery, education reform, women’s reform, self-reliance, communal experimentation, and so on. In the ferment of reform during the 1830s, Hecker reflected the Transcendentalist revolt against materialism.

The tide of material prosperity in America reached an unprecedented height before the panic of 1837. The expansion of territories, the spread of railroad lines, overseas commerce, the expansion of the cotton kingdom on the backs of slaves in the South, and the rise of industrialism in the factories of the North contributed to the wealth of a seemingly happy nation. Yet not everyone agreed with the price of material prosperity. Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison loudly opposed slavery in the South. Social reformers such as Orestes Bronson aggressively criticized industrialism in the North.

Unlike many of the advocates of reform, however, Hecker had a direct experience with working-class conditions in the prospect of his family’s baking business. He also possessed a

⁹⁰ Barber L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 6.

deep sense of compassion for those who suffered as wage earners from disease, hunger, bad money, crowded living conditions, and so on. Thus reform politics attracted Hecker to defend the dignity of workers in the hope of improving conditions not only for himself, but for others. In this aspect he was a strong idealist who met political failure with disillusionment.

After the defeat of the Loco-Focos and President Martin Van Buren, Hecker began to question the problems of society in religious categories. Although he had been a nominal Methodist before his young-adult years, he understood quite well the problem of material prosperity in market capitalism and Christian morality. Like Hecker, the Transcendentalists held human nature in high esteem. Humanity was not meant for money grubbing, especially at the expense of exploited workers and slaves. The moral being of humanity demanded more than what the material world offered. The Transcendentalist's central problem was how a change of heart could happen.⁹³ This led Hecker to focus on his own moral being through self-discipline and purification, which increasingly rejected as much of the material world as possible. In many ways, Hecker reflected this particular moral endeavor of Transcendentalism.

A year before Hecker entered Brook Farm in January 1843, Emerson delivered a series of lectures at a Masonic Temple in Boston. In one of his lectures entitled, "The Transcendentalists," he attempted to give a concise definition to the movement. One of the vague generalizations Emerson gave represented a certain aspect of Transcendentalism that reflected Hecker's experience of material rejection and the strive for self-purification: "As thinkers mankind have ever divided in two sects, Materialists and Idealists...the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representation of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot

⁹³ George F. Whicher, ed., *The Transcendentalist Revolt against Materialism* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1949), viii.

tell.”⁹⁴ Emerson defined humanity in two categories of the material and the ideal. Hecker reflected the latter in his rejection of materialism.

Since his busy youth, Hecker had questioned the value of sheer work activity after his experience in working-class and reform politics. The answer to his questions increasingly led him to search beyond the material form of objects and into the purity of moral being. Hecker’s rejection of materialism represented the ancient flesh and spirit dichotomy of Christianity as echoed in the scriptures, “For those who live according to the flesh are concerned with those things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit with the things of the spirit.”⁹⁵ In the pursuit of material happiness in the nineteenth century wealth invited pride, greed, and other vices that deeply effected society calling loudly for reform. Hecker attempted to overcome this dichotomy of materialism and idealism, flesh and spirit, by rigorous self-discipline as the model for what he wanted for society.

Hecker searched for spiritual renewal out of the economic and working-class crisis of the 1830s. Yet the Transcendentalists as a whole remained divided on how to change people’s hearts. One group, which Emerson epitomized, championed introspection and self-reliance as keys to the spiritual life. Another group, centered on Ripley and Brownson, stressed the brotherhood of man.⁹⁶ In the latter aim of Transcendentalism, Ripley attempted an experiment in practical Christianity in a utopian society at Brook Farm as the vanguard for reforming society, which would “rid the world of hunger and class hatred and would put an end to the ennui of the intellectual and the brutalization of the manual laborer.”⁹⁷ It is in his community setting that Hecker embraced Transcendentalism. Not only did he want to join the like minded, but he

⁹⁴ Quoted in Whicher., 18.

⁹⁵ Romans 8:5.

⁹⁶ Philip F. Gura *American Transcendentalism: A History* (Hill and Wang: New York, 2007), xiv.

⁹⁷ Packer., 133.

wanted to embrace their culture as his own. His spiritual quest into the Transcendentalists also brought about a class transformation that coincided with his sense of religious identity.

In entering New England's liberal elite, his writings also reveal a painful religious awakening common among the Transcendentalists. As one scholar puts it, "literary tropes and philosophical explanations, they conceived, should lead them and their followers to the comprehension of religious truth and the activation of a religious response to life."⁹⁸ Hecker's diary is crammed with literary tropes in activating a religious response toward a different life in what Franchot describes a "fascination and recurrent problem of the boundary between his worldly and spiritual selves."⁹⁹ Thus a consistent theme throughout Hecker's diary is an expression of deep self-interrogation in coming to terms with his sense of religious identity in Transcendentalism in contrast to his working-class piety.

On January 10, 1843, Hecker juxtaposed the life of materialism and the desire for spiritual renewal in his transition to Brook Farm: "Riches I have given up... When I think of turning back to my old life my spirit leaves my body."¹⁰⁰ The next day he wrote, "True life is one continuous prayer one unceasing aspiration after the holy. I have no conception of a life insensible to that which is not above lofty. I would not take it on myself to say I have been 'born again,' but I know that I have passed from death to life and that things below have no hold on me further than they lead to things above."¹⁰¹ Hecker voiced his increasing frustration with the world he wanted to leave behind, dominated by the market, to find his spiritual self in a new world represented by Brook Farm. He sought to leave behind riches (materialism) and become an idealist (identical to Emerson's notion in "The Transcendentalist") and discover a higher sense of

⁹⁸ Catherine Albanese, *Corresponding Motion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), xii.

⁹⁹ Franchot., 321.

¹⁰⁰ *Diary*, January 10, 1843.

¹⁰¹ *Diary*, January 11, 1843

life through the “spirit.” “Could we but look beyond this world of sense and flesh,” wrote Hecker, “ what strange sights we would see.”¹⁰² Like Emerson, however, Hecker struggled to find the concise language of what he spiritually desired through Transcendentalism.

His attempt at a new “life,” as he called it, appeared strange to him: “What judgment is formed of me in this community I know not but evidently I am not of their spirits. The tone of their speech to me is different. Mr. Hecker is pronounced in tone different from the tone they address others. I don’t know but that I will be one of the community.”¹⁰³ Hecker’s uncertainty in belonging represented his struggle to integrate. The difference in speech that he noticed upon his arrival at Brook Farm, demonstrates the awareness of his class background in comparison to members of Brook Farm and their roots in New England’s liberal elite. At first, Hecker felt overwhelmed by their class, but gradually embraced it when he affirmed the following month on February 3, “I cannot go back to my old life. If I should return home in this life I do not see how I can live there [sic] everything is so contrary to it.”¹⁰⁴

Despite Hecker’s new “life,” he remained connected to his family, which, at times, brought him to terms with his past as a member of New York’s working-class. His correspondence with his older brother, George, is filled with complaints about his past while defending his motives for leaving the family business. In a letter dated March 6, 1843, he explains to George, “when I look to my past, my duty toward you all, and consider what this may lead me to, and then attempt to return, I get into a state which I cannot speak of.” In Hecker’s vague language, it is difficult to understand what is meant by his “past” in relation to its effect on him. He does go on to explain that by attempting to return, “I mean attempt to return to my old life, for so I have to call it—that is, to get clear of its influence. And yet I have no will to will

¹⁰² *Diary*, February 5, 1843.

¹⁰³ Farina., 89.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

against it.”¹⁰⁵ Overcoming his “old life” must have been difficult. His new friends at Brook Farm and his family represented two different worlds that he could not reconcile. He embraced the cultural elite behind American Transcendentalism for he found them leading him closer to the “spirit.”

Giving himself further assurance for joining Brook Farm, Hecker wrote in his diary on May 16, 1843, that “Here at B.F. I become acquainted with persons who have moved in a higher rank of society than I have been and persons of good education fine talents all of which have an improving influence on me. And I meet with those who I can speak and feel to a great degree that I am understood and my feelings responded to.”¹⁰⁶ His sense of belonging among the Transcendentalists gave him assurance that he reflected their class in thought and manner despite his humble beginnings. At the same time, many members of Brook Farm also felt an attraction toward Hecker, whose earnestness won affection and sympathy, especially from his roommate, Charles Dana.

A week after entering he began baking to help pay his room and board. After baking, he spent the rest of the day in his room. At night, there was recreation or entertainment. On some nights, he attended conversations with Bronson Alcott and his English friend, Charles Lane. On other nights, there were singing classes.¹⁰⁷ Such instances of recreation, entertainment, and heated intellectual conversations at first seemed alien. Hecker wrote about his self-aware awkwardness in those first days when he questioned his place in the “community” as evident in the diary. He remained committed to the study of languages such as French and Latin. He also continued to study the school of German idealism that influenced Transcendental philosophy.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Elliot., 42.

¹⁰⁶ *Diary*, May 15, 1843, 104.

¹⁰⁷ O’Brien., 29.

Experiences of closeness to the leading intellectuals of the day further solidified Hecker's new sense religious identity through their class. As O'Brien explains, "From the start the convictions that sprang from his experience led Hecker to resist ideas that did not meet his own instinctive sense of himself."¹⁰⁸ At the end of May 1843, Hecker reached the climax of his sojourn among the Transcendentalists. He wrote in his diary that he simply could not return to normal work and hence life among the working-class: "This is not work to me, it is death, it is no work, nay worse, it is sin, hence damnation and I am not ready to go to hell yet, friend; I would rather beat my head against the wall, die in the battle, than accept plastically...[the] annihilation of my soul."¹⁰⁹ O'Brien is careful to distinguish that such expressive language about work does not mean that he was lazy or self-indulgent, but that he found ordinary life distasteful because of its closeness to materialism: "he was drawn to a higher life opened up by the spirit within and confirmed by his associates at Brook Farm."¹¹⁰ Hecker's comparison of work to death suggests that he had become a Transcendentalist in the strictest sense of following the spirit throughout his life; yet the movement never fully satisfied his spiritual hunger.

When Hecker first entered the community, he confessed that he had "passed from death to life." He did not want to return from life to death, but the meaning of that life changed at Brook Farm as he wanted more in the spiritual sense than what the community offered. Despite the intention of communion and unity at Brook Farm, Hecker increasingly felt isolated. He felt alone when he could not find an intimate union with family and friends: "I meet with no one around me. I would that I could feel that someone lived in the same world that I now do. There is something cloudy that separates us. I cannot speak of my real being to them. There is no

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in O'Brien., 37-38.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

recognition between us.”¹¹¹ Such an expression of loneliness demonstrates his inability to integrate and the primacy of his own interiority.

The deep loneliness Hecker experienced at Brook Farm strengthened his interiority. This led him to the conclusion that community he had joined did not satisfy him. He confided in his diary that life at Brook Farm was “not self-denying sacrifice enough for me, it is too much like society. It is not based upon the universal-love-principal. It is not Christ like enough for me. I want to sacrifice more to live more for others.”¹¹² During Hecker’s sojourn he became more aware of his inclination toward religion rather than assimilating into a society that did not fully inaugurate a deep sense of self-purification in a communal setting. Hecker eventually shared Alcott’s conviction that Brook Farm was “too worldly, too relaxed, too filled with leisurely discussion.”¹¹³ Hecker began exploring various Christian traditions as an alternative body to Ripley’s community.

From the time Hecker entered Brook Farm he studied historical Christianity and visited various denominations. This included the Catholic Church. His diary on April 17, 1843, shows Hecker favorably expressing his first encounter with Catholicism: “Yesterday I whent [sic] to the Catholic Church west Roxbury; It was Easter Sunday. The services of the Church were to me very impressively affecting.”¹¹⁴ In another diary entry the next day Hecker changed his perspective of the encounter: “I confess that either the Church is not sufficient for my wants or I have not seen it in its Glory...I want not to say it but I must confess It fills me no more...It does not lead me to aspire.”¹¹⁵ Yet less than a week later Hecker declared that “The Catholic Church alone seems to satisfy my wants my faith life soul...I may be laboring under a delusion...Yet my

¹¹¹ Quoted in O’Brien., 35.

¹¹² *Diary*, June 16, 1843, 109.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Diary*, April 17, 1843. 94.

¹¹⁵ *Diary*, April 18, 1843. 95.

soul is catholic and that faith answers responds to my soul in its religious aspirations and its longings.”¹¹⁶

The hesitant tone in Hecker’s diary entries suggest that his first encounter with Catholicism seemed attractive for someone outside its fold. Despite Hecker’s awkward experience, a renewed sense of the brotherhood of man that guided Brook Farm grew even stronger out of his encounter with the Catholic Church: “Protestantism is individuality what we want and are tending to is...unity.”¹¹⁷ Hecker began to find a stronger sense of unity in what Franchot explains, “[Hecker] acknowledged in the Catholic Church a successful, if deeply alien, form of embodied community, hierarchically organized around the living Christ.”¹¹⁸ Hecker’s fascination with this alien community grew and it led him to another attempt at a new life in a more “religious” community at Fruitlands.

From time to time, Alcott and his English friend Charles Lane visited Brook Farm. With their visits, Hecker became acquainted with them and their intention of starting another community that did not resemble Ripley’s. Instead, their community attempted to foster a more ascetic life. They would live simply, avoid any flesh meat or food produced by animals, work as their conscience led them, and search for a more holy life.¹¹⁹ Fruitlands would in turn seek the perfection of the soul through rigorous self-denial, discipline, and withdrawn absence from the world. At Brook Farm, Alcott and Lane felt that they had invited too much of the world, and Hecker agreed with them.

Hecker joined Fruitlands on July 11, 1843. He found it more beautiful than Brook Farm. Fruitlands possessed a farm of large meadows and woods with Mount Monadnock in view to the

¹¹⁶ *Diary*, April 24, 1843. 97.

¹¹⁷ *Diary*, April 29, 1843. 98.

¹¹⁸ Franchot., 326.

¹¹⁹ O’Brien., 39.

north and Mount Wachusett to the west. The land had all been purchased by Lane, who would not take deed because he denounced personal property. He chose a location that began a “new Eden in New England.”¹²⁰ Hecker eagerly embraced the self-purification demands of Fruitlands. His diary entry a day after he entered the community records his deep admiration of Alcott and Lane: “I desire the strength of self-denial of Mr. A. And the unselfishness of Mr. Lane in money matters. In these both they are far my superiors. I would learn this from them. I would be meek humble and set at their feet. That I might become as they are.”¹²¹ Hecker’s admiration, however, did not last long.

A week after his arrival, Hecker’s journal shifted from the prospect of Fruitlands to the longing of rejoining his family: “Alas I thought who is there at home to receive me and I felt the union of our family had been broken up and we were scattered as fragments.”¹²² At Fruitlands he seemed more desperate than ever to return home. This seems to suggest that Hecker’s venture into the self at Fruitlands did not provide that answer that he been looking for. This situation at Fruitlands presented a paradox. Hecker enjoyed the communal friendship and fraternity at Brook Farm that represented the brotherhood of all men at the expense of individual self-discipline and denial. At Fruitlands, his increasing experience of isolation through rigorous self-purification forced him to reach out for a balance with community he increasingly saw in his family.

Sensing Hecker’s discontent, Alcott and Lane approached him and asked for his opinion on the community’s problems. Hecker responded truthfully. He criticized Fruitlands on several points ranging from the lack of fruit for dietary needs to their tendency to literature and writing for the success and prosperity of their immediate community.¹²³ Not long after his critique, he

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹²¹ *Diary*, July 13, 1843. 117.

¹²² *Diary*, July 21, 1843. 118.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

planned to leave the community: “They [Alcott and Lane] are beings and I am one. My life is not theirs. Theirs is not mine.”¹²⁴ Alcott, stunned and disappointed, felt personal resentment toward Hecker.¹²⁵ According to Elliot in a memorandum of conversations with Father Hecker, he made several references to Alcott. When Elliot asked Hecker what Alcott said after he left he responded that he went to Lane and said, “Well, Hecker has flunked out. He hadn’t the courage to persevere. He’s a coward.” But Lane said, “No, you’re mistaken. Hecker’s right. He wanted more than we had to give him.”¹²⁶

As Lane accurately said, Hecker desired more than what Transcendentalism offered. He rejected the transparent eyeball of Emerson, the worldly allure of Brook Farm, and the egoism of Alcott at Fruitlands. Nonetheless, Hecker did not leave Transcendentalism the same person he entered. On the day he left Fruitlands, he admitted in his diary, “I have learnt much since I have been here. I have come in contact with some of the most prominent men of this school the spiritualists or mystic. I feel that I could not get much more if I should stay any longer.”¹²⁷

Unlike Alcott, Hecker extended a warm farewell: “Farewell Fruitlands Birds Tress Hills Mountains, valleys Farewell Ye Inhabitants Alcott, Lane, Abraham, Bower, Mrs. Alcott, and All the Children. May Providence be in and with you. Fare-well in God.”¹²⁸ On Friday of that week, Hecker returned to Brook Farm, collected his belongings, and headed for home.

Life among the Transcendentalists had been a remarkable experience for Hecker that remained reflected in his character and sense of class. According to O’Brien, “For the rest of his

¹²⁴ *Diary*, July, 22, 1843. 117.

¹²⁵ As it turned out, the resentment lasted a lifetime: “Bronson Alcott dead! I saw him coming from Rochester on the cars. I had been a Catholic missionary for I don’t know how many years. We sat together. ‘Father Hecker,’ said he, ‘why can’t you make a Catholic of me?’ ‘Too much rust here,’ said I, clapping him on the knee. He got very angry because I said that was the obstacle. I never saw him angry at any other time. He was too proud.” Isaac Hecker, March 5, 1888. Quoted in Elliot, 48.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Elliot, 81.

¹²⁷ *Diary*, July 25, 1843. 121.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

life he saw the United States through the lens of the New England experience, and it led him to believe that there was indeed a ‘special class,’ noble minded and pure hearted, ready to devote themselves to truth and follow the spirit where it led.”¹²⁹ In the development of Hecker’s hybrid religious identity, he remained influenced by the “special class” of New England’s elite he found in Transcendentalism.

Hecker’s outer image also changed during his stay at Brook Farm and Fruitlands. Elliot’s biography provides a picture of Hecker entitled, “The Young Transcendentalist.” Although Elliot does not provide a date, the picture must have been taken within the first half of 1843 when Hecker entered Brook Farm and thus considered himself a Transcendentalist. The picture, taken from a daguerreotype, depicts a young and eager Hecker wearing a vest, suit, and a bowtie as he gazes off in the distance in a state of perpetual thought. Without any evidence to suggest otherwise, a person can safely assume that his newly adopted fashion implies that Hecker’s internal transformation translated externally in clothing style as an expression of his new sense of class.

¹²⁹ O’Brien, 47.



The Young Transcendentalist.

(From a daguerreotype.)

Fig. 2.

“The Young Transcendentalist,” From Walter Elliot, *The Life of Father Hecker* (1891). This picture of Hecker must have been taken between the winter and summer of 1843 when he attended Brook Farm and Fruitlands.

His sense of culture from the New England perspective remained a consistent source of his religious self-identity. Understanding the origin and the “air” of Transcendentalism that he breathed during his sojourn illuminates how the pursuit of the “spirit” and the rejection of materialism seeped through the pores of his skin in the development of his religious identity through the brotherhood of humanity in his young-adult life . This explains why he set off in search of the church where the spirit dwelt in a living body. In finding that body, he explored the “nature” of Christianity in Transcendentalist terms in discovering the church of his spiritual aspirations. It is not a coincidence that some of the followers of Transcendentalism became Roman Catholics when, ironically, the movement began as a rebellion against liberal

Protestantism: the antithesis of Roman Catholicism. Through Transcendentalism, a movement of Catholic converts emerged as they came full circle to the door step of Rome. Following this circle demonstrates how Hecker's experience in Transcendentalism led him to the door that he was about to pass through.

Chapter III

Transcendence: A Catholic Convert

“The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power...and you will be changed into a different person”—1 Samuel 10:6

“My friends will look upon [my conversion] with astonishment and probably use the common epithets—delusion, fanaticism, and blindness—but so I want it to appear to minds.”—Isaac Hecker, June 11, 1844

Influenced by his mother’s piety and religious fervor, Isaac Hecker did not remain a Methodist in the evangelical climate of the Second Great Awakening. His young-adult participation in working-class politics and reform movements aimed at defending the plight of workers forced him to look deeper into religious questions about his society. At Brook Farm and Fruitlands, Hecker won the admiration of both communities.¹³⁰ His warm sincerity, friendliness, and eagerness for learning literature, philosophy, languages, and religious studies inspired his new friends to bestow upon him the nickname “Ernest the Seeker.” The nickname relates to William Henry Channing’s short story of the same name that appeared in *The Dial* about a “sincere young romantic’s search for truth and purity of life.”¹³¹ The meaning of this nickname also describes Hecker’s dissatisfaction among the Transcendentalists as a restless seeker without ever becoming a finder. Life in the communities seemed promising, but for Hecker they proved

¹³⁰ Elliot’s biography provides a letter written to him by George William Curtis on February 28, 1890 describing his recollection of Hecker while the two were at Brook Farm together. Curtis’ letter describes how Hecker won the admiration of the community as a sincere person seeking the answers of his soul. He was well liked by everyone even though he did not stay as long as other members.

¹³¹ O’Brien., 30.

empty of the spiritual purity he desired. A month before the end of his sojourn he asked in his diary, “Who Is Isaac Hecker?” He failed to find the answer at Brook Farm or Fruitlands: “If this world is not a mystery, and all things that are therein, then what is mysterious?”¹³²

In the post utopian experience, Hecker focused on what is described in religious terms as “regeneration,” the beginning of a powerful change in heart and mind that would define his religious identity in the process of conversion in a lifelong commitment to God as echoed in the scriptures: “The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power...and you will be changed into a different person.”¹³³ Hecker voiced the process of regeneration internally as he wrote (often painfully) about his desire to achieve purity, self-denial, stillness, quietness, and a deeper sense of love for things spiritual as opposed to material. His inclination for achieving regeneration, however, tended more toward religion in an organized sense through some vague notion of the “church” rather than individualism in self-reliance.

Returning to his family’s home and business in the summer of 1843, Isaac Hecker struggled with the routine of daily work after his New England experience. He joined John Hecker’s political activism in securing the 1844 presidential nomination of John C. Calhoun.¹³⁴ The two brothers invited Orestes Brownson to address a meeting of Calhoun supporters in New York City. Brownson, still aware of his part in the blame of Martin Van Buren’s presidential defeat, declined. He had introduced Hecker to New England Transcendentalism. After leaving the utopian communities, Brownson wrote to him that “these communities after all are humbugs,” and, “We must rehabilitate the Church and work under its influence.”¹³⁵

¹³² *Diary*, July 7, 1843.

¹³³ 1 Sam 10:6

¹³⁴ Joseph F. Gower and Richard M. Leliaert, *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 64. Hecker to Brownson, August 30, 1843. (Hereafter referred to as *Correspondence*)

¹³⁵ *Correspondence*, Brownson to Hecker, September 2, 1843.

The meaning of church and community represented larger questions about Hecker's religious identity that he had not reconciled. During the year between abandoning Ripley's and Alcott's project and his conversion to Catholicism, Hecker voiced the transformation of religious identity along cultural lines during one of the most intense surges of anti-Catholic movements raging from literary exposes, propaganda, riots, and the political activism of the Know-Nothing party. Despite such strong anti-Catholic sentiment in the country, Hecker extended his experiences of Transcendentalism as an account for his own conversion to Catholicism as a unique outcome in transcending various intellectual, political, and religious movements he had participated in.

After Hecker returned to New York City and to the family business, he felt lost during the most intense self-searching period of his life. His siblings and Transcendental friends felt alarmed as he continued to turn inward and occupy himself with acquaintances across a wide span of intellectual and religious circles. Ida Russell, a woman friend, urged him to calm his spirit by avoiding "morbid books" and "morbid people." "Such a noble soul as yours must not be overwrought," she said.¹³⁶ Alongside Brownson, George Ripley continued to correspond with Hecker as a close friend among the Transcendentalists. He wrote a letter explaining to Hecker his concern that in "common society" he "would grow blind to the vision of loveliness and glory which the future promises to humanity."¹³⁷ Ripley's letter identifies Hecker as a member of the Transcendentalist community. By observing that he remained in "common society," Ripley reflects the New England class distinction that Hecker had participated in while he plummeted further into the depths of radical seeking.

¹³⁶ Ida Russell to Hecker, September 21, 1843. Quoted in O'Brien, 31.

¹³⁷ Ripley to Hecker, September 18, 1843. Quoted in Franchot., 321.

Despite Hecker's affiliation with leading cultural, intellectual, and political movements, he questioned in his diary the very possibility of being released from their entanglements all the way down to his daily routine so as to fully embrace the spirit: "What yet remains? My diet is all purchased and all produced by hired labor. My dress I suppose the most of it by Slave Labor. And I cannot say that I am rightly conditioned until all I eat and drink or wear is produced by Love."¹³⁸ As it appears in Hecker's diary, nothing seemed to satisfy him. At first many different movements and people captured his curiosity and amused him for a while, but he always moved toward new acquaintances, ideas, and classes. His dependence on other people for social, economic, intellectual, and religious belonging reveals his inner struggle to find regeneration.

The notion of religious affiliation remained with Hecker, but it took on new life once he put to rest his sense of social belonging and turned to the interiority of his own spirit: "I feel that daily I am tending more and more to Quietism: being less willful, and more peaceful. What is not spoken from the Spirit is profane and all life is of the Spirit."¹³⁹ Hecker became increasingly interested in achieving inner peace through regeneration, which he had begun through Transcendentalism in the rejection of materialism.

For the rest of the fall and winter of 1843, Hecker became preoccupied with self-denial. He asked, "What is Quietism? Is it not when fully carried out the Brahamantic doctrine of Annihilation of reabsorption into God instead of conversing with God... Let us go inwards instead of outwards."¹⁴⁰ For less than a month Hecker abandoned his journal entries to focus inward without the interruption of recording his experiences and thoughts. A few weeks after his inner retreat, he began writing again with renewed enthusiasm in the middle of October: "Since I have written my feelings have become more definite, my thoughts clearer, and more distinct, and

¹³⁸ *Diary*, August 30, 1843.

¹³⁹ *Diary*, September 16, 1843.

¹⁴⁰ *Diary*, September 28, 1843.

my whole mind more systematic.”¹⁴¹ His concern for society won his attention with an emphasis on religion’s role through the church. He began by breaking apart the many reform movements of his day: personal, political, and social and declared that “the Church is the centre the Soul of all reform all progress. The formula of the personal reformer is the denial of self, purity, chastity of life. Holiness and oneness with God. Love.”¹⁴²

Hecker’s search among the vast movements of antebellum America increasingly focused on the central relationship between the individual and society as grounded in the church. Hecker, like Brownson, believed that personal and social reform could not proceed without some form of relationship to the church. In his diary Hecker expressed this schematically in his diary in a triangle with the three sides labeled personal reform, social reform, and political reform. In the center of the triangle he inscribed the words, “Unity, Church, and Religion.”¹⁴³ The notion of the church’s role in society through the “church question” received considerable attention in the 1840s. Among other like-minded Unitarians, William Henry Channing advocated the church’s call to social action such as the relief of the poor.¹⁴⁴ The Congregational minister and theological minister, Horace Bushnell, fostered the organic sense of church and society in his work *Christian Nature* (1847). Charles Finney had long advocated revival in the conversion of heart at the personal level in transforming society by avoiding sin and vice.

The growth of the church question did not occur in isolation, but in movements. The Unitarians, Congregationalists, Restorationists, High Church revival, the Oxford Movement within the Anglican Church, and even the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) all “resisted what Brownson and others called religious individualism and advocated

¹⁴¹ *Diary*, October 17, 1843.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Anne C. Rose. *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 21.

as an antidote a renewed emphasis on an organic church, continuity with the longer Christian tradition, and to some extent an emphasis upon the organic nature of society itself.”¹⁴⁵ As the evangelical climate of the Second Great Awakening championed revival through individual emotional conversion, alternative forms of Christianity advocated the primacy of the established church.

Hecker’s correspondence with Brownson on the church question demonstrates his awareness of the issue: “I regret that I had grown somewhat lukewarm, superficially so, to the importance of the religious revolution which is now in the process of growing.” Although he might have felt “lukewarm” toward the growing movement around the church question, he confessed that his “silence on the Church, affected perhaps, by the influence of the society in which I have moved.” Hecker increasingly felt that the object of his search was a church. In a letter to Brownson, he confessed one of the most explicit expressions of embattled religious identity in searching after an organized church while remaining a Transcendentalist: “It was necessary to have this susceptibility of their influence to be able to understand, and appreciate, their movement, and spirit...in binding myself to it I have gained in the period I was from N.Y. a very fruitful experience.”¹⁴⁶ Rather than abandon movement all together, Hecker was extending his experiences of Transcendentalism as an account for his conversion to a church.

Brownson had also replaced Transcendentalism with a vague notion of the “church.” If Emerson advocated self-reliance, Brownson increasingly voiced the need for church-reliance. The breach within Transcendentalism toward a church occurred among those who favored the doctrine of life by communion rather than individual self-reliance. At Brook Farm it was the communitarian Transcendentalists who attracted Hecker. He found in it a “special class” of

¹⁴⁵ Carey., 135.

¹⁴⁶ *Correspondence*, Hecker to Brownson, October 16, 1843.

Americans who embodied the highest sense of American culture but did not, unfortunately, possess a church. Thus Hecker, like Brownson, set off on the busy search for the church that they both desired to fulfill their aspirations that began with Transcendentalism.

Hecker and Brownson faced a common problem in their search. Since the early nineteenth-century, the political episode of disestablishment fostered the “religious free market” in which evangelical denominations and sects flourished before the second half of the nineteenth-century that made up “the religious eclecticism that has long been prominent.”¹⁴⁷ The Christian church remained fragmented into so many pieces that the American nation became a battleground for competing denominations. Many people wrestled interminably with the problems of denominational competition, each of which seemed to invalidate the claims of others. Lucy Mack Smith, the mother of Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons, described this problem when she lamented, “If I remain a member of no church, all religious people will say I am of the world; and if I join some one of the different denominations, all the rest will say I am in error.”¹⁴⁸ Unlike Lucy Smith, however, Hecker did not despair over the decision of joining the “right” church. Instead his hybrid experiences of contrasting religious allegiances allowed him to approach the problem with a unique perspective.

Hecker believed in the restoration of the church’s unity. If the one, true, holy, catholic, and apostolic church existed, then it did so in fragmented pieces.¹⁴⁹ These fragments, nonetheless, contained different elements of the Christian life however emphasized or overlooked. The evangelicals emphasized individual and moral conversion of each sinner through the emotions at the expense of the intellectual and rational questioning of divine

¹⁴⁷ John Butler. *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1990)

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 43.

¹⁴⁹ Carey., 137.

doctrine. The Unitarians and others such as Alexander Campbell's sect, calling themselves nothing more than the *Christians*, emphasized the use of reasoning in peeling away the mysteries of God through the primacy of the intellect without any formal church body. Other high church congregations and the Oxford movement within the Anglican Church favored traditional liturgy while disavowing evangelical forms of worship. Since his childhood, Hecker had experienced many of the different religious movements that erupted in antebellum America, from Methodism to Transcendentalism. He continued to look further into America's religious heritage as he sought to put their pieces together to form the one true Church he desired.

By November, 1843, Hecker continued his relentless search after the church question: "My disposition of late has been to look into the Church matters with more interest than it has for 6 months back."¹⁵⁰ He began visiting with an Anglican minister, Rev. Mr. Haight, and conversed with him an hour and a half on Church matters. The two discussed the fall of the Church of Rome in her warmth and how the "Anglicans have neglected some of her duties by her coldness."¹⁵¹ Hecker's interrogation of historical Christianity continued to force him to reduce Christian traditions to their common origin in the Catholic Church. Exploring the various pieces of the Christian church weighed heavily on his heart. "This afternoon I am very sad and sorry at heart," said Hecker, "A sadness which no sympathy touches is on me."¹⁵² He wanted to know, "How does Jesus commune with the Humanity through the Church? Does he now commune with the Church?"¹⁵³ Hecker's emphasis on Christ in the church question started a new direction in his interrogation. He puzzled over how Christ continued to "commune" with humanity as he promised. The notion of communion occupied Hecker's thoughts. In the Catholic Church, the

¹⁵⁰ *Diary*, November 5, 1843

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Diary*, November 14, 1843.

¹⁵³ *Diary*, November 15, 1843.

sacraments provided the visible means of communing with the invisible. Other Christian denominations, such as the Quakers, possessed no sacraments, and yet their moral behavior surpassed those of Catholics as the “fruit” of their communing.

At the end of November, however, the church question was drawing to a close for Hecker and Brownson. As O’Brien explains, “Like Brownson, Hecker was convinced that the church was the object of his own aspirations and those of others expressed in utopian communities and reform movements.”¹⁵⁴ Hecker’s rich experiences gave him keen insight into how each movement, circle, denomination, and community he participated in offered one piece of the goodness or hope in the overall whole of the church, however scattered and fragmented. During this time, Brownson suggested Hecker and other men join the Episcopal Church as the closest approximation available to the Catholic Church without succumbing to Rome. In a letter to Brownson, Hecker rejected the invitation to join the Episcopal Church explaining, “The Episcopal Church is well but I cannot join a Church which asks no more of me *practically* of [sic] what I am.”¹⁵⁵ Hecker demanded that the church he sought after would call him to something more than what he was and provide an object, a direction to his life. Transcendentalism did not do that, but at least its proponents were sincere and dedicated. For that Hecker remained mindful: “My past seems to me like a dream and so it is but a day dream. The deeper we drink of life the more mysterious it seems.”¹⁵⁶

At the end of 1843, Hecker was now a convinced Christian. His thoughts increasingly centered on Rome. Like many of those who pondered the church question, he developed an organic sense of Catholicism, and by January of 1844 he declared, “Catholicism is humanity becoming an organized order... The different Societies institutions and unions in the Catholic

¹⁵⁴ O’Brien., 53.

¹⁵⁵ *Correspondence*, Hecker to Brownson, December 14, 1843.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Church are the natural development of the needs of Men.”¹⁵⁷ He then lamented, “Protestantism having destroyed these institutions etc. has destroyed the object of many and it may be said the most devout and religious portion of her Community; and Men are now seeking...reorganization of Society, Fourierism, Communism, and No-Property etc.”¹⁵⁸ Hecker saw in the Catholic Church the organic structure of humanity that had been distorted since the Protestant Reformation.

Hecker’s understanding of the organic sense of Catholicism grew as he continued to study historical Christianity. Franchot explains that Milner’s emphasis on the organicity and continuity of the Catholic Church received brilliant scholarly exposition in Johann Adam Mohler’s *Symbolism; or, Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants* (1832). Hecker carefully read Mohler’s *Exposition* in his studies at Brook Farm (the volume having loaned to him by none other than Theodore Parker).¹⁵⁹ Hecker felt drawn to the Catholic Church through the ritual of the Mass, but his study of historical Catholicism also strengthened his growing convictions: “If the Roman church is the true church, or even the church nearest to the true church, Hecker believed, there was a positive obligation to join it.”¹⁶⁰ Yet he did not join right away and instead channeled his spiritual frustrations toward his inner life as a result of his encounter with Catholicism.

As Hecker searched for the church of his aspirations, he faced the crucial decision of joining either the Anglican Church or the Roman Catholic Church: “Which Church the Roman or Anglican? To which it is my duty to unite myself I am not fully settled upon. This I will have to leave to a future decision.”¹⁶¹ Such a decision intensified when he visited Archbishop John Hughes (the first Catholic he ever met formally) of the Archdiocese of New York City in March,

¹⁵⁷ *Diary*, January 4, 1844

¹⁵⁸ Franchot., 327.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ O’Brien., 34.

¹⁶¹ *Diary*, March 10, 1844.

1844. Before meeting the bishop, Hecker had met, conversed with, campaigned for, and lived with lecturers, politicians, ministers, and scholars. For the first time he now met with a prelate of the Roman Catholic Church. The meeting, however, must have seemed awkward for Hughes. Hecker asked him the requirements for the priesthood without being a Catholic. As a non-Catholic, Hughes replied to Hecker, “to enter the priesthood it was first necessary that the person should have been least two years a member of the Church.” Hecker thanked the bishop, but sensed in him a feeling of rejection: “He seemed to think that I had inborn Protestant notions of the Church.” The meeting with Hughes annoyed Hecker. Writing through the lens of popular antebellum anti-Catholic rhetoric, Hecker reminded himself why he should not join the Catholic Church: “The Roman Catholic Church is not national with us hence it does not meet our wants nor does it fully understand and sympathize with the experience and dispositions of our people. It is principally made up of adopted and foreign individuals.”¹⁶²

Hecker’s identification of the Roman Catholic Church with “adopted and foreign individuals” demonstrates his self-aware identity as a “native” American different from “non-American” foreigners. Thus his sense of American culture is distinctive by what it is not. Hecker was not alone. The American national project increasingly voiced its tension with so-called foreign intrusion. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States grew at a rapid rate with the growing tide of immigration, especially among the Irish. Catholics swiftly changed the religious landscape as a competing religion of Christianity during the evangelical heyday of the Second Great Awakening. It is during the second half of the nineteenth century that, as Sydney Ahlstrom explains, “America experienced the most violent period of religious discord in its history. Local, state, and national politics became involved, and

¹⁶² *Diary*, March 22, 1844.

in a culminating phase of the struggle, a bitter and secretive form of anti-Catholic nativism reached the very threshold of national power.”¹⁶³

Since the earliest American colonies, anti-Catholicism prevailed as a national tradition. While earlier anti-Catholic rhetoric centered on religious and theological differences with Protestantism, it intensified in the mid-nineteenth century. From the burning down of an Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1834 to popular literature such as Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836) reflected the political climate of the nativist movement’s Protestant crusade against Catholicism in the United States.¹⁶⁴ “The Catholic Church holds now in darkness and bondage nearly half the civilized world,” the Reverend Lyman Beecher warned in 1834, after the Ursuline convent inferno, “It is the most skilful, powerful, dreadful system of corruption for those who wield it, and of slavery and debasement to those who live under it.”¹⁶⁵ The web of nativism across the nation suggests the reasons behind Hecker’s decision not to join the Catholic Church after his meeting with Hughes. Thus his first encounter with Catholicism conflicted with his sense of American culture.

Although Hecker’s meeting with Hughes did not inspire him to join the Catholic Church, he confessed to Brownson in a letter explaining his decision: “I am not prepared, in other words I cannot join this Church without willfulness, and it is impossible for me to do this, at the present time, though probably I may eventually be led to take this path.”¹⁶⁶ Catholicism, for the moment, remained in the background, although he continued to study historical Christianity. The Reverend Mr. Norris continued to correspond with Hecker urging him to examine those points

¹⁶³ Ahlstrom., 555.

¹⁶⁴ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1938), 66.

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in James Hennesey. *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 119.

¹⁶⁶ *Correspondence*, Hecker to Brownson, March 28, 1844.

that kept him from joining the Anglican or Catholic Church. He responded to Norris saying, “though the Church of Rome may commit errors in practice they had not committed in principle and that it was easier to prune a luxuriant tree than to revivify a tree almost exhausted of life.”¹⁶⁷ Such an argument demonstrates Hecker’s awareness of Catholic apologetics despite his initial reluctance to join the Church of Rome. His perplexity grew.

Still uncertain about which church to join, Hecker decided to study Greek and Latin with George Bradford. His thoughts, however, reflected a growth of inner peace of God’s presence: “I feel the presence of God wherever I am. I would kneel and praise God in all places. In his presence I walk and feel his breath encompass me.”¹⁶⁸ Such sentiments gave Hecker inner assurance in following the will of God as he embarked on another journey. In April 1844, he returned to New England a different person. He spoke with George Ripley and visited Brook Farm, where he found his friends more sympathetic to his new interest in the church than he had expected.¹⁶⁹ As O’Brien explains, “In contrast to his first days in New England a year earlier, Hecker was now confident and critical of some of the local heroes, including the great Emerson.”¹⁷⁰ Hecker knew that the church question was leading him in the direction of the Catholic Church. Thus he wrote of Emerson and those like him who affirmed self-reliance:

I have had a few words with Emerson. He stands on extreme grounds where he did several years ago. He and his followers seem to me to live almost a pure intellectual existence. They have no conception of the Church; out of Protestantism they are almost perfectly ignorant. They are the narrowest men and yet they think are extremely many

¹⁶⁷ *Diary*, March 30, 1844.

¹⁶⁸ *Diary*, March 22, 1844.

¹⁶⁹ O’Brien, 56.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

sided and forsooth do not comprehend Christendom and reject it. The Catholic accepts all the good they affirm and finds it comparatively to that which he has.¹⁷¹

During his stay at Concord, Hecker felt contempt for certain aspects of Transcendentalism that dismissed the need for institutions and hence the role of the church in organizing society. For Hecker understood Christianity in Transcendentalist terms: “take up the cross and follow Christ, that is, to deny ourselves and to submit wholly to the spirit of Love, and to this end was the church instituted.”¹⁷² Yet on the other hand, “He had none of the transcendentalist disdain for institutions, though he shared in their desire to get at the spirit behind the form.”¹⁷³ His sincerity for the church grew out of his experiences with Transcendentalism in the quest for purity.

Hecker could hesitate no longer. Since his earliest days in New England when he visited his first Catholic mass in west Roxbury, “the Catholic Church met all my wants on all sides.” Yet his immediate decision to decline reflected nativist attitudes toward the Catholic Church as the “most despised, poorest and according to the world the least respectable on account of the order of foreigners which it is chiefly composed of in this country.”¹⁷⁴ Therefore his friends, he was sure, would regard his step “with astonishment and probably use the common epithets of delusion, fanaticism, and blindness.” By becoming a Catholic, Hecker gained something: the sense of religious identity he yearned for through the satisfaction that his conversion caused controversy among his friends as a Catholic convert, for he wished the epithets of delusion, fanaticism, and blindness “to appear to minds.”¹⁷⁵ To understand why Hecker wished for such epithets to be concluded by members of Transcendentalism is complex. However, through the

¹⁷¹ Quoted in O’Brien, 57. Hecker to Family, April 24, 1844.

¹⁷² *Diary*, April 29, 1844.

¹⁷³ O’Brien., 59.

¹⁷⁴ *Diary*, June 11, 1844.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Catholic Church, Hecker distinguished himself by what was counter contrary to the so-called American culture he and so many others prescribed to in the larger non-foreign American nationalism and in the tradition of the New England liberal elite.

Hecker's experiences in Transcendentalism had a powerful influence on him. He was brought into the movement because the plight of workers and bad working-class conditions led him to political reform. His disappointment with political reform led him to question religious values, which led him to seek a purer life at Brook Farm so that he might cultivate life in the "spirit" in the rejection of materialism. Yet the question of reform no longer demanded his attention. After his sojourn, he looked forward and no longer associated with the working-class. His contempt for the anti-slavery movement represents the extent to which Hecker developed a distinguished sense of class: "There are no greater Slave holders than our modern Abolitionists. Their own wills are in chains to self and they are in bondage to Sin and deprive the Angels of heaven of the freedom of their home their own Souls."¹⁷⁶ In a sense, he had become somewhat of a snob. His contempt for reform demonstrates the class change that had taken place in Hecker, for he no longer sympathized with the struggles of humanity, which had laid the path of his journey toward Transcendentalism.

Despite Hecker's frustration with his friends within Transcendentalism and other reform movements, life at Concord continued to bring inner peace and the love for God continued to grow. His studies in Latin and Greek persisted with George Bradford, and a strong friendship developed with Henry Thoreau (whom he boarded with at Walden while he stayed in New England). As the end of May drew near, Hecker began to lose interest in study as the decision to join a church could no longer be avoided. The time could not have been riper for Hecker when his long time mentor and dear friend, Brownson, publicly announced his preparation to enter the

¹⁷⁶ *Diary*, May 13, 1844.

Catholic Church. Brownson urged Hecker to do the same. Feeling alarmed by making a decision Hecker wrote in his diary, “I must join the Church or become a mystic.”¹⁷⁷ Such a statement represented Hecker’s double mind of either joining the Catholic Church or remaining, in a sense, a wondering spiritual seeker with no church to call home.

Writing home from New England on June 11, 1844, to declare his intention of joining the Catholic Church, Hecker used the language of joining in organic body to preserve his communion with the spirit: “I feel like affirming, in the spirit of the man who Christ made to see, I know not whether this Church be or not be what certain men call it, but this I know: it has the life my heart is thirsting for, and of which my spirit is in great need.”¹⁷⁸ Hecker journeyed to the Catholic Church with Brownson.¹⁷⁹ The former found guidance with Bishop John Fitzpatrick of Boston. In Boston Hecker began his preparations to enter the Catholic Church, and frequently mused in his diary about the decision to join: “I do not know of any act that I could now do that will have more influence to shapen [sic] my destiny than my union with the Catholic Church.”¹⁸⁰ While Hecker expressed joy in his decision to join the Catholic Church, it did stimulate further self-reflection. In his diary he voiced the inner tension of the competing religious allegiances that he felt as he embarked on his conversion. His ultimate judgment of Transcendentalism is ironic in light of the movement’s origins in reactions against “corpse cold” Unitarianism.¹⁸¹

The transcendentalist is one who has a keen sight but little warmth of heart. Fine conceit—but destitute of the rich glow of Love. He is in rapport with the spiritual world unconscious of the spiritual one. He is all nerve and no blood, colorless. He talks of self

¹⁷⁷ *Diary*, June 7, 1844.

¹⁷⁸ Hecker to his family, June 11, 1844; as quoted in Elliott, 151

¹⁷⁹ Ten years after the conversion of Brownson and Hecker, the former publicly wrote that they helped each other find the church. No doubt, *The Brownson—Hecker Correspondence*, attest to their dialogues about the possibility and eventual reality of converting.

¹⁸⁰ *Diary*, June 14, 1844.

¹⁸¹ O’Brien, 63.

reliance but fears to trust himself to Love...He would have written a critical essay on the power of the Soul at the foot of the Cross.¹⁸²

Hecker decided to meet with Emerson, Lane, and Alcott to explain himself. “We shall not meet each other,” he wrote in his diary, “for on no other ground can I meet him than those of Love. We may talk intellectual together and remark and reply and remark again.”¹⁸³ Although Hecker could no longer advocate the radical tendencies of Transcendentalism, he could not forget the impact that the Apostles of the Newness had on his life, and for which he owed so much for allowing him to join their “special class.”¹⁸⁴

On August 2, 1844, Hecker made his full reception into the Catholic Church that concluded, in Jenny Franchot’s words, “a decade-long interrogation of various political, Protestant evangelical, and finally utopian communitarian solutions to social reform and internal regeneration.”¹⁸⁵ In the scheme of things, Brownson had come to the Catholic Church through his own intellectual endeavors in philosophy, theology and church history. He looked to the logical consistency of his reason’s demand in his crucial examination of Church councils, synods, and the writings of the early Church Fathers that led him to Rome. In contrast, Hecker’s “road to the church was his own; it led within through deep and disturbing experiences of the spirit, and had little to do with Brownson’s historical and philosophical speculations.”¹⁸⁶ Hecker’s self-interrogation throughout his diary reveals his inward emphasis to listen to the spirit of intuition that he learned to value in Transcendentalism. In the process, however, he did not find the oversoul of Emerson, but the spirit that dwelt within the Catholic Church. If Brownson

¹⁸² *Diary*, June 14, 1844.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ According to Elliot, Hecker learned later on that Alcott had been polite when heard the news, but that Emerson remained disappointed.

¹⁸⁵ Franchot, 321.

¹⁸⁶ O’Brien, 64.

came to the Church through a syllogism, Hecker came through “the Spirit” that was always “pressing within him, leading him he knew not where, and always suggesting to him the insufficiencies of his contemporary existence.”¹⁸⁷ Nothing could have proven more helpful and fruitful for Hecker than his journey into Transcendentalism that remained a permanent part of his psyche.

When Hecker first entered Brook Farm he confessed that he had “passed from life to death.” He later identified that same life not with Transcendentalism, but with the Catholic Church. This life blossomed in Hecker during a crucial period of the church question when so many American were eagerly searching for a church to call home. The same year he entered the Catholic Church, the wave of the Second Great Awakening broke when the Methodists, the most tightly knit religious body in the country, split over the issue of slavery in 1844. Thus Hecker and other converts could see in Protestantism the inability to unite the country, which led them to look elsewhere. Although his motives were sincere, Hecker’s movement toward the Catholic Church was unusual, but it did distinguish the sense of religious identity he so desired. His conversion, however, did not mean that he would rejoin the working-class or the poor for that matter, but to sustain his vision of American culture through the New England liberal elite within Catholicism.

Catholic converts from Protestantism made the smallest growth of the Church in the United States. Despite their zeal, they retained “heavy intellectual debts to their Protestant past and could not repudiate their personal and intellectual heritage.”¹⁸⁸ Hecker proved no different. In O’Brien’s words, “Isaac Hecker’s decision to become a Catholic marked not the conclusion of

¹⁸⁷ Franchot., 323

¹⁸⁸ Patrick Allitt. *Catholic Convert: British and American Intellectual Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4.

his search, but another beginning.”¹⁸⁹ Hecker desperately sought the “change” associated with regeneration. He would know the answer to his question “who is Isaac Hecker?” by what he was becoming. However, a change had already taken place. Hecker’s experiences of Transcendentalism at Brook Farm and Fruitlands began a powerful religious change in him. He adopted their language and categories for expressing his feelings and ideas about religious questions associated with his search for his self-identity in the religious sense. He also expressed his belonging to their sense of class with those “higher in society than himself” in adopting the class of the New England elite as his own. His hybrid religious identity in Catholicism distinguished his impact on American society and Catholicism as a priest of the Most Holy Redeemer of St. Alphonsus Ligouri, the Redemptorists a year after his conversion in 1845.

¹⁸⁹ O’Brien, 66.

Chapter IV

Impact: American Catholicism

“We want American Priests as fast as we can get them”—Orestes Brownson to Isaac Hecker,
June 25, 1845

In the summer of 1844, Isaac Hecker the seeker had now become a finder. A year after his conversion, he joined the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (C.Ss.R.) in 1845.¹⁹⁰ His journey into the Catholic Church led to the priesthood to find deeper meaning in and for his life. Hecker had an immediate impact on American society and Catholicism in the nine years between his ordination as a Redemptorist in 1849 and the founding of the Paulists in 1858. Assessing Hecker’s impact is evident in two ways. The first and most obvious way is the response Hecker received from his life and work as a priest. He received both praise and rejection by American non-Catholic society and within Church circles such as the hierarchy, the Redemptorists, and fellow converts. The second and most important way is to understand the response Hecker received by what he did differently from the “state” of Roman Catholicism in America in relation to his experience of New England Transcendentalism as a significant force in his hybrid religious identity that influenced his work. This unique relationship is evident as it transformed his decision to become a priest (1846), his work as an evangelist (1850-1856), the literary style of his two works *Questions of the Soul* (1856) and *Aspirations of Nature* (1857), and his organization of the first congregation of Catholic priests in the United States: The Paulists (1858).

¹⁹⁰ The congregation was founded by Alphonsus Maria Ligouri (1696-1787), Italian founder of the Redemptorists, writer and moral theologian, and a doctor of the Church. Founded in Scala, Italy, the Redemptorists preached the gospel to the poor and abandoned sinners. In 1832 the congregation came to the United States to minister to the German-speaking Catholics in the Diocese of Cinicinatai. In 1842 Bishop Huges invited the Redemptorists to work among German immigrants in New York City. In the United States the Redemptorists remained under the jurisdiction of the Belgian province until 1850 when the first American province was founded.

Hecker's interest in the priesthood preceded his decision to become a Catholic. Beginning with his conversation with Hughes on the requirements for entering the priesthood, he recalled the propaganda of the nativist movement's depiction of Catholicism as a "foreign faith" of the lowest classes. Xenophobia played a large part in anti-Catholic rhetoric aimed at the poor class of immigrants. Crime, poverty, drunkenness, and pauperism had all been associated with the character of Catholic immigrants in America. Thus Hecker initially declared that the Catholic Church was not national "with us" and principally made up of adopted and foreign individuals. Yet his decision to become a priest after his conversion resembled mid-nineteenth century fascination with Catholicism's old world seat of power and ascetic imagery that lured and captured the imagination of various New England writers and travelers.

"From the 1830s on, American Protestants were challenged not just by internal dissension and Catholic immigration," explains Franchot, "but by the surprising aesthetics of Catholic Europe, made possible by steam boat travel."¹⁹¹ Various New England writers either visited Catholic Europe or wrote about it. Preoccupations with ceremony, celibacy, architecture, monasticism, the inquisition, and the Papacy contributed to a strong sense of the overwhelming powerful "primitive" image of Christendom such as the role of the Spanish Inquisition in Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), the sacrament of confession in Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" (1850), and the Spanish Catholic slave traders in Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1856).¹⁹² The attractions of Catholic Europe that appeared in popular fiction had the same effect in inspiring Hecker to make a pilgrimage to Rome to discover the spiritual heritage of his new faith embodied in shrines, monasteries, cathedrals, and so on. His desired pilgrimage also spoke to his

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹² Franchot., xxiii.

hybridity, as he intended to demonstrate the Transcendentalist view of the restorative powers of nature into the world of Catholic Europe.

Among the New England Transcendentalists, Thoreau was one of the most sensitive to the experience of nature. His essay “The Natural History of Massachusetts” (1842) gave an account of the transcendental quality of nature in beauty, oneness, and life giving force. In this essay he studied various species and their habits in understanding the “intricacy of nature the universal that underpin all life.”¹⁹³ During Hecker’s stay in Concord before his conversion, he knew Thoreau’s enjoyment of long walks and his passion for studying the natural environment. Hecker desired to experience his new faith in the same manner by making a pilgrimage to Catholic Europe. He wanted Thoreau to accompany him, “immersing themselves in the old world before venturing further into the future with which their new world was identified.”¹⁹⁴ The future of this new world had a powerful meaning in the symbol of the pilgrimage. It represented Hecker’s life long commitment to experiencing Catholicism in Transcendentalist terms of “nature” and the desire for others to share in the spiritual journey of a pilgrimage. If Thoreau could embrace the life giving force of nature through experience such as long walks, Hecker thought that the same dynamic power of nature could also be experienced through the many shrines, cathedrals, and monasteries that dotted Catholic Europe.

Hecker intended to experience his new faith in terms that Thoreau understood and to cherish “the illusion that he might convert Thoreau to Catholicism, and to that end proposed...that they take a trip to Europe.” Thoreau rejected the invitation while declaring his faith in the religion of nature alone: “I remember you, as it were, with the whole Catholic Church at your skirt...for the moment, I think I understand your relation to that body; but the thought

¹⁹³ Gura., 205.

¹⁹⁴ O’Brien., 68.

was gone again in a twinkling, as when a dry leaf falls from its stems over our heads, but is instantly lost in the rustling mass at our feet.”¹⁹⁵ Hecker must have felt disappointed by the response for he did not go on pilgrimage, but his writings and subsequent correspondence on the subject demonstrate his willingness to take heroic measures to bring himself and others to embrace Catholicism, especially through the sense of experience.

His vain attempt to convert Thoreau began to shape Hecker’s religious identity in leading others on “pilgrimage.” The people he specifically desired to invite, however, were the “special class” of the New England liberal elite as symbolized in Thoreau’s invitation. Hecker still possessed a strong allegiance to the New England Transcendentalists, which quickly became a source of his embattled religious identity immediately after his conversion, especially with Brownson.

In the fall and winter of 1844, Hecker’s friendship with Bishop John McCloskey grew.¹⁹⁶ Hecker wrote to Brownson about his wish for him to meet the bishop as a man whose “acquaintance [is] better than either of the Bishops you know in your vicinity or Bishop Hughes here.”¹⁹⁷ Moreover, he also mentioned in another letter to Brownson that “Bishop Hughes thought of writing to you whether you would come on to New York and start a Catholic review.”¹⁹⁸ After the founding of the *Brownson Quarterly Review* in 1838 and his restless work in reform politics, Brownson gained national fame. With his conversion in 1844, he became a leading American Catholic figure by virtue of his reputation. Thus Hughes and others found in Brownson a person who possessed a powerful, if not widely read, literary voice in the country.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Lawrence Wilson, “Thoreau and Roman Catholicism,” *Catholic Historical Review* 42 (April 1956), 158.

¹⁹⁶ McCloskey served as auxiliary bishop of New York City alongside Bishop Hughes. McCloskey guided Hecker’s conversion and played an instrumental role that eventually led to his decision to consider the priesthood. In 1875, McCloskey became the first American prelate to receive the red biretta when he was made a Cardinal.

¹⁹⁷ *Correspondence*, Hecker to Brownson, August 17, 1844.

¹⁹⁸ *Correspondence*, Hecker to Brownson, September 5, 1844.

In an attempt to move the review to New York to satisfy Hughes, Hecker flattered Brownson with his judgment, “I don’t hesitate to say that they look to your union with the Catholic Church as an era in Catholic America.”¹⁹⁹ Brownson, however, rejected the suggestion in a long reply: “I do not like the project of a Catholic review at New York.” He feared that the “Review would necessarily be confined by almost exclusively in its circulation to the Catholic population. It is better to let mine go as it is...among the Protestants also.” Brownson went on the offensive, telling Hecker to inform McCloskey that his decision to join the Church did not occur for any other reason than the simple fact that, as a sinner, he needed to find the means of salvation: “I go into the Church because I need it, not because it needs me.” Brownson closed his letter explaining his recent trip to Brook Farm to instruct those members on entering the Church.²⁰⁰ In the final paragraph he reaffirmed his commitment to the Catholic Church by renouncing Transcendentalism: “Mr. Ripley, I fear, is worse than an infidel. The atmosphere of the place [Brook Farm] is horrible. [I] have no faith in such associations. They will be only gatherings of all that is vile, to fester and breed corruption.”²⁰¹ Brownson’s harsh criticism of Transcendentalism suggests his own sense of separation from his past and focus on his future life in the Catholic Church, but Hecker found those ties complicated to sever.

Unlike Brownson, Hecker retained his sympathy for the Transcendentalists. He cherished the joy of sharing his faith with this particular class of people who laid the foundation for his own conversion. As Elliot explains, “He thought it was to that class, or, rather to the multitude to whom they were prophets, that the exponent of Catholicity should first address himself.” Hecker valued the Transcendentalists as a people endowed with the highest activity of the natural

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Sophia Ripley, George Ripley’s first wife, and her niece Sarah F. Stearns eventually entered the Church. Stearns later became a nun.

²⁰¹ *Correspondence*, Brownson to Hecker, September 24, 1844.

facilities and perhaps the only “class of Americans who loved truth for its own sake, that trait which is the peculiarity of the Catholic mind, and the first requisite of real conversion.”²⁰² The desire to persuade this class of people to follow his path to the Catholic Church inspired Hecker to become a priest. This inspiration, however, assumed that the Transcendentalists were the first principle in Hecker’s conversion and that their love for the truth would eventually lead them to the Catholic Church, he judged.

In the spring of 1845, Hecker strongly considered becoming a priest. If he followed the “spirit” that led him into the Catholic Church, he hoped that the same spirit would eventually lead him to his life’s work. Ever since his first conversation with Brownson on the question, “How can I be assured of the reality of my experiences?” Brownson and McCloskey recognized Hecker’s passion for a spiritual communion and eagerness to share his experiences with others. Thus McCloskey encouraged him to become a priest and introduced him to various religious communities. He thought that the Jesuits might be a natural fit. He accompanied Hecker on visits to see the newly installed Jesuit community at Fordham. In contrast, Brownson knew Hecker’s tendency toward contemplation and recommended either the Carthusians or the Dominicans. Hecker chose none of them.

Brownson knew Hecker’s challenge: “It is difficult to advise another in regard to the order to be selected.” Nonetheless, he continued to scrutinize Hecker on his choice. In one instance he asked Hecker, “And how do you like on trial Catholicity? I grow more and more a Catholic and less a Protestant.” Brownson declared his Catholic identity to overcome his own insecurity as an embattled convert. The notion of his American identity within Catholicism remained intact for he complained to Hecker that he disliked the Irish for they “have no clear understanding of their religion...and our *Irish* priests are either bent on making money, or else

²⁰² Elliot., 178.

they are Irishman before they are Catholics.” The problem for Brownson is that there was no visible body of “American Catholicism” separate from the immigrant Church in America. On one hand he complained “that the mass of our Catholics are not Catholics,” for they serve their own national causes before their religion as Brownson suggests. Yet in another statement he also declared to Hecker, “But we want American priests as fast as can get them.”²⁰³

Hecker received an invitation to join the Redemptorists, who possessed a seminary in Europe. The invitation came from a Catholic he met some years earlier informing him that a German priest named Father Rumpler wanted to see him. Hecker at first rejected the invitation but soon accepted it. As the tone of his voice demonstrates with his correspondence with Brownson, passion and impatience increasingly took over: “Who will take me in hands? [sic] I want someone to kill me stone dead, or make me cry out enough, enough.” Although the Redemptorists did not seem attractive at first impression, their invitation apparently felt welcoming to Hecker as a convert, and he was not alone.²⁰⁴

Hecker and two American companions, Clarence Walworth and James McMaster, sailed to Europe on August 14, 1845, to begin their training in St. Trond, Belgium. They arrived in September. The religious atmosphere of St. Trond, like the rest of Catholic Europe, captured Hecker’s imagination as someone engaging “with the Protestant culture left behind, a culture fully identified as the ‘world’ repudiated by the spiritual pilgrim yet still at the core of his distinctive converted selfhood.”²⁰⁵ The visible ascetics of statues, crucifixes, and shrines that

²⁰³ *Correspondence*, Brownson to Hecker, June 25, 1845.

²⁰⁴ Among Hecker’s first companions in the seminary were two American converts, Clarence Walworth and James McMaster. Walworth came from a very politically prestigious Saratoga family in particular. Born in 1820, Walworth was the son of Ruben Walworth, the last chancellor of New York State from 1828-1848. Clarence Walworth’s life had been quite different from Hecker’s. He graduated at the age of eighteen from Union College where he had been a Phi Beta Kappa student, and later admitted to the bar in 1841 before studying for the ministry. McMaster eventually left the seminary only later to become newspaper editor of the fierce Catholic newspaper the *Freeman’s Journal*. See Joseph McSorley, *Isaac Hecker and his Friends* (Mahwah, NJ. Paulist Press, 1972), 19.

²⁰⁵ Franchot., 322.

filled the foot trails through the woods surrounding the novitiate had a powerful effect on Hecker. In contrast to the American secular environment of New York City and New England, Hecker absorbed the restorative powers of nature he observed in religious symbols. His sense of Catholic identity surged and he embraced extreme devotional practices: “As a seminarian Hecker enjoyed mystical experiences, flagellated himself, and practiced so many bodily mortifications that he alarmed his superiors.”²⁰⁶ He had learned the discipline of diet at Brook Farm and especially Fruitlands, but in Belgium he “slept on boards, rarely more than five hours, wore the large cilice daily, and took the discipline of self-administered flagellation.”²⁰⁷

As he pushed further to deny himself the necessities of his body, Hecker embraced a recurrent theme of violent repercussion as an embattled convert purging himself to the brink of requesting permission from his superiors to wear a cloak laced with sharp nails to inflict bodily harm across his entire body.²⁰⁸ While the request was never accepted, his experience of bodily suffering led to consolation of his spirit. The rejection of materialism in favor of life by the spirit had grown in Hecker since his earliest frustrations with the plight of the working-class and reform politics. In his search for inner purity at Brook Farm and Fruitlands, Hecker extended that same quest into specific Catholic terms during his years in the seminary.

The Redemptorists welcomed Hecker’s sincerity, but scrutinized him. Hecker received the sacrament of Holy Orders and was ordained on August 2, 1849, a year after Walworth. Despite his European excursion, Hecker’s moral and spiritual compass pointed to the United States to fulfill a dream he so passionately expressed in a letter to his superiors as a seminarian:

I believe that providence calls me to an active life: further that he calls me to America to convert a certain class of persons among whom I found myself before my conversion: I

²⁰⁶ Allitt., 69.

²⁰⁷ O’Brien., 94.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

believe that I shall be the vile instrument which He will make use of for the conversion of a multitude of those unhappy souls who aspire after truth without having the means to arrive at and possess it.²⁰⁹

Hecker had Alcott, Emerson, Ripley, and Thoreau in mind. He revered each of them although they had denounced any formal organization of the church let alone Catholicism. The Redemptorists eventually granted Hecker's request to return to America to enliven Catholics in a nation still deemed a missionary country. However, as O'Brien explains, "it was a work which pointed further, toward the conversion of a 'special class' he had known well, and with them the conversion of the nation."²¹⁰ Hecker wanted to work in America as a missionary priest not for the immigrant classes, but to translate Catholicism for the New England liberal elite. This double work, Hecker felt, guided the meaning of his priesthood and the beginning of another personal crisis of embattled religious identity.

After a brief year of service in England as a priest, Hecker arrived in New York City on March 19, 1851, seeking to skillfully balance his assignment to be a Catholic missionary and with his desire to be an American evangelist to non-Catholics. The former entailed a commitment to renew the fervor of Catholicism among the overwhelming number of Catholic immigrants. Brownson had complained that the "mass of our Catholics are not Catholics." As in Evangelical Protestantism, revival presupposed declension that spurred the force of the Second Great Awakening. At the same time Brownson lodged his complaint to Hecker, Charles G. Finney also felt that revival, both real and imagined, had waned. In his famous work "Letters on Revivals" (1845-1846), he mapped out the continual renewal for the perfection of revival as it

²⁰⁹ Hecker to Mon. T. R. Pere [Rev. Michael Heilig, C.S.S.R.], May 30, 1848; Quoted in Gower and Leliaert, 20

²¹⁰ O'Brien., 99.

struggled to compete with alternative forms of Christianity.²¹¹ Moreover, Finney met and conversed with one of Hecker's companions, Walworth, while the group was serving in England. According to Finney, "[Walworth] has been for years zealously to promote revivals of religion...he was trying to accomplish in the Roman Catholic church what I was endeavoring to accomplish in the Protestant church."²¹² Hecker and his American companions practiced their own form of Catholic revival in the parish missions. As missionaries they were bound to instigating revival among immigrant Catholics, but Hecker's insistence upon non-Catholic evangelization increasingly put the group at odds with the Redemptorists and their work among immigrant German communities.²¹³

From 1851 to 1853, Hecker served on the "mission band," which swept across the eastern seaboard. As traveling missionaries, Hecker and other Redemptorists visited various parishes to strengthen the zeal of Catholics in immigrant German and Irish communities. As a missionary, Hecker's preaching focused on wide range of topics spanning from penance, death, judgment, heaven, hell, virtue, the saints, the sacraments and especially the role of the Virgin Mary. Success was always measured in numbers. The priests kept records of how many confessions they heard and the number of people who received Holy Communion. Most importantly the mission records also mentioned the improvement of Catholic behavior by keeping drinking and saloon frequenting in check.²¹⁴ The mission sermons aimed at awakening in immigrant Catholics the need for the sacraments, but they also served another purpose.

²¹¹ James D. Bratt, *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 23. Bratt challenges the view of revivalism's preeminence in shaping the antebellum cultural, social, and political landscape. Even in its heyday, revivalism faced many criticisms ranging from various competing denominational, liturgical, and theological movements. antebellum cultural, social, and political landscape.

²¹² Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1876), 367.

²¹³ Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830-1900* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 43-44.

²¹⁴ O'Brien., 102.

The work of the missions and the topics of their preaching strengthened the sectarian identity among Catholics as an extension of the “state” Roman Catholicism in America. Know-Nothing agitation, riots, and the burning of churches and convents in the 1840s and 1850s had fostered a defensive attitude among Catholics by solidifying the boundaries of their island communities. In a global context, European revolutions had already stripped the power of the Church in traditional Catholic countries, and Italian unification threatened the very prestige of the Papal States. As one scholar has argued, nineteenth-century Catholic devotional literature “aggressively promoted an affectively orientated sectarian, as opposed to ecumenical, form of piety intended to heighten the fervor of the laity and strengthen lay attachment to the institutional church.”²¹⁵ In contrast, Hecker’s desire to work among non-Catholics as an American evangelist extended his own version of revival through the experience, language, slogans, and ideals of Transcendentalism to advance his plea to the nation to follow his path to the Catholic Church.

The mission band worked hard to enliven the religious life of immigrant Catholics. However, Hecker had not lost sight of the special class, but he had to skillfully maneuver between desire and his responsibility of obedience to the Redemptorists. As O’Brien puts it, “Tension would soon develop between the work of the missions, addressed as it was to Catholics, and Hecker’s urgent desire to evangelize among non-Catholics.”²¹⁶ By 1853, Hecker felt more eager than ever to break out of missionary work. In a striking letter to Richard Simpson, an English Catholic convert and friend of the famous John Henry Newman, Hecker expressed his desire to become an American evangelist: “We must make Yankeedom the Rome of the modern world—or at least work hard to make it Catholic.”²¹⁷ As an experienced parish

²¹⁵ Anne Taves. *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 1.

²¹⁶ O’Brien., 103.

²¹⁷ Hecker to Simpson, January 27, 1853; Quoted in O’Brien, 104.

missionary, Hecker felt confident in the impact he could make on non-Catholic English speaking Americans, as well. To accomplish this goal, however, he increasingly stepped outside the boundaries of sectarian Catholicism, which proved a risk. His work as an American evangelist operated on one fundamental assumption he learned during his sojourn in Transcendentalism, that “his own experience was not singular to himself; what happened to him happened, or could happen, to all people.”²¹⁸ Hecker believed in the power of experience, which had been instrumental to the path of his conversion.

In the summer of 1854 Hecker conjured a plan intended for an ideal non-Catholic audience, that he envisioned as minds of the highest faculties and eager to follow the truth wherever it might lead them. He prepared to write a book on this subject with the blessings of his superior and fellow missionaries. In the summer of 1855, he published his landmark book, “Questions of the Soul.” O’Brien describes it as “an almost perfect expression of contemporary American self-culture.” He goes on to say that the argument “did not frame in traditional apologetic terms... Instead he raised fundamental questions about human nature and history.”²¹⁹

Using the language of Transcendentalism, Hecker pleaded his case to educated, middle-to-upper-class white Anglo Saxons that he identified with during his class transformation at Brook Farm and Fruitlands:

My object in view is to bring minds similarly constituted as my own to similar convictions and results, by the same process as I passed through. The leading idea is to expose the wants of the heart and demand their proper object, rather than a logical

²¹⁸ O’Brien., 106

²¹⁹ Ibid., 105.

defense of the church... The affections of the heart, when pure, are no less unerring guides to the truth than the logic of the intellect.²²⁰

These convictions, however, represented the extension of Transcendentalist terms into Catholicism that poured out the embattled language of Hecker's own hybrid status. As he stated in the preface, the power of experience and the questions of the heart resemble the process by which he had come to his own conversion. It began with his experience during the ferment of reform during the 1830s, when he questioned religious values and his relationship to them. This led to the cultivation of his interiority for leading a purer life after the spirit at Brook Farm and Fruitlands. Unlike Brownson, Hecker did not rely on logical consistencies in historical apologetics, but on the overwhelming movement of the spirit communing with his heart. As a priest, this made Hecker a hybrid apostle as he translated his experiences in Transcendentalism into a plea for people to become Catholic. Hecker broke the bond of traditional Catholicism to promulgate his message from a specific form of culture in the New England liberal elite.

On one hand, Hecker praised the special class of literary and transcendental figures, including Shakespeare, Carlyle, Goethe, Hawthorne, Byron, Channing, and Emerson. The book is filled with many quotations from them. Hecker felt that these men embodied "the desire after a more spiritual life [that] is one of the chief characteristics of the American people."²²¹ He dedicated two favorable chapters to Brook Farm and Fruitlands. On the organization of Brook Farm, Hecker wrote about its founder: "Moved by this feeling [of love], he sought to create around him the circumstances which would respond to it, enable him to worship God and love his brother; and to love his brother in a truly Christian manner."²²² In introducing Alcott's Fruitlands, Hecker carefully noted that individuals there sympathized with Brook Farm despite

²²⁰ *Correspondence*, Hecker to Brownson, September 15, 1854.

²²¹ Isaac Hecker, *Questions of the Soul* (New York: Appleton, 1855), 55.

²²² *Ibid.*, 61.

many disagreements, but that the “Fruitlanders took a more ascetic, spiritual, and religious view of life.”²²³ His treatment of both communities demonstrates Hecker’s own sense of self-identity and continual sympathy with Transcendentalism. Hecker especially praised Emerson’s critique of corpse cold Protestantism in opening the way for an alternative mother-like church “upon whose loving bosom we can lay our wearied heads, and from her breasts of divine truth and love draw, like babes, sweet nourishment for our thirsty souls.”²²⁴ Hecker argued that this thirst could only be quenched in Catholicism.

Hecker felt that, many Americans like himself, were restless seekers in desperate need of a church and that Protestantism compared to a “step-mother, heartless, cold, and her breast of stone.”²²⁵ The church question confirmed his belief that Protestantism did not render positive religion, for it entrusted the interpretation of the scriptures to each individual. This produced divisions and schisms as embodied in the founding of the Mormons in the 1830s and the Methodist split over slavery in 1844. Protestantism seemed a bottomless pit. Thus Hecker concluded that the Protestant church “stands and listens to their appeals, stony, heartless, and unconcerned as a sphinx.”²²⁶

The publication of the book launched Hecker into publicity as a national Catholic figure. He awaited the review of his book with eagerness to test his work as an American evangelist.. His book was met with mixed reviews. The *New York Tribune*, carrying Ripley’s column notice, judged, “in general the tone of the work savours more of sentiment than reasoning.” The *Boston Transcript* called it “A genial, though a Catholic book, though evidently from the heart of the writer.” The *New York Observer* deemed it: “A queer title and a queerer book” and labeled it as

²²³ Ibid., 4.

²²⁴ Ibid., 70.

²²⁵ Ibid., 128.

²²⁶ Ibid., 136.

“a cutting artifice of Popery to catch the unwary.” The harshest criticism, however, hailed from denominational reviews. The Philadelphia *Presbyterian* denounced the entire book as “the brazen designs of Rome that the free people of this land will ever be brought under the spiritual despotism which has enthralled the millions of Europe—most especially will they not come under the yoke at the call of such a two-penny trumpet of this book.” The New York *Evangelist* lodged the most insightful critique of Hecker’s evident hybridity: “Such works as this are an attempt to turn one of the chief arguments of Protestantism into the defense of the Papacy.”²²⁷ Nonetheless, Brownson praised it as “one of the few original and genuine books our country can boast.”²²⁸ Sensing the overwhelming attention *Questions* received, Hecker felt confident in his work.

The move toward evangelization through the literary style of Transcendentalism did not resemble any Catholic literature in America. Hecker had crossed a crucial boundary in translating Catholicism in Transcendentalist terms. He no longer wanted to work within the immigrant community.²²⁹ Hecker reiterated this position in a letter to Brownson: “up to the present time the Church has been almost exclusively devoted to provide for her own children, and this has almost been too great a task for her.”²³⁰ Hecker wanted to break free from the sectarian mold of Catholicism to elevate the cultural tone of American Catholic life through Transcendentalism: “Hecker had a more positive view of human nature than devotional

²²⁷ Book reviews quoted in Holden, Vincent *A Yankee Paul: Isaac Thomas Hecker*. (New York: Bruce Pub. Co; 1958), 190-191.

²²⁸ Book review in *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 3 (April 1855), 211.

²²⁹ When Hecker worked on the publication of *Questions*, two prominent American converts joined the Redemptorists, Francis Baker and George Deshon. Born in 1816, Baker was an Episcopal minister when he befriended Hewitt and later followed in his footsteps into the Catholic Church and later the priesthood. Born in 1823, Deshon entered West Point at an early age to pursue a military career. His roommate at the academy was none other than Ulysses S. Grant. Deshon graduated second in his class 1843 and remained at the academy for some years teaching mathematics and ethics. He became a Catholic in 1851 and joined the Redemptorists in 1855 where he joined Baker, Hecker, Hewitt, and Walworth.

²³⁰ *Correspondance*, Hecker to Brownson, August 22, 1855.

Catholicism and continually stressed the possibility and indeed the need for union with the Holy Spirit on the part of individuals.” He did not dismiss the cult of miracles, sacraments, or the intervention of the saints, but they were secondary to the immediate communion of the human soul with the Spirit.²³¹

Prompted by the publicity of his first book and disappointed in the lack of conversions to Catholicism, Hecker launched a sequel, “Aspirations of Nature” (1857). He made a second case for Catholicism in Transcendentalist terms on the foundation of human nature. He argued that “Original sin did not efface the image of God stamped upon the soul. Reason and free will remained, their essence unimpaired, uncorrupted, uninjured. It did not despoil man of any of his merely natural faculties, capacities, or powers.”²³² Hecker presented his audience with Unitarian and Transcendentalist rebellion against utter human depravity cultivated by conservative Protestantism. In emphasizing his optimistic understanding of human nature as the pathway toward real conversion rather than historical apologetic, Hecker found himself at odds with his order and with Brownson. Hecker developed his understanding of human nature in the fermentation of Transcendentalism. But Hecker took it further to claim that Catholicism was indeed the religion of the Republic and the American people, for “The foundations of our political fabric do not suppose reason imbecile, nor human will enslaved; they rest on the maxim of man’s capability of self-government, and this presupposes the possession and exercise of Reason and Free Will.”²³³ Hecker had gone too far in affirming Transcendentalists’ belief in the natural aspiration for God, independent from any supernatural gift. Hecker’s emphasis on the

²³¹ Jay P. Dolan *The American Catholic Experience: A History From Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, New York: Image Books), 236.

²³² Isaac Hecker, *Aspirations of Nature* (New York: James B. Kirker, 1857), 197.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 185.

bond between Catholicism and the New Republic seemed like a dangerous mixing of nationalism and religion that alarmed officials in the Redemptorists.

Brownson's harsh criticism of the book intensified the situation. He cited in his October issue of the *Review* continual praise of Hecker as a Catholic convert and writer, but criticized him on the point that his "special class" of earnest seekers did not enumerate the country. Brownson regarded the Transcendentalists as an exotic minority embodying very little of the American people.²³⁴ Hecker had dismissed Evangelical Protestantism as an irrational and overly emotional religion without ever acknowledging the reality that it had come to dominate the religious landscape of the New Republic. Thus Hecker's narrow understanding of American culture from the perspective of the New England elite alienated many people ranging from the enslaved to the immigrants in his project of American Catholicism. Moreover, he had not fully convinced Brownson, who judged that Hecker had gone too far in the implications of human nature that stood against Catholic orthodoxy. Brownson's criticism reflected ambivalence between the two men as they tested each other.

In the midst of the poor reception of his sequel, the Redemptorists experienced dramatic reorganizations that threatened the work of English-speaking missions and evangelization to non-Catholics. The conflict of nationalism had also been a source of many problems that took its toll on the Redemptorist community. In 1854, Pope Pius IX attempted to resolve problems in the Redemptorists as result of Transalpine and Cisalpine sectors in Europe who competed for control over the order. In the wake of Rome's reorganization of the Redemptorists, George Ruland was named superior of the American providence. He was determined to separate American Fathers by transferring them to new foundations in St. Thomas and Quebec.

²³⁴ "Aspirations of Nature," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (October 1857) in Brownson, *Work* vol. 14, pp. 543-577.

Baker, Hewitt, Deshon, Walworth and especially Hecker believed that their work in the evangelization of non-Catholics must have made some positive impact on Catholic life in America worthy enough for them to seek separation from the Redemptorists.²³⁵ Knowing that they did not have the support of their superior, the American Fathers convinced Hecker to sail to Rome (George Hecker financed the trip) to plead their case for the need of an English-speaking house. The unauthorized trip meant immediate expulsion from the order if it failed to reach its objective. To that affect “Hecker rounded up letters of testimonial to the importance of the missions and the prospects of vigorous mission efforts among the English-speaking, and personal testimonials to his character and zeal.”²³⁶ With his deep sincerity and experience of American Catholicism in the form of letters, appeals, and written work of American Catholic figures, Hecker sailed for Rome to plead his case. As O’Brien concludes about Hecker’s bold plan, “He was, indeed, prepared to ‘risk everything’ for his vision of Catholic America, persuaded by a body of religious men committed to it. Confident that his vision came from God.”²³⁷

Isaac Hecker arrived in Rome on August 26, 1857, in the hope of gaining the support of the Rector General of the Redemptorists for an English-speaking house. Three days later, he was expelled from the Redemptorists by the Rector General, who deemed his coming to Rome in violation of the vows of poverty (the expense of the trip) and obedience (he did not have authorization to travel abroad). The Congregation of the Propaganda of the Faith passed the case to Pope Pius IX for final judgment. Despite the mounting evidence lodged against Hecker in favor of expulsion, the pope decided that certain priests within the Redemptorists should be dispensed from their vows while ignoring the preceding expulsion. This conclusion arrived after

²³⁵ Clarence Walworth did not share in the group’s desire to work in non-Catholic evangelization. He preferred the parish mission model, and this became a consistent source of conflict with the American Redemptorists.

²³⁶ O’Brien., 127.

²³⁷ Ibid., 130.

seven months of deliberation and declared on March 6, 1858 with the Papal decree, *Nuper Nonnulli*.

The separation of the American Fathers from the Redemptorists did not occur in a vacuum, but from complex misunderstandings, disputes over the priority of non-Catholic evangelization, and the clash of character between the converts and their European superiors. The pope skillfully negotiated the delicate situation in his decree while recognizing the grievances of the Redemptorists and Hecker's sincere petition: "It appeared to His Holiness, that a separation of this kind would be prejudicial to the unity of the Congregation... and therefore should not be permitted." The reality of the situation, however, forced the pontiff to judge "by tenor of his decree, and by his Apostolic authority, does dispense from their simple vows." Clarence Walworth, Augustine Hewitt, George Deshon, and Francis Baker, together with Isaac Hecker, should instead "labor by work, example, and word in the Vineyard of the Lord, and give themselves with alacrity to the eternal salvation of souls, and promote with all their power the sanctification of their neighbor."²³⁸ These words concluded a decade-long struggle among the American Fathers to continue their work without the intervention of the Redemptorists.

The Papal decree did not specifically recognize any new order out of the Redemptorists and asserted that only that the named priests should continue their work of non-Catholic American evangelization. As priests no longer affiliated with any order, Hecker and his companions were now eligible to work in a diocese of their choice. Upon recommendation from members of the Roman Curia, Hecker selected New York City. Hughes eagerly accepted them although they were now in his service and they had to accept his episcopal authority. The cost of

²³⁸ Quoted in Elliot., 279.

Hughes' "episcopal approbation" meant that the former Redemptorists had to assist with parochial duties.²³⁹

In late May 1858 the group met to lay the foundations of their future community. They all shared in O'Brien's words, "a commitment to one another and to the visionary, mystical man who was unquestionably their leader."²⁴⁰ From the start, Hecker had been the nucleus that formed the American fathers. He alone sailed to Rome and took the greatest risk and endured the anxiety of expulsion. As a result, Hecker fashioned the community after his own experiences in the quest of ascertaining his own sense of religious identity in the hope of reconciling Roman Catholicism and American culture that translated into the rules of a new religious community.

The group met in the "upper room" of a convent. Although there is little known of the discussions that took place, three documents attest to the debates that had taken place in forming the new community. In reverse, the third document dealt with the raising of funds for a permanent mother house for which the new priests could launch new missions while providing a house of studies for seminarians and novices. The second document reaffirmed the commitment that which Hecker and his companions had to do parish work in New York City. The first document is the most unique and possesses a direct relationship with Hecker's hybrid religious identity is the constitution of the new religious community named the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle (CSP), commonly known as the Paulists. In their constitution they agreed to live "a life perfectly in common." The constitution laid out the essential foundations of leading a religious life. They were to perform two daily meditations, visit the blessed sacrament, pray the rosary daily, an examination of conscience, public acts of penance were to be performed in the

²³⁹ Hecker had always preferred the giving of missions and non-Catholic evangelization over parochial duties. Circumstances, however, never made that reality possible.

²⁴⁰ O'Brien., 170.

refectory, and so on.²⁴¹ Until the approval of the pope was granted, the community was led by a superior for three years. On June 13, Hecker was elected first superior. On July 7, Baker, Hewitt, Deshon, and Hecker all signed the provisional rule with the approval of Hughes.

One of the most striking aspects of the constitution was the absence of vows in binding themselves to the Rule. As Hecker explained in the constitution, “The civil and political state of things of our age, particularly in the United States, fosters the individual life. But it should do so without weakening the community life: this is true individualism. The problem is to make the synthesis. The joint product is the Paulist.”²⁴² Thus Hecker had favored American republican virtues of voluntary agreement over vows. According to Franchot, “It was, in Hecker’s view, the long-awaited solution of how to live in America.”²⁴³ As Hecker adjusted the Paulists to the political customs of the nations, the absence of vows served another purpose.

The most astonishing aspect is that the Paulists participate in Hecker’s affiliation with Transcendentalism. The Paulists share a structure similar to Ripley’s ideal community at Brook Farm. As O’Brien explains, “[Hecker] preferred that, in a country marked by radical freedom, the members should be moved by inner conviction and the guidance of the spirit not by external requirements.”²⁴⁴ In an unusual mixture of Transcendentalism and Catholicism, Hecker had formed his congregation for its members to pursue their own spiritual perfection in harkening to the voice of the spirit within rather than following any religious vow that would take the place of inner communion. Hecker and the Paulists represent the extent to which a Catholic religious community could resemble the utopian communities at Brook Farm and Fruitlands, but it did come at a cost.

²⁴¹ “Program of the Rule and Constitution of the Congregation of the Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle.” 1858.

²⁴² Quoted in Elliot., 296.

²⁴³ Franchot., 325.

²⁴⁴ O’Brien., 173.

Among the former Redemptorists who signed the constitution, Walworth remained absent. He had felt that Hecker had gone too far in veering from the Rule of St. Alphonsus. Walworth could not comprehend how the members of a religious society could coexist with other members without permanent vows to bind them to a particular rule. Shaken by his experiences with the Redemptorists and his dissatisfaction with Hecker, Walworth left the community. He later joined the Diocese of Albany and served as a parish priest under Bishop McCloskey. The loss of Walworth was a painful sacrifice for the early community to endure. He had a national reputation as one of the fiercest Catholic preachers in the nation. His dissent from the Paulists represented the problem of Hecker's vision of a religious community modeled after his own experiences of competing religious allegiances that had plagued the community from the start.

Through the Paulists, Hecker hoped that a “body of free men who loved God with all their might and cling together, could conquer this modern world of ours.”²⁴⁵ This hope, however, would continue to be challenged. In the immediate years following his death in 1888, Hecker's legacy as an American Catholic evangelist had almost reached the threshold of condemnation during the controversy known as Americanism. Even in his early life, Hecker struggled to negotiate the sensitive boundaries of religious allegiances as he formed American Catholicism through his experiences of Transcendentalism. He conformed the Catholic Church to the “spirit of age” only because he believed that that spirit was not in conflict with Catholicism. As O'Brien explains, “[Hecker] saw the ‘saving fulness’ of God's presence in the Roman Catholic Church, but for him that church was ‘the living power which animated history and pushed it forward unawareness’”²⁴⁶ For those who adhered to the Catholic Church as a timeless, unchanging entity,

²⁴⁵ Walworth to Deshon, June 20, 1858. Quoted in O'Brien., 173.

²⁴⁶ O'Brien., 393.

and understood doctrine only through static terms, Hecker made no sense.²⁴⁷ Thus his impact on the Catholic Church had serious consequences that led to his rejection by many of the Transcendentalists, his difficult relationship with Brownson, his expulsion from the Redemptorists, Walworth's dissent, and the gradual "Protestant Catholic" identity of the early Paulists.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

Epilogue: “The Protestant Catholics”

In 1903, fifteen years after the death of Isaac Hecker, the *New York Times* referred to the Paulists as “liberal” and noted that they were known throughout the religious world as the “Protestant Catholics,” after the death of the third Paulist superior, George Deshon. The article emphasized that Hecker had been a Protestant before founding the Paulists and that he was one of the literary men who embraced such thinkers as Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, and Parker. In associating Hecker with the New England liberal elite, the *Times* supported its claim in labeling the Paulists the “Protestant Catholics.” George Searle, fourth Paulist superior, publicly denied the claim in an article that appeared in the *Times* a day later. Searle’s rebuttal reassured the public that the Paulists continued Hecker’s vision of non-Catholic evangelization while ignoring his former affiliation with American Transcendentalism.

Hecker formed American Catholicism in such a way that it led to his association with “Americanism” and the so-called “Protestant Catholic” identity of the Paulists. In understanding this consequence, I unpacked what was “Protestant” and “American” about his form of Catholicism during his most informative and life changing years, roughly between 1837 and 1858. During those years, Hecker had an intense intellectual and cultural journey that led him from the political activism of New York City’s working-class, to Brook Farm and Fruitlands, and finally to the Catholic Church and the priesthood. At every stage in his life during this period, his rich experiences produced a hybrid religious identity, which led him to formulate a distinct form of American Catholicism that came to define his work as a charismatic missionary priest and the founder of a religious community.

Hecker derived his form of American Catholicism through his experiences. As a nominal Methodist, baker, working-class reformer, and later a Transcendentalist, Hecker’s journey into

the Catholic Church could not have been more unusual. Yet his social and cultural milieu played a significant role in shaping Hecker's form of American Catholicism as he understood it. Thus Hecker embodied an amalgam of various American religious, social, political, and cultural currents. To Understand American Catholicism requires us to understand Hecker's unique relationship with his social and cultural milieu. In this endeavor, cultural biography has been an inseparable method in combining Hecker's subjectivity with objective historical sequences that informed his decisions and actions. In the process, a particular form of religious hybridity distinguished Hecker as an American religious figure by means of his passage through reform and Transcendentalism to founding a unique Roman Catholic religious order. This is evident through the three concepts of cultural biography.

Hecker possessed close proximities to his time during the ferment of reform that initiated his thoughts and actions that motivated him toward the Catholic Church. The downward spiral of the national economy after the panic of 1837 led Hecker and others to question the religious principles behind their political economy. This questioning occurred at the expense of him no longer affiliating with the Methodist faith of his mother and the first instance of a changing religious identity out of the ferment of reform. At first, reform politics and movements offered the ideal solution he and others desired to improve their nation's economic and social morality, as suggested in such works as Brownson's essay, "The Laboring Classes." Yet the democratic defeat in the 1840 presidential election shattered all hope, forcing Hecker to abandon reform movements and national politics. In Hecker's own words, "Oh! How long did I try to make politics serve my religion."²⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the experience remained a lasting one.

Elliot observed that "Hecker's zeal for social reform lent force to his strictly personal cravings for a more religious life; he longed for wider scope than individual effort could possibly

²⁴⁸ As quoted in Elliot 193.

bestow, and also for a supernatural point of view.”²⁴⁹ He wanted to embrace a more disciplined life morally and spiritually by associating with the “like minded” he dubbed the “Apostles of the Newness” of New England’s liberal elite. Instead of relying on reform or political movements, they appealed directly to the hearts of humanity to reject materialism in favor of life by the “spirit.” Hecker reflected the Transcendentalist’s aspirations in his personal moral discipline. He was also enchanted by mystical vision in his youth and hungered for things spiritual rather than material. In the communities of Brook Farm and Fruitlands he found deeper meaning by embracing a specific form of class in inaugurating a new sense of religious identity through his affiliation with American Transcendentalism.

Hecker’s experiences among the New England liberal elite in turn shaped his understanding of what American culture meant to him as he adopted their behavior, image, and intellectual language for articulating God, community, and reform. Hecker was affected by their ideas, events, and movements within Transcendentalism as the historical air that he breathed. He felt that they had embodied the brightest and most sincere minds as the highest class within American civilization. The Transcendentalists, however, remained divided as to whether renovation should occur at the heart of each individual or at the institutional level. Thus it remained a starting point for Hecker into something more religious, spiritual, and visible in nature. His sojourn among the Transcendentalists and his ability to adopt their categories, personalities, and ideas as his own language for expressing his sense of religious identity proved remarkable for someone who stood outside the movement in class, education, and religious origin.

After leaving the utopian communities, Hecker rejected self-reliance in working out his own regeneration. His new quest focused on the central relationship between the individual and

²⁴⁹ Elliot, 194.

society as grounded in the church. Hecker concluded that personal and social reform could not proceed without some form of relationship to the church. He worked out the problem of finding the object of his search in the antebellum language of the church question. Yet his experiences within Transcendentalism gave him a different perspective on the question in approaching it through the organic nature of historical Christianity found in the Catholic Church. Hecker extended his experiences of Transcendentalism to account for his own conversion to Catholicism as a unique transcendence of the various intellectual, political, and religious movements during one of the most intense episodes of national prejudice toward Catholics and its immigrant body. In doing so, Hecker voiced one of the loudest expressions of religious hybridity in his decision to become a Catholic through Transcendentalist terms of “spirit and nature.”

Hecker later interpreted his experiences with Transcendentalism into distinctly Catholic terms as the culmination of his hybrid religious identity. According to O’Brien, “as a religious thinker he had some great gifts, and as a man of his times he absorbed modern symbols and meanings and blended them with Christian faith and Catholic tradition in ways that were unique.”²⁵⁰ After his conversion, Hecker formed American Catholicism through his perception of American culture through a specific class. His work as a Catholic evangelist, his two published books and the founding of the Paulists had an impact on American society and Catholic life through their use of Transcendentalist expressions, paradigms, languages, personalities, and ideals in forming American Catholicism. This accounted for what was “American” and “Protestant” about Hecker’s hybrid vision of American Catholicism modeled after his own experience to appeal to a specific class of people. He experienced in his special class what he wanted to give to the Catholic Church to renew its vigor in American life. But by equating American culture with Transcendentalism, Hecker misjudged the influence of what Brownson

²⁵⁰ O’Brien, 398.

deemed an exotic minority. The poor, the immigrant, and the enslaved all escaped his attention because of his elite understanding of American culture, and that neglect explains why his hope for a Catholic America failed. His experiences only spoke to very few like minded people who joined his vision such as Walter Elliot and the early Paulists who remained in the community. Hecker found fulfillment in the trickle of converts he brought into the Catholic Church, but his movement in forming American Catholicism did not possess the power of the evangelical sweep during the Second Great Awakening nor did it lead the Transcendentalist movement to follow his path.

Hecker attempted to adapt Roman Catholicism to American culture as he came to terms with his own sense of religious identity, which often conflicted with the religious allegiances of his past and present. His ambivalent relationship with the Transcendentalists, and fellow Catholic converts such as Brownson, and his expulsion from the Redemptorists and Walworth's eventual dissent from the Paulists represents the extent to which Hecker spoke a language of competing religious allegiances as an embattled spokesperson of American Catholicism. Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott continued to reject Hecker's message while the American Catholic Church continued to insulate itself in the nineteenth-century as a distinct sub-culture. Increasingly, Brownson became its spokesperson. The Philadelphia and Cincinnati Bible Wars in public education during the 1840s, the creation of the Catholic parochial school system in the 1850s, and the sectarian devotional piety of Catholics all confirmed that Hecker's vision remained a risk.

Through Hecker, however, the ancient tradition of the Catholic Church so far removed from the American continent in space and time now possessed an "American" experience of its faith in the life, work, and vision of one its greatest American proponents. As O'Brien explains, "Still, every, race, age, and class has its own experience of God, and each local and particular

historic experience of the church adds to the total experience of Christ's presence in human history."²⁵¹ Hecker did not represent the totality of the American experience during his time. But his experience within his own limited social and cultural milieu reveals how a certain class of people and ideas within Transcendentalism influenced his hybrid form of American Catholicism after his own journey within American cultural and intellectual history.

²⁵¹ O'Brien., 403.

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