

Transcendentalism: Religion & Social Action

Syllabus

Course Facilitator

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Course description

Transcendentalism featured a flowering of idealism among a small community of New England Unitarian intellectuals, educators, writers, and reformers. They embraced spirituality, social responsibility, and ethical pluralism. Their ideas and actions stretched beyond European thought and dared to speak new truths that many of their contemporaries found both disturbing and revolutionary. The course will focus on Transcendentalist thought, experiments, social reform, and social action.

Readings

R. Todd Felton. *A Journey into the Transcendentalists' New England*. Berkley: Roaring Forties P, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0976670643

Barbara L. Packer. *The Transcendentalists*. Athens: U George P, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0820329581

Barry Hankins. "Transcendentalism as a New Religious Movement" and "The Second Great Awakening, Transcendentalism, and the Antislavery Impulse." *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2004. 23-40, 85-108. **PDF excerpts**

Lawrence Buell, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0812975093

Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift, 1993. ISBN-13: 978-0486277905

Henry David Thoreau. *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift, 1993. ISBN-13: 978-0486275635

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. *Record of a School: Exemplifying the General Principles of Spiritual Culture*. 1845. Bedford, MA: Applewood, 2005. **PDF excerpts**

Margaret Fuller. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. 1845. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift, 1999. ISBN-13: 978-0486406626

Louisa May Alcott. *Work*. 1872. New York: Penguin, 1994. ISBN-13: 978-0140390919

Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wirght, ed. *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalism Movement its Contexts*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999. Out of Print. **PDF excerpts**.

Weekly Assignments

Each week has readings. Sometimes the week might have a lot of readings. There are also on-line discussion assignments. Discussion postings are due by Friday noon. Students must respond to three other postings by Sunday midnight. Postings and responses must be in-depth and thoughtful. Focus on engaging the time period and its texts in dialog. What did they mean for their time period? What teaching do they have for us today (if any)?

Topics & Weeks

1. Introduction

Reading

Note: read the assigned readings in order; they build on each other.

Felton, 1 “Transcendentalism: An Introduction”

Note: Felton is always an easy read that provides background and context

Packer, 1 “Unitarian Beginnings”

Note: Packer’s historical narrative builds on Felton with a focus on culture and ideas.

Hankins, 2 “Transcendentalism as a New Religious Movement” **PDF Excerpt**

Online discussion

Introduce yourself. Who are you? What is your seminary? What program are you in? Which year are you in your program? What do you plan to do with your degree? If you were alive during the Transcendentalist era, which Transcendentalist would you have been? Why?

- ### 2. The Origins of Transcendentalism: New England Unitarianism, European Romanticism and Idealism (Mary Moody Emerson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Ellery Channing, Thomas Carline, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Henry Hedge, George Ripley)

Reading

Felton, 2 “Boston: Public Face” and 3 “Cambridge: Training Ground”
Packer, 3 “Carlyle and the Beginnings of American Transcendentalism”
Packer 2 “Assault on Locke” (optional, recommended for philosophical interests)
Buel, I “Anticipations.”

Note: Buel offers source readings from the period. These can often be challenging and archaic. Instead of an encyclopedic summary, focus on the 2-3 main arguments (and metaphors) of each reading.

On-line discussion

Each student will pick one of the 7 readings from Buel (no repeats). In one paragraph, compare and contrast the reading with the Transcendentalist movement. In a second paragraph, explain the most important idea of the reading. Note the most confusing or challenging notion in the reading. Ask one question about the reading for further discussion (a critical thinking question, not a factual one).

3. Manifestos and Definitions of Transcendentalism (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, Christopher Pearce Cranch, George Ripley, Charles Dickens, Henry David Thoreau)

Reading

Felton, 3 “Concord: Heart and Soul”
Packer, 4 “*Annus Mirabilis*”
Buell, II “Manifestos and Definitions”

On-line discussion

Pick one of the 9 readings (no repeats). Pretend that you are the author. Your editor has assigned you the task of writing a 3-paragraph Reader’s Digest version of your essay in modern English. You also need to compose one discussion question to start a conversation about the reading.

4. Spiritual Ferment & Religious Reform (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Andrews Norton, Henry Ware, Jr, George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Lidian Emerson, Hendry David Thoreau, Thomas Wentworth Higginson)

Reading

Packer, 5 “The Establishment and the Movement”
Buell, III “Spiritual Ferment and Religious Reform”

On-line discussion

Students will work in groups of two, conducting a dyad discussion of their reading. Write a brief intro, and ask a pertinent question about it. Dialog with your partner on the issue. Each student will lead the discussion with their selected reading.

Paper (due Sunday midnight)

Write a 2-3 page personal reflective paper, on the topic, “Transcendentalist influences on my own spiritual development and practice.” Ideally, this could be written as the minister’s article for a church newsletter: make it accessible, enticing, and readable.

Congratulations: a fourth of the course is done!

5. Social Aims & Secular Reform: Individual Transformation & Social Change (Orestes Brownson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, George Ripley, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau)

Reading

Packer, 6 “Letters and Social Aims”

Buell, IV.A “Reform as Individual transformation Versus Reform as Systemic Social Change” (except 4 Peabody’s “Plan of West Roxbury Community” and 5 Ripley’s “Brook Farm’s Constitution”)

6. Utopian Communities (Brook Farm and Fruitlands)

Reading

Felton, 7 “Utopian Societies: Transcendent Communities”

Packer, 7 “The Hope of Reform”

Buell, IV.A. 4 Peabody’s “Plan of West Roxbury Community” and 5 Ripley’s “Brook Farm’s Constitution”

7. Educational Reform & Experimentation (Elizabeth Peabody, Amos Bronson Alcott)

Reading

Packer, 7 “The Hope of Reform”

Buell, IV.B “Education”

A. B. Alcott, **PDF excerpts**

Paper (due Sunday midnight)

Write a 2-3 page personal reflective paper, on the topic, “Transcendentalist influences on my pursuit of social action and justice.” Ideally, this could be written as an op ed piece for the *UU World*: broad appeal, interesting, and inspiring.

READING WEEK

8. Women, Feminism, and Suffrage (Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott)

Reading

Hankins, 6 “Revivalism and Feminism” **PDF Excerpt**

Buell, IV. C “Feminism”

Fuller

L. M. Alcott

Final Project Proposals due (Sunday Midnight)

9. Nature: Body, Mind, Spirit (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Lane, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Wentworth Higginson)

Reading

Felton, 5 “Walden: Secular and Sacred”

Buell, IV.D “Nature and the Health of Body and Spirit”

10. Anti-slavery (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau)

Reading

Packer, 9 “The Antislavery Years”

Buell, IV.E “Antislavery”

Hankins, 5 “The Second Great Awakening, Transcendentalism, and the Antislavery Impulse”

PDF Excerpt

Paper (due Sunday midnight)

Write a 2-3 page personal reflective paper, on the topic, “Why is Transcendentalism important for Unitarian Universalism today?” Ideally, this will read like a short, focused sermon for use in worship.

11. Prose, Art, and Music (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, John Sullivan Dwight, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Amos Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott)

Reading

Buell, V.A “Critical Statements,” V.B “‘Impoverished’ Prose,” and V.D “Narrative”

12. Poetry (William Ellery Channing II, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederic Henry Hedge, Ellen Sturgis Hooper, Henry David Thoreau, Jones Very, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson)

Reading

Felton, 8 “Amherst: ‘Paradise’”

Buell, V.C “Poetry”

13. Influences and Aftermath (Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Henry Channing, Charlotte Forten, Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Octavius Brooks Forthingham, Caroline Wells Healey Dall, Henry James)

Reading

Packer, 8 “Diaspora”

Buell, VI “Remembrances”

14. Conclusion & Final Project

Online Discussion

Final Project due (Friday, 5 PM)

Student Expectations

Participants will participate in weekly interactive discussions, with their own contributions postings and responses to other contributions.

Participants will write three 2-3 page personal reflective papers. The week 4 topic will be, “Transcendentalist influences on my own spiritual development and practice.” The week 7 topic will be, “Transcendentalist influences on my pursuit of social action and justice.” The week 10 topic will be, “Why is Transcendentalism important for Unitarian Universalism today?”

The final paper will be a ministerial or educational project about Transcendentalism, of the participant’s own choosing (in consultation with the instructor). It will be about 10-15 pages long. Students have the following options: a research project of their interest, a sermon series on Transcendentalism, an Adult Faith Development program, research the influences of Transcendentalism on subsequent religious thought, etc.. The project can be artistic or creative in nature, such as an original creation of an artwork, music, literature, or a performance piece.

Starr King’s Eight Threshold Areas for the course

This course focuses on the “History of Dissenting Traditions and the Thea/ological Quest.” It centers on the disciples of theological and religious education, specifically theology, church history, and cultural studies.

Starr King’s commitment to Educating to Counter Oppressions and Create Just and Sustainable Communities

The course will study Transcendentalism, an early American Unitarian religious movement, that includes a deep commitment to social justice. It included anti-slavery, women’s suffrage (and other rights), educational reform, and egalitarian society. Students will specifically explore the role of women in 19th century American society, and the African-American context of slavery and emancipation.

Special attention to educating students from historically marginalized social locations in their preparation for religious leadership

The course will explore the religious and social goals of Women and African-Americans in 19th century American society. It will look at the efforts of Women and African-Americans on behalf

of their own liberation, and at well-meaning middle-class whites who sought to assist in their social and political struggles. It will also investigate the flowering of Unitarian interests in the religious traditions of the world, beyond Christianity: Hinduism, Sufism, and nature spirituality.

Level of course

The course will be intermediate in nature. Ideally, students should complete a semester of church history or Unitarian-Universalist history. Either course should provide an overview of American religious life in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Students will gain most benefits from the course, by being able to situate it in a larger historical, cultural, and religious context.

Fieldwork, cultural immersion or community involvement

None. Students will not engage in field work/cultural immersion/community involvement as part of this course.

Instructor's Qualifications for this Course

Summer 2009, the instructor completed a National Endowment for the Humanities "Landmarks of American History and Culture" program for college faculty. The topic was "Concord, Massachusetts: A Center of Transcendentalism and Social Reform in the 19th Century." The workshop was held in Concord, MA, with daily visiting scholars, guided tours of historic locations, and research in the Transcendentalism collection of the Concord Public Library (the second largest collection on Transcendentalism, after Harvard's Houghton Library).



Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond