Evangelicalism in Antebellum America

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Overview

Between the American Revolution and the Civil War, evangelical Protestantism rose to a salient position, not just in American religion, but in the culture at large. Beginning at the tail end of the eighteenth century, religious revivals became a recurrent event in localities across the nation. The revivals yielded converts who swelled the ranks of churches and voluntary societies. Evangelical denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists benefited most of all.

By about 1830, evangelicals nationwide created a new institution, the Sunday school, with the goal of passing on the faith to their children and the children of others. A key attraction of any Sunday school was its library, which contained juvenile literature produced by denominational publishing houses, national agencies such as the American Sunday School Union, or trade publishers looking to make a profit off of the schools' large enrollments.

This module is designed to give you insights into and a feel for the culture of evangelicalism during the early republic and antebellum period. It is one thing to read textbook accounts of "the Second Great Awakening" or "antebellum middle-class culture." It is another, richer experience to investigate these topics yourself through an encounter with some provocative primary sources.

Resources

The following websites either are used in this activity or provide useful background:

1. "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic" (http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/religion.html) is the website for an exhibition mounted in 1998 at the Library of Congress. It surveys the role of religion in the colonial period and the founding of the new nation. This exercise uses only the last of seven sections, the one on "Religion and the New Republic."

2. "Shaping the Values of Youth: Sunday School Books in 19th Century America (http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/ssb/index.cfm) is a searchable database of over 160 texts published between the years 1815 and 1865 for use in Protestant Sunday school classes.

3. "Living the Revolution: America, 1789-1820" (http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/livingrev/livingrev.htm) is an "online professional development seminar toolbox" from the National Humanities Center. It contains an array of material for teaching and learning about the early republic. This module makes use of some of the primary source documents available on the site.

4. "Divining America: Religion and the National Culture (http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/divam.htm), also from the National Humanities Center, provides over two dozen essays by leading scholars on topics in American religious history from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. As background information, people teaching this module may wish to read Donald Scott's essay, "Evangelicalism, Revivalism, and the Second Great Awakening" (http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/nevanrev.htm).

Activities

I divide this module into two parts to fit with how my U.S. survey course is typically set up to meet twice per week, with one day being in a computer lab and the other in a traditional classroom.

Part I: Revivals

1. You will work on this section in groups of two or three.

2. As background, read the description (http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel07.html) of "Religion and the New Republic." Be sure to scroll down the entire page, taking in all of the text and images. (Note that you can enlarge any of the images to full-screen size by clicking on them.) Based on what you read here, how would your group define the term, "evangelical"? Post a definition to Blackboard, or, if another group has already done so, post a comment that amends that group's definition.

3. Compare and contrast the following excerpt (http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/livingrev/religion/text6/cartwright.pdf) from the *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* with this excerpt (http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/livingrev/religion/text7/allen.pdf) from *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. To Blackboard, post a short essay of three or four paragraphs that addresses the following questions: What happened to bring about the conversion of Cartwright and Allen to evangelical Christianity, and how did each man's behavior change as a result? What aspects of the camp meeting experience could bring about the conversion of so many people at once? What was the basic message that each man responded to personally and then preached himself? Finally, how did white Methodists decide to address the issue of slavery? What experiences of Allen's led to the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination? Discuss these questions with your partner(s) before you start writing. Each group should just post one essay together.

Part II: Sunday School Books

1. Before class, go to the "Sunday School Books" homepage (http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/ssb/index.cfm), and locate the story, *My First Sunday-School*, using the "Browse: Titles" function. Read the story in its entirety. As you are reading, bear in mind the following questions: According to this story, what would a typical child's experience have been like in an antebellum Sunday school? What were children taught in Sunday school, both in terms of specific religious doctrines and general values? Who were the teachers and other adults involved there? What roles do books and reading play in the story? Then post to Blackboard an observation or question to be used in class discussion.

2. For homework after class, explore the "Shaping the Values of Youth" site, especially the "Sunday School Books by Category" (http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/ssb/?action=list), and identify a subject that you would like to research further; your subject can be either pre-selected or one of your own creation. "Sunday School Books by Category" contains thirteen pre-arranged topics such as "Immigrants" or "Temperance." To create your own list, use the "Search the Collection" (http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/ssb/search.cfm) feature. Enter keywords to find books that appeals to your curiosity.

3. Once you have found a likely topic, identify a few stories that relate to it with a total number of pages around 120. Thus, you could choose just one long story of that length. More likely, you will have to select three or four different stories around a common theme that in combination total about 120 pages. When you have selected your topics and titles, send me an e-mail, so that I can review your selections prior to the start of your research. Once your topic has been approved by me, you should read the stories themselves by accessing them through the "Shaping the Values of Youth" (http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/ssb/index.cfm) site

4. You are to use your selected stories as the basis for a 1000-word essay on the culture of nineteenth-century evangelicalism as revealed through your topic. The specific focus of the essay is up to you; put another way, the focus of the essay will come to mind as you think about the stories you are reading. As you read, consider the following questions, although your essay need not address every one of them: What religious beliefs do the stories emphasize, and what religious practices do they hold up for emulation? What behaviors, attitudes, and values do the stories praise or condemn? What life lessons do the stories' authors seek to impart to their readers? How do the

stories depict male and female characters and the ideal mother and father? How do the stories portray people of other races, religions, or nationalities, if they are included? What examples of antebellum Protestant reform appear? In your essay, be sure to cite specific examples from the texts in support of your argument.

Instructor's Annotations

When I initially planned this module, I intended to use it in either of two courses that I teach: a one-semester survey of "Religion in America" that is cross-listed as history and American studies or an upper-division history course on "The Early American Republic, 1788-1850." An understanding of evangelicalism is essential for both courses. Not only was evangelicalism the most important expression of Protestant Christianity in nineteenth-century America, but it also ranked right up with land as a driving factor in the history of the early republic, as Robert Wiebe observed in *The Opening of American Society*. Today's students, however, can have a tough time grasping the concept. Secularists find accounts of revivals and conversions quite alien, while contemporary Christians need to appreciate that their nineteenth-century brethren lived in a very different milieu, to say nothing of the reaction of people of different faiths.

The Sunday school literature at the center of the module offers an accessible path into the heart of antebellum evangelical culture in the United States. Since the books were written for a juvenile audience, their prose is relatively easy to comprehend. But such seeming simplicity should not deceive us: the books are revealing cultural artifacts that are laden with a range of ideas, values, and attitudes. Moreover, the American Memory collection's database of Sunday school literature provides students the opportunity to research a subtopic of their own choosing. It is my hope that giving students the freedom to choose their paper topic will foster more interest in and ownership of the assignment.

The module was originally designed to fit the arrangement I formerly had, whereby I saw students once a week in a computer lab and once a week in a conventional classroom. Part I takes advantage of having students together in lab by directing them to discuss with a partner and come to a shared understanding of key concepts. Part II is based on the idea of having students do a common reading before class, which we will then discuss as a group. It seemed to me important that we take the time to model for students how to interpret one of the stories and search it for meaning.

Instructors will accordingly have to modify the assignment based on their particular settings of computer lab, conventional classroom, or online. Although I have never done so, the module could presumably be assigned outside class time entirely, if the students were experienced with using an online discussion board. Furthermore, if the module is being used in a survey of U.S. history to 1865, there will probably not be time for all of it. Part I could be assigned as background or discarded altogether, while the heart of the module from Part II is used instead. One could even narrow the focus further, by limiting students to certain topics such as "temperance," so that the exercise relates to two stand-bys of the survey, the evangelical movement and reform.