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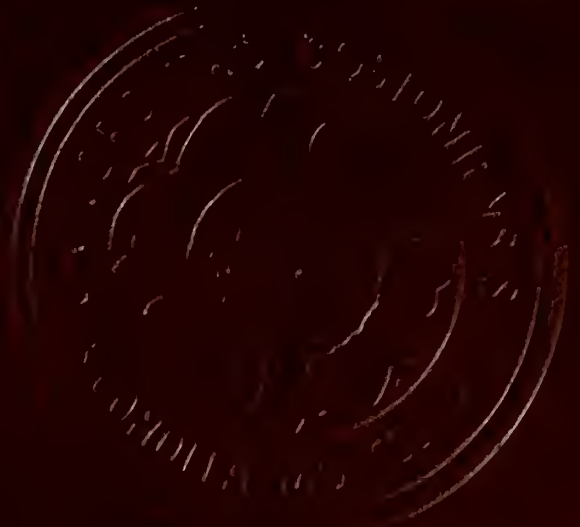
Early unitarianism and Bronson Alcott

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MASTER'S THESIS
EARLY UNITARIANISM
and
BRONSON ALCOTT
By HOPE ARMITAGE
BOSTON UNIVERSITY 1944

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

THESIS

EARLY UNITARIANISM AND BRONSON ALCOTT

By

HOPE ARMITAGE

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APPROVED

By

First Reader Thomas R. Mather
Professor of English

Second Reader George M. Sweath
Professor of English

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INTRODUCTION

Emerson said of Amos Bronson Alcott "...I see plainly that I conversed with the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time. He is a man..."¹

The majority have taken Alcott's pure Transcendentalism for granted, and they have placed no importance on what Unitarian influence there might have been in his philosophical and religious ideals.

It was the purpose of this study (1) to determine the influence of the Unitarian movement on Amos Bronson Alcott; and (2) to determine which if any of Alcott's principles were Unitarian rather than Transcendental.

Although Alcott was not himself a writer of great and major importance, his ideals were marked in their influence upon Emerson, Thoreau, Ripley, Sanborn, Harris and others. For nearly fifty years his conversations enriched the lives of his friends, and the results of these conversations may be seen in their work. To determine where

¹Bliss Perry, Editor, The Heart of Emerson's Journals (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1926), p. 110.

those ideals arose and from what source is to further the understanding of that period in New England literature called Transcendental.

Unitarianism was interpreted as meaning (1) the unity of God; that is God in one person rather than God, the Holy Trinity; (2) the universal brotherhood of man; (3) man as the child of God, and (4) Christ as the example of the perfect man and not a divine person.²

Transcendentalism was interpreted as meaning the philosophical and religious ideal that proclaimed the intellectual came from the intuition, senses, and the "over-soul" rather than experience, i.e. it transcended experience. This philosophy in its entirety adopted miracles, ecstasy, intuition, and inspiration. The doctrine of Transcendentalism as presented was first set forth by Immanuel Kant of Königsberg.³

²James F. Clarke, Manual of Unitarian Belief. (Boston: The Beacon Press, Inc. 1924), p. 13.

³Octavius B. Forthingham, Transcendentalism in New England (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1876), p. 127.

CHAPTER I

BEFORE UNITARIANISM

Amos Bronson Alcott, who lived his adult life a non-conformist even to the liberal Unitarian creed, found nothing of this attitude in his family environment. His early religious outlook and training were Episcopalian, the church of his mother's family; and of his immediate family Alcott's mother exercised the strongest and most lasting influence upon him. In New Connecticut, his poetic autobiography, he stated that clearly.

Lovingly his mother did her lore impart;
While with soft eyes he did her daily see,
Flushed his young fancy, touched his tender heart,
His conscience christened in infancy.¹

Alcott, born in Wolcott, Connecticut, November 29, 1799, was the eldest son of Joseph Chatfield Alcox and Anna Bronson. When a youth Alcott and his cousin William Alcott changed their name from "Alcox", the corrupted form of Alcocke, to the now familiar Alcott.²

¹Amos Bronson Alcott, New Connecticut (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1887), p. 22.

²F. B. Sanborn and William T. Harris, Memoir of Bronson Alcott (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1893), Vol. I, p. 1.

His first education, the learning of his letters and how to read, came from his mother. Although she had wished him to be educated as had been her brother, Tillostson Bronson, Alcott's early and principal schooling was in the crossroads schoolhouse. Of this he himself said:

At crossroads near the district schoolhouse stood
Disconsolate; its wide-mouthed chimney heats,
Fuelled all winter long with soggy wood,
Scarce reached the shivering pupils in their seats.

All round the room the hacked pine tables range,
Long seats in front, in corner dungeon set;
Master will lessons hear, books interchange,
Mend pens, set copies, point the alphabet.

On Saturdays forth came, yellow and dim,
New England's Primer, and the scholars all
Lord's Prayer recite, Commandments, cradle-hymn,
And fatal consequence of Adam's fall.³

Books were few and very far afield. Bronson and William Alcott by borrowing around the countryside managed to add to the schoolroom's meager food. Noted among those they read were Pilgrim's Progress, Young's Night Thoughts, Hervey's Meditations and Burgh's Dignity of Human Nature.

³Alcott, op. cit., pp. 23-24

Pilgrim's Progress was Bronson Alcott's favorite. Often when he was working on his father's farm, he acted the part of Pilgrim. Pilgrim appears to have given him his first philosophical thoughts and stimulus.⁴

The fall of 1813 found Alcott in Cheshire with his uncle, Reverend Tillotson Bronson. He was to run his uncle's errands and to attend the local school. After two months the boy and his uncle discovered differences of opinions that combined with Alcott's homesickness, and necessitated his return to the Spindle Hill farm. After this his only formal education was three months in the spring of 1815 spent on arithmetic, grammar, and writing with the Reverend John Keyes.

His parents had become communicants of the Episcopal parish in Wolcott after its organization in 1811. Mrs. Alcott had been reared in the Episcopal Church, and her husband had followed her example. Alcott had been confirmed by Bishop Brownell in 1816, and his mother for a long time hoped that he would follow her brother in the ministry.

⁴F. B. Sanborn and William T. Harris, op. cit., p. 16.

Although Bronson had helped to conduct the services in Wolcott prior to the engagement of a rector, he soon lost all interest in the ministry and even while in the Episcopalian stronghold of Virginia drifted from the church.⁵ While he at that time expressed a growing distaste for the forms and ritual of the church, it was not until he met Samuel May that he seriously attacked in his mind the beliefs of Trinitarianism.

Alcott under the influence of his cousin, William, decided to become a schoolteacher. Many threads in the life of Bronson Alcott may be traced to William Alcott, but the most important is that his influence decided Bronson Alcott to be a teacher. Alcott was receptive to the idea of teaching as he disliked farming and a previous job in the local clock factory had proven to him his strong dislike for work such as that.

With high hopes, a teaching certificate given to him by his uncle, Dr. Bronson, and a youthful assurance, Alcott sailed for Virginia October 13, 1818. When Alcott arrived he found no schools or tutorial positions open to him. Instead of teaching he turned to peddling, a job for which

⁵Ibid, p. 25.

he was not without experience. In the summer of 1815 he had made two trips as a peddler into Western Massachusetts with a cousin, Thomas Alcox.

The first year proved so successful from a financial point of view that Alcott returned to Virginia and peddling in the fall of 1819. With him this time went his brother. This season was, also, prosperous. At the time it was nearly disastrously so to Alcott. Upon his return to Wolcott in the midsummer of 1820, his costly clothes and fine manners caused more than one head to shake and more than one tongue to wag.

Highly encouraged by his two former successes, Alcott made three more trips south. All were financial failures. Alcott returned from his last trip to Wolcott after a serious illness and badly in debt to his father. The debt was in fact nearly the exact amount that the four years of Yale would have cost his father.

But the southern trips were not complete failures. There Alcott for the first time found all the books he could read and the leisure in which to read them. The planters were more than generous with their libraries to the young peddler.⁶ Also, it was in the south that he acquired the

⁶Ibid., p. 65.

polished and courtly manner which later became his talisman, for Alcott with his selective eye took only the best Virginia had to offer.

In North Carolina, Alcott met many followers of George Fox. The Quakers and their religious instruction gave him his first non-Episcopalian religious instruction. Their ideas and opinions helped to start Alcott in his religious and philosophical change.⁷

Finally in November, 1825, Alcott received his long hoped for teaching position. He became the village schoolmaster in Cheshire, Connecticut. Here Alcott for the first time started to use his own ideas of education. They were at this time merely rough outlines of the system he was later to develop so highly in Boston and Philadelphia.⁸

⁷Ibid, p. 65.

⁸Ibid, p. 70.

CHAPTER II

UNITARIANISM

While in Cheshire Alcott received his first direct contact with the non-Orthodox Church from Samuel J. May. Alcott's school had aroused the interest of S. J. May, a Unitarian minister in Brooklyn, Connecticut; and because of the school a correspondence flourished before they became acquainted in the summer of 1827.¹

The Unitarian belief in one God, a Unity, and not a God of Three Persons, the Trinity, was the logical belief for Alcott, the rebel and mystic. His theories of education which sprang from within himself were ample proof of both. His constant inner questioning of the whys and wherefores of human nature, its origin, and its God were highly conducive to that belief. The acceptance of Unitarian doctrines was only the final break with orthodox religion that may be traced to the questioning which arose in Alcott's mind following his friendship with the Quakers of North Carolina.

¹F. B. Sanborn and William T. Harris, A Memoir of A. Bronson Alcott (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1893), Vol. 1, p. 76.

Unitarianism under that name was in 1827 a comparatively young movement in America, and the inner conflict which soon grew had not as yet made its debut. A movement young and rebellious presents a solid front to the world, that was and still is necessary for its preservation. The position and doctrines of Unitarianism were presented to America at the First Unitarian Church in Baltimore.

It was there in 1819, on the occasion of the ordination of Reverend Jared Sparks as the first minister of this church, that Dr. Channing gave utterance to the first great declaration of the Unitarian position, in a sermon that has never been surpassed in this country as an intellectual interpretation of the highest spiritual problems.²

In this declaration many of the tenets of the older Protestant faiths remained, and these tenets later became the subject of strong controversy. This controversy arose when the German philosophical system of Transcendentalism and not the English Unitarian beliefs began to hold sway within a small group of the younger Unitarians.³

²George W. Cooke, Unitarianism in America (Boston: American Unitarian Association 1910), p. 111.

³Ibid., p. 155.

The early Unitarians were believers in the supernatural and in the miracles of the New Testament. They accepted without question the ideas on this subject that had been entertained by all Protestants from the days of Luther and Calvin.⁴

Although Unitarianism was a youthful movement in America when Alcott first made his acquaintance with it, it was by no means a youthful one in Europe and the Near East. The various seeds of Unitarianism tried to establish themselves in all countries affected by the Reformation. However, the discussion of the validity of the Holy Trinity far precedes the Reformation. This doctrine caused trouble between the Eastern and Western Branches of the Apostolic Church long before their final division,⁵ and it has been considered by many the cause of much ill feeling between the peoples of the Jewish and Christian faiths.⁶

This early discussion of Trinitarian validity grew from the teachings of Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria around 318. His belief was known as Arianism.

⁴Ibid, p. 156.

⁵Earl M. Wilbur, Our Unitarian Heritage (Boston: The Beacon Press 1926), p. 23.

⁶Ibid, p. 9.

This was Arianism: the belief that Christ though a being far above man, was yet less than God; that he was created before the creation of the world; and that he was of a different nature from either God or man.⁷

This controversy between Arius and the Bishop of Alexandria led to the Council of Nicaea in 325. From this Council came the Nicene Creed. "It was the one creed recognized by both the Eastern and Western Church, from which it has been inherited by Orthodox Protestantism."⁸

Until the Reformation this creed ended all formal attacks on the Holy Trinity, and it was the one common ground upon which both Catholic and Orthodox Protestant could attack the Antitrinitarians. Even Calvin was willing to help Catholicism in stamping out the heretic who dared to question the divinity of Christ.⁹

The Antitrinitarianism of the Reformation and seventeenth century was by no means Unitarianism in the modern sense. There are, however, several Antitrinitarian movements worthy of mention because they kept alive the spirit of

⁷Ibid, p. 14.

⁸Ibid, p. 472.

⁹Joseph H. Allen, An Historical Sketch of the Unitarian Movement since the Reformation (New York: The Christian Literature Co. 1894), p. 46.

Unity in God. Among these were the fight of Servetus to purify the conception of the Godhead within the Catholic Church and later within the Protestant Churches,¹⁰ the Minor Reform Church of Poland 1565-79,¹¹ Socinianism in Poland,¹² and Unitarianism in Transylvania 1564-1690.¹³

These early movements had an effect upon the nineteenth century American Unitarian movement through their effect upon the English Unitarianism. Until the 1830's the main current of thought and influence flowed from the English movement to the American. For that reason some understanding of the early development of Unitarianism in England is compulsory to comprehend the thought which developed in America and culminated in the Unitarian Church.

The Unitarian movement in England did not spring from any single source. We may discover at least four fairly distinct streams of influence that flowed together in it before the end of the seventeenth century. There are: first, the influence of the Bible (Wyclif's) itself; second, the influence of Italians and other foreign

¹⁰Wilbur, op. cit., pp. 52-64, 79-100.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 135-147.

¹²Ibid., pp. 148-180.

¹³Ibid., pp. 209-258.

thinkers at the Strangers' Church in London; third, Anabaptist influences; and fourth, the influence of Socinianism.¹⁴

The first truly established Unitarian movement in England was a revolt from the Church of England led by Theophilus Lindsey. Prior to this there had been three separate movements towards Unitarianism, the first of these was isolated and ended with the death of its leader, John Bidle, in 1662,¹⁵ the second and third were factions within the Church of England and the Dissenting Churches. These movements grew to a large degree independently of each other. It was from their union that the English Unitarian Church became an organized body.¹⁶

England's first successful Unitarian Society was the one organized by Theophilus Lindsey at London on April 17, 1774. Lindsey had been a vicar of the English Church. He had loved the form of worship but had disagreed with the conception of the Godhead. After the establishment of his Essex Street Chapel, he used a revised form of the Book of

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 289-90.

¹⁵Allen op. cit., pp. 131-35

¹⁶Wilbur, op. cit., p. 343.

Common Prayer that omitted the exaltation of Christ to a Deity.

While Lindsey supplied the Church of England bond to Unitarianism, Priestly, an extreme rationalist, supplied the dissenting one. His influence was largely responsible for the rationalistic and independent thinking that was typical of the English movement in the nineteenth century before the influence of Channing was carried from America to England. "Their religion seemed more of the head than of the heart, and many of the churches of their followers were deemed cold and unspiritual."¹⁷

It was this rationalistic tendency that slowly made silent inroads in the American Calvinistic Churches during the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The liberal tendency grew inwardly with no controversy until Reverend Henry Ware's election to the Chair of Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard in the spring of 1805. Ware's liberalism developed a controversy that resulted in Channing's Baltimore sermon and the pronouncement of American liberalism in religion as Unitarianism.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 383.

¹⁸Cooke, op. cit., pp. 55-91.

Although early American Unitarians accepted the miracles of the New Testament, it was a rationalistic movement that appealed to man's trained intellect rather than to his intuition. It was, also, a release from the formal authority of the old religion.

This history and background of Unitarianism opened to Alcott a treasure chest of study, meditation, and discussion with Samuel J. May. The history and reading were not only interesting in themselves, but they suggested many other fields to explore and to study. They were a pull to the mystical in Alcott which later led him to Transcendentalism.

Even when Alcott later doubted the appeal of Unitarianism for the majority¹⁹ and he discarded most Unitarian thought, a strong bond was established between the new religion and Alcott in Antitrinitarianism. For himself he firmly believed "Divinely speaking, God is the only person."²⁰

¹⁹Odell Shepard, Editor, The Journal of Bronson Alcott (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1938), p. 523.

²⁰A. Bronson Alcott, "Orphic Sayings", The Dial, Vol. I, No. 3, p. 352, January 1841.

CHAPTER III

TOWARDS TRANSCENDENTALISM

After Alcott's removal from the Cheshire School he went to Bristol, Connecticut, as the schoolmaster. In Bristol as in Cheshire Alcott's advanced educational theories received harsh treatment. It was soon apparent that he could not remain there and teach as he saw fit.

Samuel May, who was greatly interested in the public school system and teaching, advised Alcott to go to Boston. This Alcott did in the fall of 1827. In Boston he obtained the primary teaching position in a small private school of the Kindergarden type. Mr. May's efforts and recommendations were responsible for Alcott's success in acquiring the position. As his theories and practices received an enthusiastic reception, Alcott believed his struggle to gain recognition in the educational field had ended. He now turned his attention to the development of his own philosophical and religious ideals as well as educational ones.

Under the influence of Unitarianism Alcott slowly evolved his concepts of education to the fine drawn out principles illustrated in his Temple School. From the time of his first contact with Unitarianism Alcott swiftly developed his

idealistic tendencies. Many Americans have been and are idealistic; most of us have a vein of idealism; but Alcott was peculiar in that he was nothing but an idealist.

In going from Connecticut to Boston, Alcott found himself in the center of idealistic religious and philosophical thought. He accepted Unitarianism through his own interpretation of the Bible and his admiration for its leader. In his Journal Alcott said of Channing:

His mind is a remarkable one. It soars high. It leaves the region of material vision and seeks affinity with the objects and essences of spiritual forms. It looks far into futurity, and assembles the realities of its scenes. It casts a penetrating and extensive look over the whole range of the moral kingdom, and defines in the happiest outlines the relations and dependencies of every scene. It throws upon the principles of Christianity a light which dissipates the darkness in which it has so long been enclosed, and reveals to the plainest understanding its beauty, its accordance with the wants of our nature, its power in elevating that nature to the heights of virtue and happiness, and its influence upon the mind in the investigation of truth as the great end of its action¹

And it was truth in the pure and abstract that Alcott sought. For him truth was the answer to the problem of man's relation to God, the problem of the "One and many". Many

¹Odell Shepard, Editor, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1938), p. 19.

times in Boston he felt he was reaching nearer and nearer to this great truth. The stimulation of men such as Ripley, Pierpont, Forthingham, Young, Palfrey, Tuckerman, and Emerson whom he heard from the pulpit and lecture stage quickened his mind and imagination.² Although by this time (1829) he knew Channing, Ripley, and others, it was not until 1835 that he met Emerson. Their acquaintanceship soon developed into the mutually beneficial friendship that lasted for the remainder of their lives.

During this first Boston residence Alcott embarked upon his lifelong career as a talker. His most profound influence upon Emerson and the other New England Transcendentalists was the verbal thought left with them.

Soon after his marriage in 1830 to Abigail May, Alcott heard and then met William Lloyd Garrison. This resulted in the formation of an interest strongly distasteful to the majority of Boston's Unitarians and drew his attention to reforms other than educational ones.

²Ibid., p. 19.

Although Alcott professed Unitarianism as his belief for some time he had been questioning himself as to whether it was the highest form of Christian religion. His reading of the metaphysical and mystical pre-Lockean philosophers tended to pronounce this doubt.³ He was "speculating deeply on the nature of the soul and on human perfectibility."⁴ Alcott was certain Unitarianism did not hold the answer.

His stay in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where he met and talked with liberal minded Quakers aggravated his growing animosity to Unitarianism. His attitude of respect was changing to one of harsh criticism.

Alcott was not alone in his growing critical attitude. Emerson in his sermons was giving vent to the same doubts and questions. Unitarianism was not after all the cure-all.

An influence much freer and more tinted with romanticism than the rationalistic English one was rapidly making steady progress in the calm pool of Unitarian theology. This was German Transcendentalism.

³Ibid., p. 26.

⁴F. S. Sanborn and William T. Harris, Memoirs of A. Bronson Alcott (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1893), Vol. I, p. 235.

"Dr. Channing was one of its originators; and so, less directly were Coleridge, Carlyle, and the Germans whom these two chiefly made known to the English speaking race."⁵

⁵Ibid., p. 235.

CHAPTER IV

TRANSCENDENTALISM

Transcendentalism in New England received its impetus from the German philosophical system of Immanuel Kant; but in New England it was more than a philosophy, it was a religious movement, "A wave of sentiment!"¹ The rationalistic Unitarianism of English influence lacked a warmth and personal element which Transcendentalism supplied. When Transcendentalism arose in New England it was in direct dispute with Unitarianism. Later many features of Transcendentalism were incorporated in Unitarianism.

When Alcott returned to Boston in the midsummer of 1834, he found that Emerson had gone to Concord and the revolt was in full swing. The revolt was one more of spirit than of doctrine. The Transcendentalists felt their common bond to be love of truth and freedom. In reality it was, also, a revolt of a few from rationalism and cold intelligence. It gave the heart preference over the mind.

¹O. B. Forthingham, Transcendentalism in New England (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1876), p. 355.

"The heart is the prophet of your soul, and ever fulfills her prophecies; reason is her historian; but for the prophecy the history would not be."²

Alcott gravitated towards this new trend within Unitarianism. This movement which would not be bounded by ordinary methods of thought, this movement which sought the true meaning of faith, love, and man from instinct and insight pulled Alcott to its group. His reading and study especially that on human perfectibility and the nature of the soul made him better prepared than most men to enter the nascent movement.³ For Transcendentalism to Alcott was a means to reach the method of acquiring that perfectibility.

Alcott's new school in Boston, the Temple School (1834-37) was the proving ground for his theories both religious and educational. During the Temple School period Alcott and not Emerson was regarded as the Transcendentalists' leader. Not until his Divinity School address of 1838 was that position in Transcendental circles given to Emerson. Emerson became "The Seer", and Alcott "The Mystic" of the movement.

²A. B. Alcott, "Orphic Sayings", The Dial, Vol. I, No. 1, July 1840, p. 85.

³F. B. Sanborn and William T. Harris, Memoir of Bronson Alcott (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1893), p. 235.

"Mr. Alcott may be justly called a mystic - one of the very small class of persons who accept without qualification and constantly teach the doctrine of the soul's primacy and pre-existence."⁴

The representatives of the new spiritual philosophy founded "The Symposium" or later Transcendental Club. Ripley, Emerson, and Alcott were responsible for the club's formation. The meetings were held under various names from 1836 to 1850. The general order of the club was open debate on some topic of proven Transcendental interest. The first meeting at Alcott's saw one of his favorite subjects under debate, that of "American Genius--the causes which hinder its growth."⁵

To the followers of Transcendentalism, the movement gave their life purpose, but Emerson aptly summed up the opinion of most people when he said: "The view taken of Transcendentalism in State Street is that it threatens to invalidate contracts."⁶

Despite the general opinion of Transcendentalism it did enlarge the thought and make for a broader scope and not a narrow range in ideas.

⁴O. B. Forthingham, op. cit., p. 249.

⁵Sanborn & Harris, op. cit., p. 239.

⁶Bliss Perry, Editor, The Heart of Emerson's Journals (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1926) p. 166.

As Transcendentalism grew, Alcott's school failed. With this failure in the educational field Alcott left teaching and devoted the remainder of his life to philosophical debates, reading, and conversation. His mind was one of insight, intuition, and instinct. He believed in the wisdom of the soul;

Deepest wisdom is nearest. Not in the midst of the ages alone, but in the midst of every soul. Woulds't be wise, O man? Look then into thy soul, and thou shalt find wisdom--yea more than did Plato or Jesus. For thus they waxed wise. So thou. Bring the ages into thy day. Behold eternity in it. Summon thy soul into thy presence. Is not a greater than Plato or Jesus before thee? Thou mayest know this: those thou cans't but fancy. Let thy instinct save thee."⁷

By December of 1835 Alcott had so evolved his own religious ideals that he no longer felt the need of a church.

It is not my duty, I cannot so regard it, to attend the churches. My own spirit preaches sounder doctrine than I there hear, and I must listen to its divine teachings. Not in contumelious distrust of the good results of the preached word on society will I refrain from the temples, but in the deep conviction that the Lord appeareth to me more visibly in other courts, and that there am I to seek and find Him, worshipping in the holy temple of soul.⁸

⁷Odell Shepard, Editor, The Journals of Bronson Alcott (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1938), p. 93.

⁸Ibid., p. 72.

Under the influence of his reading in Plato and Plotinus Alcott became the Transcendental advocate of Plotinus' theory that the origin of all things comes from the lapse or fall from the Absolute One.⁹ Thus when men were beginning to understand evolution Alcott felt the process was in the reverse order.

In July, 1840, The Dial, Transcendentalism's "Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion" was published for the first time. The "Orphic Sayings" were Alcott's contribution to the magazine edited by Margaret Fuller and Emerson.

Also, in 1840, Alcott moved to Concord where with slight interruptions he spent the remaining forty-eight years of his life. With this move the inner circle of Transcendentalism was complete in one town. Here Alcott, Emerson, and Thoreau were to talk, to write, and to practice Transcendentalism for nearly fifty years.

⁹Sanborn & Harris, Op. cit., p. 572

CONCLUSION

The Unitarian movement introduced Alcott to non-Orthodox religion, and it gave him his first substantial contact with liberal thought. His own studies of the Bible convinced him that the Unitarian doctrine of Antitrinitarianism was the true interpretation of God. When Alcott accepted the premise of God as a Unity, he took his first major step towards his final philosophical and religious ideals.

Although Alcott himself remained Antitrinitarian in belief and in his early career was strongly influenced by the Unitarian leaders, his final philosophical and religious principles, those of wisdom from within, intuition, instinct, and the Lapse from the Absolute One were New England Transcendentalism.

Alcott was far too much the mystic for long enjoyment of the cold rationalistic viewpoint in Unitarianism.

ABSTRACT

Amos Bronson Alcott, the Transcendental mystic, sharply influenced the thought and work of American writers from 1835 to 1888. Although he was not himself a great writer, he left his imprint on the works of such men as Emerson and Thoreau through his conversation.

Alcott (1799-1888) was the eldest son of Joseph Chatfield Alcox and Anna Bronson. Reared in the Episcopal Church, he left that church for Unitarianism, and finally he left Unitarianism for Transcendentalism.

Although his early primary purpose was educational reform, his own formal education was limited to the village school near his father's Spindle Hill farm in Wolcott, Connecticut. It was even a difficulty for him to find reading material, only by borrowing was he able to secure books such as Pilgrim's Progress which gave him his first philosophical stimulus.

Influenced by his cousin, William Alcott, Bronson Alcott decided to become a teacher. In October of 1818 he went to Virginia with the hope of finding a school or tutorial position. In this he was unsuccessful, and he turned

to peddling. For five winters he traveled in the south as a peddler. Although the sum total of his efforts was financially a failure, personally it was not. He found books to read and the time in which to read them. His first non-Episcopalian religious instruction came from the Quakers of North Carolina.

November of 1825 saw Alcott in his first teaching position at Cheshire, Connecticut. Here he started to develop the educational system that he carried to Boston and Philadelphia. Because his method was so in advance of the educational practices then used, he was unable to remain in Cheshire. From Cheshire he went to Bristol, Connecticut, and from Bristol to Boston.

His educational ideals, which he evolved within his own mystical mind, attracted the attention of Samuel J. May, the Unitarian minister of Brooklyn, Connecticut. Mr. May's intense interest in public school education drew him to Alcott. After a period of correspondence, they met in the early summer of 1827.

Samuel J. May was a Unitarian minister in an orthodox state. The doctrines of his belief which he set before Alcott were the logical ones for the questioning and rebellious

Alcott. Antitrinitarianism was the answer to many of his questions. The acceptance of Unitarianism came only as the final break with Episcopalianism. The gulf had been slowly growing since his southern trip.

Unitarianism, as Alcott knew it, was the outgrowth of Pre-Reformation and Reformation Antitrinitarianism. The validity of the Holy Trinity as a subject of dispute in the Church dated from Arius and his doctrine of Arianism which resulted in the Nicene Creed of 325. This creed ended the formal attacks upon Trinitarianism until the Reformation.

During the Reformation the fight against Antitrinitarian movements was the only meeting ground of Catholic and Orthodox Protestant.

The eighteenth century Unitarianism of England sprang from four sources. These were Wyclif's Bible, the Strangers' Church, the Anabaptists, and Socinianism of Poland.

Prior to the establishment of Lindsey's Essex Street Chapel in London on April 17, 1774, there had been three separate attempts towards Unitarianism. The first, John Bidle's, ended with his death in 1662. The second and third were factions within the English and Dissenting Churches. The union of those factions formed the English Unitarian

Church. Lindsey came from the Church of England, Priestly from the Dissenters. Under Priestly's leadership the movement became extremely rationalistic.

This rationalism made inroads in American Calvinism without controversy until Henry Ware became Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard in 1805. Channing's Baltimore sermon of 1819 which named this liberalism as Unitarianism resulted from the controversy.

Unitarianism, its doctrines and history, opened new fields of thought to Alcott. Later he was to disagree with the majority of Unitarian principles, but he always believed in Antitrinitarianism for himself.

On Samuel J. May's advice Alcott went to Boston in the fall of 1827. Mr. May had recommended Alcott for the primary teaching position in a small school. While there Alcott achieved his first success.

Under the stimulus of Unitarian thought and men such as Channing, Ripley, Pierpont, Forthingham, Palfrey, Tuckerman, and Emerson he turned to the development of his personal philosophical ideals. These men, he believed, were striving for the truth of man's relationship to God, nature and himself.

Alcott married "Abba" May, sister of Samuel May in 1830. Until that year Unitarianism had occupied his mind, but in October he met William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison's anti-slavery movement was distasteful to the Unitarians. This angered Alcott, and he now turned to other reforms as well as educational ones.

Alcott had mentally left Unitarianism in 1834 when he returned to Boston after nearly four years in Germantown, Pennsylvania. He found a new influence had grown to shatter the quietness of Unitarian theology. This was Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism was a German philosophy advanced by Immanuel Kant and introduced to the English speaking peoples by Coleridge and Carlyle. In New England it became a religious as well as a philosophical doctrine. The growth in New England was rapid where it served as an antidote to Unitarianism's coolness and rationalism. In the end Unitarianism was enriched by incorporating many ideals of Transcendentalism with its own.

The revolt was one of spirit rather than doctrine. Its leaders felt their bond to be love of truth and freedom. They sought the true meaning of God, man, and nature with their instinct and insight.

Alcott in view of his reading on human perfectibility and the nature of the soul was well prepared to join the group and to become one of its leaders. Until Emerson's Divinity School Address of 1838 Alcott was regarded as the foremost Transcendentalist. Alcott became "The Mystic" of Transcendentalism, and a mystic he was. He accepted without question the soul's primacy and pre-existence.

Alcott used his Temple School to prove his theories of education, philosophy, religion and to advance the practice of reaching wisdom from within one's self. He so fully believed in worship from the soul that he left all organized church worship.

Alcott was an avid reader, and from his reading of Plato and Plotinus he adopted Plotinus' theory of Lapse from the Absolute One as his primary answer to the origin of man and man's nature.

After his final teaching failure he moved from Boston to Concord in 1840. With Emerson and Thoreau he was to talk, to write, and to live Transcendentalism for nearly fifty years.

Alcott's first liberalism and idealism sprang from the motivation that Unitarians and Unitarian thought gave him; but the final results, those ideals that were so influential in American philosophy and thought, were Transcendental.

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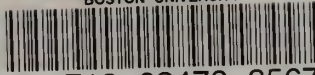
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