

Teaching New Harmony: Education, Religion and Human Nature at New Harmony, Indiana, 1824-1827

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“This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson in “The American Scholar” 1837.¹

People in the early American republic were increasingly open to new ideas about how to instruct the coming generations. The impact of the enlightenment and the French and American revolutions left open many possibilities for social change. The same reformist spirit seen in Emerson’s *American Scholar* was felt on the North American continent thirty years earlier with theorists such as Samuel Knox championing a system of liberal schools and it was certainly present at the experiment in communitarianism on the Indiana Wabash in the 1820s.²

Liberal theory and mainstream practice were separated by differing ideologies concerning religion and social thought which weighed heavily into theories of education. In the case of New Harmony, the pedagogically theories of the community’s leaders were shaped by their ideas about human nature and the role of religion in society which challenged the dominant Christian understandings in contemporary America.

While others have written about reform at New Harmony, this paper will focus on the impact of ideas about human nature and religion on educational reform. Due to the central importance of pedagogical theory to the philosophies of the experiment’s leaders and the influence of their radical ideas about human nature and religion upon those philosophies, New Harmony posed an affront to the Christian discourse on those issues in early 19th century American thought.

The historical significance of the experiment at New Harmony is entirely dependent on the historical significance of the ideas of Robert Owen, William Maclure and the other educators at New Harmony. Therefore, to understand education at New Harmony we have to understand the context and educational philosophies of these two men. However, as Howell and Prevenier remind us, “Historians who focus on the importance of the individual must, at a minimum, be sure to take account of the situation that made it possible for one person to have such an effect.”³

New Harmony was championed by British philanthropist and social theorist, Robert Owen. Born in northern Wales in 1771, Owen turned his attention to social philosophy and the search for a “New Moral World” after gaining his fortune in the 1790s. From January 1800 until his American aspirations at New Harmony in the 1820s, Owen managed the New Lanark mills in Scotland and established an environment in which he could act as a social engineer and form his theories on mankind.⁴ Thinking men and educators in both Europe and America admired his success at New Lanark. One of these was another wealthy philanthropist in Scotland, William Maclure.

Maclure, like Owen, gained his fortune through business success around the turn of the century and by the age of thirty-seven was able to dedicate most of his time to philanthropic pursuits.⁵ Maclure was principally an educational reformer and traveled Europe and the United States during the first quarter of the nineteenth century visiting schools and establishing his own in France and in Philadelphia. When Owen purchased the land of a German sectarian community, Father Rapp’s Harmonists, in the summer of 1824, Maclure was supportive, saying of the American continent, “Tis the best field of experiment on earth and I am rejoiced to find that he has chosen it.”⁶ Maclure moved his school from Philadelphia to New Harmony and joined Owen’s experiment in Indiana two years later.

Owen and Maclure took their ideas and capital to the ideological landscape of America which was hostile to their ideas about religion and human nature. Christianity and education were seen as mutually dependent by those who ran American schools. Teachers were charged with the duty of preserving the faith and religion was also thought to be necessary to education. The Christian concept of original sin portrayed human nature as inherently corrupt. Children were seen as being closer to humanity’s original state of sin and education played an important role in restraining the inherent corruption of human nature through the discipline and rules of the schoolhouse. These ideas, as illustrated later, conflicted sharply with the ideas championed at New Harmony.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Eclectic English Classics by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Orren Henry Smith (New York: American Book Company, 1903), 62.

² Samuel Knox, “An Essay on the Best System of Liberal Education,” (1799) in *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), 271-372. [Hereafter *Essays*]

³ Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 141.

⁴ Arthur Eugene Bestor, Jr., *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phase of American Communitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), 62.

⁵ Thomas A. Barlow, *Pestalozzi and American Education* (Boulder, Colorado: Es Este Press, University of Colorado, 1977), 36.

⁶ William Maclure, *The European Journals of William Maclure (1805-1824)*, ed. John S. Doskey (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983).

While the lure of cheap land in the United States and the promise of new possibilities brought Owen and Maclure to America, their ideas were originally formulated in Scotland. The intellectual environment of Scotland in the early nineteenth century, characterized by the exploration of progressive and secular social science, created the space in which Owen and Maclure formulated their ideas. Harrison writes of intellectuals in early nineteenth century Scotland, “In their discussions of human nature, social forces and institutions, economic processes and government — all included in the omnibus category, moral philosophy — there emerged the beginnings of modern sociology and the idea of social science.”⁷

Out of this enlightenment-influenced climate, focused on the analysis of social life, came two men with the capital — also made possible by their circumstances in the growing industrial centers of England and Scotland—to put their ideas into action.

Although the exact intellectual origins of Owen’s ideas are less clear than those of Maclure’s—his son said he rarely read books and tended to dismiss them—they are still part of a process of thought in the discourse of the time.⁸ The ideas of both Maclure and Owen, influenced by a Scottish intellectual renaissance, had to act in concert with other ideas, and with their capital, to make an impact.⁹

Realities at New Harmony did not play out as the hopeful reformers had planned. By May 1825, the roughly eight hundred persons at New Harmony—who would escalate to about a thousand before the end of 1825—were administering the community known as the preliminary society.¹⁰ Owen departed in early June of that year to continue his propaganda campaign in the east to promote the experiment, which had so far involved two speeches before congress in February and March.¹¹ Without Owen at the helm, New Harmony had little success and some began to leave the community, as Thomas Pears, secretary of the preliminary society committee, wrote, “the Master Spirit is not here and I fear we shall advance but slowly until his reappearance.”¹²

The Master Spirit’s return did not however, bring any unity or end the factionalism Mr. Pears had felt brewing even before Owen’s departure.¹³ After Owen’s return and the arrival of Maclure’s party on board a river boat traveling from Pittsburg down the Ohio river — dubbed the ‘boatload of knowledge’ by Owen — in January 1826, the new constitution of the “New-Harmony Community of Equality” was drawn up and published in the experiment’s official newspaper, the *New-Harmony Gazette*.¹⁴ Only three weeks later, the first two groups of settlers to break off from the original community — the first a group upset with Owen’s religious ideas and the second a group of English immigrants — separated themselves from Owen’s New Harmony.¹⁵

The community further fractured in May of 1826, after a community vote to separate into three separate parts based on trade; the School Society, the Agricultural and Pastoral Society, and the Mechanic and Manufacturing Society.¹⁶ Maclure proposed the separation with the belief that communities would function better if they were small and homogenous but the split did little to reconcile conflict between the groups.¹⁷

In August 1826, the Agricultural and Mechanic societies both refused to any longer pay tuition to the School society and Owen himself encouraged the separation.¹⁸ The community was fractured and little could be done to save Owen’s dream. By Owen’s departure in June 1827 — he would not return for a year — the experiment was effectively at an end and newspapers from surrounding states began to declare the failure of the community.¹⁹

⁷ John F.C. Harrison, “The Steam Engine of the New Moral World” *Journal of British Studies* 6 (1967): 81.

⁸ Robert Dale Owen, *Threading My Way: An Autobiography* (New York: G.W. Carleton and Co., 1967), 90.

⁹ Harrison, “Steam Engine,” 81.

¹⁰ Introduction to *Pears Papers*, Vol. 11 of *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1937), 8; Donald MacDonald, “Journey to America, 1824-1825” in *Indiana Historical Society Publications* vol. 14 (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 292.

¹¹ Thomas Pears to Benjamin Bakewell, 2 June 1825. *Pears Papers*, 12-15; Robert Owen, *Two Discourses on a New System of Society as delivered in the Hall of Representatives of the United States* (Philadelphia: Atkinson and Alexander, printers, 1825).

¹² Thomas Pears to Benjamin Bakewell, 2 September 1825. *Pears Papers*, 24-32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12-15.

¹⁴ “Constitution of the New-Harmony Community of Equality,” *New-Harmony Gazette*, 15 February 1826. Vol. 1, 161 (Microfilm, Inter-Library Loan form East Texas State University Library, Commerce, TX). [Hereafter *New-Harmony Gazette*]

¹⁵ Donald MacDonald, “Second Journey to America, 1825-1826” *Indiana Historical Society Publications* vol. 14 (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 337.

¹⁶ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 184-185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁸ Marie Duclos Frerageot to William Maclure, 11 August 1826 in Vol. 15 of *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, ed. Arthur Bestor (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society, 1948), 351-353. [Hereafter Maclure-Frerageot Correspondence]

¹⁹ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 196.

Maclure, however, continued to have a presence at New Harmony and opened several schools.²⁰ It was with the end of Owen's involvement at New Harmony that an end to the threat to dominant ideas about human nature and the role of religion in society prevalent in contemporary discourse came. Education was the apex of that threat due to its base in radical ideas about human nature and religion and its importance to the philosophies of both Owen and Maclure.

Robert Owen's philosophy on the social situation of mankind begins with the idea that every evil and malady present in mankind's situation results from, "that greatest of all errors, the notion that individuals form their own characters."²¹ Owen held that each person's nature was shaped for them by their circumstances and that, in order to create a new moral world, one would need to create the circumstances necessary to bring about the development of a new moral man. Education was then essential to Owen's ideas, as John F. C. Harrison writes, "The primary goal of education for the Owenite was to produce men and women suitable for a new moral world."²² Harrison also observes, "His first important work, *A New View of Society*, was in one sense a general treatise on education."²³ The importance of education to Owenism hinges partially on the fact that ideas about human nature, and the shaping thereof, were the central doctrine of Owenism and schools were its vessel.

Owen was successful with his school at New Lanark and it received positive attention from his contemporaries, including, as noted above, William Maclure. At New Lanark, Owen favored the Lancasterian theory of pedagogy in which older students would often instruct the younger.²⁴ For Owen, this was a practical system which would allow a great number of students to be taught efficiently. Teaching large numbers was important for Owen because the role of education in his philosophy was to generate harmony throughout the community and shape individuals in a manner which would ensure their happiness. He adopted a very liberal method of schooling, which avoided punishment and was dedicated to the instruction of poor children. Kindness and gentle direction with happiness as the desired end, rather than severity with discipline and order as the desired ends, produced, "a type of education greatly superior to the mechanical instruction of the age."²⁵

Owen carried his ideas and success at New Lanark with him to America when he established New Harmony. Owen's move to America brought him into a climate hostile to his religious ideas. Owen was already famous as an anti-religious thinker, a reputation which earned him some infamy in both the British Isles but his new environment in America would prove to be even more resistant.²⁶ New Harmony's affront to the pedagogical discourse, which saw education as dependent upon and responsible for religion, as discussed later, formed the context in which Owen attempted his system in Indiana.

Echoing his words from *A New View of Society*, he writes in the *Gazette*, "The basis on which the new Religion will arise, is the knowledge of the *all-important-fact*, that man does not, that he never can, form his own thoughts and feelings, from which proceed his conduct and character" [emphasis in original].²⁷ He speaks to congress of the virtues of separating children from their parents, a practice that was implemented by Maclure's boarding school at New Harmony.²⁸ The importance placed on removing children from their parents was certainly influenced by the idea that experience shapes human nature, and Owen and others believed that removing the possibly negative influence of the parent would create better conditions in which to shape the child's nature. Owen was particularly concerned with the schools at his experiment and took care to bring the finest instructors to New Harmony with him.

The central place of pedagogy within Owen's aspirations can be seen in his recruitment of skilled and reputable instructors for the school in New Harmony. Along with Maclure, a well-known educator and patron of reform in both Europe and America, came some of his compatriots such as Marie Duclos Fretageot [1783-1833] — primary teacher of the infant school for children between two and five years of age — and Joseph Neef [1770-1854] — primary teacher for the upper school for children between five and twelve years of age.²⁹ It says something about both the goals of Owen's experiment and the close ties between education and communitarianism that the most influential people he was able to bring with him to the southwestern corner of Indiana were intellectuals and educators. This is particularly evident in Owenism, with its focus on the inherent malleability of human nature.

These educators all came to New Harmony with their own new ideas about the school and its place in society. Neef and Maclure in particular were influenced by the pedagogical methods of Johann Pestalozzi [1746-1827],

²⁰ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 201.

²¹ Robert Owen, *A New View of Society* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1927), 65.

²² Harrison, "Steam Engine," 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁴ Owen, *Threading My Way*, 100-101.

²⁵ Harrison, "Steam Engine," 90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁷ "Instruction in the New-System," *New-Harmony Gazette*, 19 July 1926. Vol. 1.

²⁸ Owen, *Two Discourses on a New System*, 42.; Barlow, *Pestalozzi and American Education*, 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-44.

a Swiss instructor who focused on the need to teach mentally, physically and spiritually and that the purpose of education was to prepare an individual for his or her future place within society. Stressing practical instruction, Pestalozzi broke away from the European mainstream of academic instruction focused on the classics and languages and sought to prepare students for their everyday lives.³⁰ His intended results were not however, obedient automatons, but rather independent, satisfied individuals. He says, “We must bear in mind that the ultimate goal of education is, not a perfection in the accomplishments of the school, but fitness for life; not the acquirement of habits of blind obedience and of prescribed diligence, but a preparation for independent action.”³¹

We see then that Pestalozzi’s method was concerned with the child’s individuality and happiness. In arguing the role of education was to prepare children for independence and adulthood, Pestalozzi, “rejected the educational goal of contemporary religious groups of the day: to develop a good, contrite person who would be satisfied to enjoy the fruits of his earthly labors in the afterlife” but did not do away with religious instruction all together, maintaining that spiritual instruction was as important as mental or physical.³²

Ideas about human nature were every bit as prevalent in his methods as Owen’s were in his. The influence of Pestalozzianism on Maclure first began when he first visited Pestalozzi’s school at Yverdon in October 1805 and was enamored with the success of Pestalozzi’s ideas professing them to have formed, “the most rational system of education I have ever seen.”³³ Maclure brought Pestalozzi’s former pupil and co-educator, Joseph Neef, with him to America, on Pestalozzi’s recommendation.³⁴ Neef became the principal instructor at New Harmony’s upper school, showing the connection between Pestalozzi’s schools in Europe and the schools in New Harmony. One thing which Maclure and Pestalozzi shared with Owen was their desire to put education to the use of correcting social problems, a process Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe call educationalization.³⁵ This process developed rapidly alongside the idea of the nation-state beginning in the eighteenth century.³⁶

Pestalozzi’s and Maclure’s ideas about human nature were influenced by enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1712-1778] and a profound respect for childhood. They took Rousseau’s ideas of benevolent human nature which had to be treated kindly whereas the dominant form of education in contemporary America was more in line with Thomas Hobbes’ [1588-1679] view of human nature as corrupt and needing of forcible correction.³⁷ Pestalozzi and Maclure attempted to apply Rousseau’s ideas to the instruction of the poor and working classes, whereas Rousseau’s focus in his educational treatise, *Emile*, had been on the wealthy child, whose parents could afford a personal tutor.³⁸ Regardless of its need to teach numerous working class children, Pestalozzian ideas remained tailored to developing the child as an individual and the need of working class children for practical education shaped the Pestalozzian perspective on instruction for everyday life.

Owen’s and Maclure’s ideas about religion influenced their pedagogical philosophies as well. Both men were skeptical and placed little value on spirituality in education. Owen’s son Robert Dale, described Owen as a man who, “rejected ... the miraculous and the infallible” and Maclure as well railed against the influence of infallible religious doctrine on society in his journals.³⁹ However, because Owen proclaimed his mistrust of religion more readily than Maclure, and also given the fact that Owen was the more famous of the two, Owen’s name was struck with the infamy of being anti-religious in a way Maclure’s never was.⁴⁰ The fact that the aforementioned group which broke off from New Harmony out of disagreement with Owen’s religious ideas named their community ‘Macluria’ in tribute to William Maclure, shows how little known to the general public his negative views on religion were.⁴¹ Owen’s reputation as an enemy to Christianity contributed to the challenge his presence and leadership at New Harmony posed to the

³⁰ Barlow, *Pestalozzi and American Education*, 13.

³¹ Johann Pestalozzi, “How Gertude Teaches Her Children” in *Pestalozzi’s Educational Writings* ed. J.A. Green and Frances A. Collie (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901). Quoted in Barlow, 14.

³² Barlow, *Pestalozzi and American Education*, 14, 24.

³³ Maclure, *European Journals*, 75.

³⁴ Emma L. Farrell, “The New Harmony Experiment, an Origin of Progressive Education,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 15 (May, 1928): 357.

³⁵ Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers, “Educationalization as an ongoing Modernization Process,” *Educational Theory* 58 (2008): 379.

³⁶ Rebekka Horlacher, “Schooling as a means of popular education: Pestalozzi’s method as a popular education experiment,” *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 47 (2011): 65.

³⁷ Eric Schwitzgebel, “Human Nature and Moral Education in Mencius, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Rousseau,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (April, 2007): 147-168.

³⁸ In this treatise, Rousseau lays out a method of education by which a tutor can help shape a young student and protect their nature from the hostile forces of society. Maclure and Pestalozzi also seek to allow the basic nature of the child to develop without harming it with excess discipline. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, Or on Education* (New York: Dutton, 1974); Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 136.

³⁹ Owen, *Threading My Way*, 194.; Maclure, *European Journals*, 18 May 1812, 551.

⁴⁰ Barlow, *Pestalozzi and American Education*, 38.

⁴¹ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 176.

American discourse.

Both Owen and Maclure based their educational philosophies on ideas about human nature and ideas about the role of religion in society; ideas which challenged the Christian discourse of contemporary America. Yet, despite the similarities between Owen's and Maclure's ideas, aspects of Maclure's ideas drawn from Pestalozzi caused contention with Owen and placed Maclure in a position which was less threatening to established ideas than Owen's. This led to legal troubles between the two and a feud between Maclure's Pestalozzian school, which was focused on the education of the individual child, and the new school Owen opened in 1825, which was dedicated to mass instruction and promoting harmony in the community.⁴² David McLaren says of this new system that, "It was the monitorial system of mass instruction brought to bear on the community system and, as such, had no place in any system based on Pestalozzianism."⁴³ The individual-focused Pestalozzian education championed by Maclure was not compatible with Owen's dream of communal learning. Also, Owen's publicly negative views on religion were met with greater animosity from the people of America than Maclure's relatively quiet views and constituted a greater threat to the discourse.

The discourse within which Owen and Maclure had to operate was one in which education and ideas about human nature were heavily influenced by religion. Education was dependent upon religion in that one of its central purposes was seen as protecting and carrying on the Christian faith. Barlow describes the educational status of early nineteenth century America thusly, "Public education was at a low point in the United States. Still ensnared to a large extent in the pressures and dictates of religious bodies its primary purpose had not reached much beyond Luther's caveat that every person should be able to read the Bible in order to serve as his own priest."⁴⁴

Luther's caveat had been a dominant theme in American pedagogy since the colonial period when the General Court of Massachusetts passed the "old deluder Satan Act" in 1647. The justification for the law mandating schools in large towns was made with a religious argument about the necessity of Christians to read the Bible, reading,

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the scriptures... It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty house-holders, shall the forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read.⁴⁵

The mandate placed upon schools by religious America is shown in the late eighteenth into the nineteenth century by the way Christians thought and wrote about education. Simeon Doggett, a clergyman in the late eighteenth century said in his *Discourse on Education*, "Obvious it is that education, and most probably the clergy, are necessary to perpetuate the evidences of our holy religion."⁴⁶ This sacred duty entrusted to instructors was a central part of contemporary religious and pedagogical discourse and was threatened by Owen's presence and his 'godless' experiment in Indiana.

Not only is an obligation placed on schools to preserve Christian discourse, but it is seen as dependent upon religion for its existence. Education was to be built up from the common ground of Christianity and was to teach morality through spirituality. Benjamin Rush wrote, "I beg leave that the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in RELIGION" [emphasis in original].⁴⁷ Within this frame, schools are both responsible for and dependent on religious ideas. Foucault argued that Christian education lent itself quite well to governmentality over the details of life saying,

In any case 'detail' had long been a category of theology and asceticism: every detail is important since, in the sight of God, no immensity is greater than a detail, nor is anything so small that it was not willed by one of his individual wishes. In this great tradition of the eminence of detail, all the minutiae of 'training' found their place easily enough. For the disciplined man, as for the true believer, no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it.⁴⁸

Christianity's ability to make significant all the details of life brings those details of life under the control of the discourse through ideas about proper behavior and an ever-watchful deity. The school is one of the places where control is most exerted by authority over the minute details of an individual's life through restriction of movement and expectation of certain behaviors to be judged by a teacher. The cohabitation of Christianity and education in contemporary America was, in large part, built upon the exertion of power over students. The pedagogical ideas of both

⁴² "Instruction in the New System," 23 August 1826. *New-Harmony Gazette*. Vol 1. 382-383.

⁴³ David J. McLaren, "Robert Owen, William Maclure and New Harmony," *History of Education* 25 (1996): 233.

⁴⁴ Barlow, *Pestalozzi and American Education*, 9.

⁴⁵ "Old Deluder Satan Act." General Court of Massachusetts, 1647, in Stuart G. Noble, *A History of American Education* (New York: Rinehart and Co.), 1954.

⁴⁶ Simeon Doggett, "A Discourse on Education." 1796. In *Essays*, 157.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic." 1786. In *Essays*, 10.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies," in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 184.

Maclure and Owen ran against this trend, as both advocated for leniency and imposed less restriction upon the child.

Christian ideas about human nature were also evident in contemporary American education, notably ideas about original sin. The doctrine of original sin, along with other Christian dogma, was taught to students and was incorporated into the lessons. In many primers—picture books which made use of rhyme to teach children the alphabet—the first entry for the letter “A” read, “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.”⁴⁹ Repeated use of religious doctrine in instructed was an expected part of the instruction.

Schools not only taught original sin as a Christian doctrine, but their methods were fundamentally influenced by it. Just as Maclure and Pestalozzi’s pedagogical philosophies were influenced by Rousseau’s ideas about a benevolent human nature, and Owen’s by his steadfast belief in the absolute malleability of human nature, into allowing the good in a child to develop freely, the prevailing Christian education system tended towards a Hobbesian view of human nature, maintaining that rules and authority must work to correct and prevent the evil inherent in man’s nature.⁵⁰ Due to this difference, Owen’s and Maclure’s educational ideas were a threat to the discourse because of the influence of these contrary views about human nature.

As noted above, neither Maclure nor Owen held favorable views of Christianity. Maclure was dedicated to ensuring the school continued to, “Teach no species of religion, leaving the minds of youth a blank piece of paper on which their priests or parents may write what they please” and Owen shook up a fair amount of trouble any time he offered an opinion on religion. His 1826 ‘Declaration of Mental Independence,’ in which he maintained that, “this formidable Trinity, compounded of Ignorance, Superstition, and Hypocrisy, is the only Demon, or Devil, that ever has, or, most likely, ever will torment the human race,” caused such a stir that Maclure had to distance himself and his school from Owen’s ideas, writing, “They are the opinions of one individual, Mr. Owen, who is, perhaps, the only one within five hundred miles of him, who thinks them fit or necessary in the present state of society.”⁵¹ Maclure was inevitably successful in allowing Owen to take the brunt of the reaction to the community’s perceived lack of religious guidance and his schools remained at New Harmony after Owen’s involvement in the community had been pronounced a failure.

The community struggled with the problems brought about by religious contentions since the very beginning. In addition to the secession of the aforementioned dissidents of ‘Macluria,’ others expressed their distaste with secularism. In October of 1825, The Gazette ran a letter to the editor spanning three pages of print chastising the paper that, “Your correspondence appears to treat rather lightly of the divine judgments.”⁵² The editors responded with the warning, “We have to request our religious correspondents to shorten their communications, or we shall be under the necessity of rejecting them altogether.”⁵³ While religion may not have been something that Owen and the other editors of the Gazette wanted to address, it was an issue of preeminent importance for many Americans and would color their conception of what New Harmony was all about.

Criticism of the religious situation was not limited to those within the community itself. The experiment was a hot news story and contemporary Americans were interested in what was happening in Mr. Owen’s community in Indiana. Owen’s travel companion, Donald MacDonald wrote of how editors and newspapermen would frequently approach their party for hopes of some news during their travels.⁵⁴ Much of the national discourse concerning New Harmony revolved around its religious implications. In an entry before the community had even been established, MacDonald discusses a conversation Owen has with an American schoolmaster who believes Owen’s philosophy to be inconsistent because of Christian ideas about freewill and human nature.⁵⁵ These types of conversations appear more than once in MacDonald’s diaries and show the difficulty Owen had putting his other ideas into practice while operating in an environment hostile to his religious ideas.

Christian newspapers and periodicals attacked Owen and his ideas as early as 1817, before plans to make the United States his base of operations had even taken root.⁵⁶ In 1824, when he was focusing more on America, the Christian Advocate reported that Owen’s scheme, “appeared not only exceedingly visionary, but in some particulars

⁴⁹ Clifton Johnson, *Old-Time School Book*. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1982), 77.

⁵⁰ Schwitzgebel, “Human Nature and Moral Education,” 147-168.

⁵¹ William Maclure to Marie Fretageot. 2 August 1826. *Maclure-Fretageot Correspondence*, 347.; “Declaration of Mental Independence,” 12 July 1826. *New-Harmony Gazette*. Vol. 1. 330.; Maclure, William to an Unnamed Gentleman. 20 September 1826. *Maclure-Fretageot Correspondence*, 374.

⁵² “Letter to the Editors,” 8 October 1825. *New-Harmony Gazette*. Vol. 1. 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁴ MacDonald, *Second Journey*, 367.

⁵⁵ MacDonald, *First Journey*, 261. (For further arguments of Owen’s travel party caused by religion see *First Journey*, 168, and *Second Journey*, 316-318. One gets the sense that Owen and MacDonald tire of these conversations.)

⁵⁶ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 124.

dangerous... (as Owen) denied the doctrine of original sin, and seemed to us to build his system on the old and baseless foundation of the Perfectionists.”⁵⁷ During the formative period of Owenism in America, mostly denominational periodicals attacked Owen, but their cries were a prelude to what would happen as the community developed.

After Owen’s public appearances at Washington in February and March 1825, the secular press began to echo the statements of the religious periodicals.⁵⁸ There was debate between supporters of Owen and the orthodox who opposed him, but the defense put up by Owen’s admirers—particularly if it evoked Christian scripture extolling the virtue of communism—only served to convince the orthodox even more of the threat of Owenism. For many Christians, “It was Owen’s rejection of the doctrine of human depravity and original sin that broke open all the vials of wrath.”⁵⁹ Benjamin Bakewell wrote to Thomas Pears that part of the public of Pittsburg are, “already prepared to crow at the downfall of Mr. Owen’s anti-religion system.”⁶⁰ Although the controversy had little to do with what was actually happening on the ground at New Harmony, the failure of the community was certainly a victory for those attacking Owen’s system.

The concept of deep contingency and relation between individuals and the larger power of the press over the discourse is helpful when looking at concepts of agency, or, as Ayers and Nesbit put it, “who possessed the capacity for action and who used that capacity for what purposes and when.”⁶¹ Individuals expressed their agency through dialogue and, in the case of those who formed Macluria, through separation. At the same time, the press, with the power of capital and a large base with greater influence over the discourse, shaped the notion of New Harmony as anti-Christian on a completely different scale. These two expressions of agency occur within unique scales but are connected in their expression of dissatisfaction with Owen’s ideas as being anti-Christian and therefore subversive.

It was principally Owen who received the attacks for his views about religion in human nature as it was his ideas, and his public statements of those ideas, which most directly flew against the discourse. Although both Owen’s and Maclure’s ideas about human nature ran against Christian doctrine and the dominant American discourse, Maclure’s at least included something akin to original sin, saying, “All children, as well as men, if not occupied in doing good, will most probably be doing harm, either to themselves or others. Want of occupation is one of the great sources of mischief. Children ought never to be idle, but to be constantly employed from morning to night in benefiting themselves or others.”⁶²

Maclure, like the Massachusetts General Court in the 1600s, wanted to keep the children occupied, for, as the saying goes, the devil has work for idle hands. Owen’s take on human nature was more radical than Maclure’s in this respect as, “For Owen, the notion of an inherent tendency to ‘sin’ was anathema. He believed children were born with the potential for either good or evil and their environment determined which road they would take.”⁶³ Owen’s dogmatic belief in the determination of individual’s characters by their circumstances was more radical an assault upon the Christian discourse of human nature than Maclure’s and was singled out as dangerous.

Also, as shown above in his Declaration of Mental Independence [1826] Owen was more vocal about his dissatisfaction with religion and Maclure sometimes had to distance himself and his school from those ideas in order to protect them; something Owen never learned to do for his community. Owen’s vocal ideas about religion continued to shape the way Americans thought about Owenism and the experiment at New Harmony even after he had left. In 1829, Owen took part in a debate with Alexander Campbell in Cincinnati in which Owen argued against Christian notions about human nature such as freewill and original sin and attempted, in his own words, “to prove that the principle of all religions are erroneous, and that their practice is injurious to the human race.”⁶⁴

Both Owen’s choice to leave New Harmony and his continued attacks on the Christian discourse are an example of deep contingency, as we see Owen’s actions on the local scale impacting the place of the experiment in the national discourse. No doubt Owen’s affairs after he left New Harmony continued to affect the place the experiment

⁵⁷ *Christian Advocate*. December 1824. Philadelphia. Vol. 2, 560 in Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 125.

⁵⁸ Owen, *Two Discourses on a New System*.

⁵⁹ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 125-126.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Bakewell to Thomas Pears, 10 September 1825. *Pears Papers*, 34-35.

⁶¹ Deep contingency is a way of looking at social interactions across scales. These interactions are seen in the sources used for this paper including newspapers—an example of discourse on a national or community scale—and correspondence—an example of discourse on an individual scale. Owen and Maclure were able to gather the capital and influence to carry out an experiment in which to try their ideas on a local scale, but the ideas of the experiment also had an impact on the national scale in the contemporary discourse on education, human nature and religion. Ayers and Nesbit. “Seeing Emancipation.” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1 (March, 2011), 4, 8. Project Muse.

⁶² William Maclure, “Notice of Mr. Owen’s Establishment in Indiana.” *American Journal of Science and Arts*. Vol. 10. (February, 1826). Quoted in David J McLaren, “Robert Owen, William Maclure and New Harmony,” *History of Education* 25 (1996): 231.

⁶³ David J. McLaren, “Robert Owen, William Maclure and New Harmony,” *History of Education* 25 (1996): 231.

⁶⁴ Edward H. Madden and Dennis W. Madden, “The Great Debate: Alexander Campbell vs. Robert Owen.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society*. Vol. 18 (Summer, 1982). Accessed through JSTOR on 21 November 2013. 207-226.; *Robert Owen’s Opening Speech and his Reply to Rev. Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati, 1829) in Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 228.

in the national discourse. No doubt Owen's affairs after he left New Harmony continued to affect the place the experiment held in the American narrative. Arthur Bestor argues that,

By the end of the 1820s Owenism was identified in the public mind less with communitarianism than with free thought, (because,) ... Conservatives had seized upon the handiest stick to beat the dog, and in the end they created the impression that New Harmony had failed because of its antireligious bias rather than any inherent defect in its economic principles.⁶⁵

While it is true that blame for the failure came to rest upon the anti-religious aspects of the community, it has less to do with the "handiest stick to beat the dog" and more to do with the absorption of Owen's radicalism back into the dominant narrative. By placing blame upon the community's lack of religious leadership, the Christian discourse gained an example of how education without religion and radical ideas about human nature were doomed to fail, something which was fit into the early eighteenth century American discourse more readily than a condemnation of communist economic principles. New Harmony's place was then established within the continuity of the Christian narrative, extolling their views of human nature and the role of religion in society to be more successful than those of anti-religious Robert Owen.

The methods and theories applied to the instruction of youth are intrinsically tied into the worldviews of those creating those theories and are a manifestation of ideological power in society. Although reform was on the mind of many teachers in the early republic, New Harmony posed a particular threat to the Christian discourse of contemporary America because of its combination of subversive ideas about human nature and the role of religion in society. At the time of the New Harmony experiment, Protestant Christianity held much of the ideological power in America and was expressed, engrained, and encouraged through schools. Education was chief among the objects of reform at New Harmony, and was perhaps even placed above economic egalitarianism in its importance to the philosophies of the community's leaders. It was also the most revolutionary issue on the New Harmony reformist agenda because it was the realm in which their radical ideas about human nature and religion had the most impact.

⁶⁵ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 228.

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