

American History I – Religion and Social Reform in the Antebellum Era

Reading 1:

The elementary schools throughout the state are irresponsible institutions, established by individuals, from mere motives of private speculation or gain, who are sometimes destitute of character, and frequently of the requisite attainments and abilities. From the circumstance of the schools being the absolute property of individuals, no supervision or effectual control can be exercised over them; hence, ignorance, inattention, and even immorality, prevail to a lamentable extent among their teachers.

Working Man's Advocate, 1830

Reading 2:

The scheme of Universal Equal Education at the expense, is virtually "Agrarianism." It would be a compulsory application of the means of the richer, for the direct use of the poorer classes; and so far an arbitrary division of property among them....One of the chief excitements to industry...is the hope of earning the means of educating their children respectably ...that incentive would be removed, and the scheme of state and equal education be a premium for comparative idleness, to be taken out of the pockets of the laborious and conscientious.

Philadelphia National Gazette, 1830

Reading 3:

I believe in the existence of a great, immortal, immutable principle of natural law...which proves the absolute right to an education of every human being that comes into the world; and which, of course, proves the correlative duty of every government to see that the means of that education are provided for all....

Massachusetts is parental in her government. More and more, as year after year rolls by, she seeks to substitute prevention for remedy, and rewards for penalties. She strives to make industry the antidote to poverty, and to counterwork the progress of vice and crime by the diffusion of knowledge and the culture of virtuous principles.

Horace Mann, 1846

Reading 4:

I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience....

I have seen many who, part of the year, are chained or caged. The use of cages all but universal....I encountered during the last three months many poor creatures wandering reckless and unprotected through the country.

Dorothea Dix, 1843

Reading 5:

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice....

He has made her, if married, in the eyes of the law civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns....

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employment, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.

He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction, which he considers most honorable to himself....

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education--all colleges being closed against her....

He has created a false public sentiment, by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which

moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated but deemed of little account in man.... He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

"Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" of the 1848 Seneca Falls, New York, Women's Rights Convention

Reading 6:

Intemperance is the sin of our land, and, with out boundless prosperity, is coming in upon us like a flood; and if anything shall defeat the hopes of the world, which hang upon our experiment of civil liberty, it is that river of fire, which is rolling through the land, destroying the vital air, and extending around an atmosphere of death.

Lyman Beecher, 1826

Reading 7:

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created temperate; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain natural and innocent desires; that among these are the appetite for cold water and the pursuit of happiness! that to secure the gratification of these propensities fountains and streams are gushing....

Manifesto of the Washington Total Abstinence Societies, 1841

Reading 8:

[How] will reformation and temperance be secured...? Never except through the instrumentality of the law. If it were possible to reason the drunkard into sobriety, it would not be possible to make the rumseller forego his filthy gains....The only logic he will comprehend, is some such ordinance...coming to him in the shape and with the voice of law--you shall not sell.

American Temperance Magazine, 1852

Reading 9:

We register our testimony, not only against all wars, whether offensive or defensive, but all preparations for war; against every naval ship, every arsenal, every fortification; against the militia system and a standing army; against all military chieftains and soldiers; against all monuments commemorative of victory over a fallen foe, all trophies won in battle, all celebrations in honor of military or naval exploits; against all appropriations for the defense of a nation by force and arms...every edict of government requiring of its subjects military service.

Declaration of Sentiments, Boston Peace Convention, 1838

Reading 10:

Under our system of isolated and separate households, with separate interests and separate pursuits, instead of association and combination among families, there is the most deplorable waste, which is one of the primary sources of the general poverty that exists; and discord, antagonism, selfishness, and an anti-social spirit are engendered. Woman is subjected to unremitting and slavish domestic duties...a dead rebuke to all pretensions to Democracy....A new social order [should] be established, based upon "Associated households"....

Albert Brisbane

QUESTIONS FOR RESPONSE

1. What arguments were advanced in favor of public schools? How did opponents of public schools respond?
2. Describe the plight of the mentally ill in early 19th century America?
3. What disabilities to early 19th century American women live under according to pre-Civil War women's rights advocates?
4. Why did pre-Civil War temperance reformers consider drinking a cardinal sin?
5. Describe the aims of other pre-Civil War reformers.
6. What is the common theme of these reform movements?