The development of American religion and the emergence of an American literary tradition are often viewed as two distinct features of the American landscape. And yet American religion and American literature were interdependent, often mutually enforcing, phenomena in the early days of the United States. The two had much to say to each other and may be enriched when considered together. Religion depends on narrative and poetic form for its expression as much as literature has its origins in religious belief, crisis, and dissent.

Colonial Origins of a National Literature

In the colonial and early national period, conventional clergymen attacked the novel and fiction as deleterious to religious meaning. From their perspective, storytelling violated the truth value of religious doctrine. Puritan theology eschewed embellishment in the interest of preserving doctrinal purity. Prominent Puritan leaders such as Cotton Mather and George Whitefield declared in the mid-eighteenth century that the secularizing forces of plays, romances, and imaginative writing would preclude entrance into heaven. Even after the American Revolution in the last part of the century, this view remained largely unchanged among Calvinist ministers. Timothy Dwight, for example, asserted that there was an impassable gulf between the Bible and novels or poetry.

Poetry

Discrimination against narrative form was particularly acute when the author or subject matter challenged the social order. The African American poet Phyllis Wheatley came under unusually virulent attack for her religious verse. Wheatley was the author of such poems as “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield” (1770) and “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773). In the first, Wheatley contemplates the spiritual power of a religious leader, and in the second she explores the possibilities and perils of religious conversion. Although Wheatley declares that “Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land” and “taught my benighted soul to understand/ That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too,” she cautions American religious leaders who “view our sable race with scornful eye” that “Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/ May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train” (The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, p. 529). Challenging the racism of Christian leaders even as she endorses the superiority of Christian belief, Wheatley both upholds and abhors religious piety. Such poetry outraged not only religious but political leaders. Thomas Jefferson asserts in Notes on the State of Virginia (1787) that “religion may have produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet.”

More than a hundred years earlier Anne Bradstreet had encountered similar vitriol from religious leaders for poems like “The Flesh and the Spirit,” “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” and “Upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666.” Bradstreet, the first English-speaking North American poet, found herself critiqued for transgressing gender roles as well as religious precepts. Her later poetry addressed the spiritual struggles of a Christian confronting doubt and skepticism, and therefore challenged rather than enforced religious determinism, but religious leaders were outraged at her earlier writing because it challenged a spiritual
order in which godly love preceded and overpowered earthly or carnal love. Bradstreet's self-avowed struggle between the flesh and the spirit as well as her intense love for her husband, family, and home upset a hierarchical order in which God ruled supreme over human bonds and an individual's most important relationship was with the divine rather than with a mortal being.

Captivity Narratives

Captivity narratives, which offered writers an opportunity to describe life on the frontier as a religious trial, became popular reading for early American Christians. A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1676) was by far the most popular of this genre. In this firsthand account of an Indian attack on the frontier village of Lancaster, Massachusetts, Mary Rowlandson describes the Indians as instruments of Satan who have come to test her faith. Using scripture passages, she likens her removal to an Indian community and her subsequent enforced relocations to biblical stories of migration and captivity. She describes her ordeal as a faith journey in which her initial understanding of herself as a pious believer is transformed and challenged before being reaffirmed. Because captivity narratives like Rowlandson's showed the triumph of the godly over harsh wilderness and pagan evil, they were more acceptable fare than purely imaginative writing.

And yet we see imaginative elements clearly at work in Rowlandson's seemingly literal transposition of biblical narrative onto captivity story. The narrative is organized not by chapters but by “removes.” The trajectory of events goes from attack to the first remove all the way to the twentieth remove. During her enforced flight through the wilderness, Rowlandson experiences the loss of a child, enslavement, extreme hunger, pain, and despair. These extremities are not alleviated easily once she escapes and is returned to home, family, and church community. Looking back on her trial, she admires the wonderful power of God to allow her to see the vanity of worldly concern and material comfort. She insists that we must rely solely on God and our whole dependence must be on him.

In this way, Rowlandson's narrative works, unlike Bradstreet's, to reinforce the unquestioned and unquestioning primacy of the individual's relation to God. Furthermore, unlike Wheatley's writing, Rowlandson's narrative seems to assume that God's disciples on earth are above critique—transparent and disinterested purveyors of his divine will. And yet her narrative ends not only with an affirmation of Christian principles but with the acknowledgement that the captivity has also produced an uneasy wakefulness and distrust of her surroundings that belie her assertions that she puts all her faith in God's goodness. God's power is great in that he carries her through many trials and returns her to safety in order to teach her a faith lesson, but this knowledge does not give her absolute peace and faith. It also breeds a nocturnal watchfulness: Rowlandson says that she remembers a time when she slept peacefully, but after her restoration she remains awake when all are asleep, dwelling upon things past.

Puritan Sermons
Despite the fact that Puritan theology often dismissed literary expression as biblically inauthentic and therefore secularizing, some of the most famous Puritan sermons explicitly rely upon literary devices like metaphor, simile, metonymy, and imagery to powerfully move their listeners. John Winthrop's “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), for example, challenges Puritan voyagers to understand themselves to be undertaking a world-changing experiment in religious freedom and to imagine this new society they were preparing to build as “a city upon a hill” that would draw the eyes of all people throughout the world. On the one hand, Winthrop depends upon the extensive use of imagery and simile to help his listeners visualize their future to be like a new city, the likes of which the world has never before seen. But he also invokes literary expression to warn them of the high risk of their undertaking, when he declares that should they fail in their endeavor they will be made a “story and a by-word through the world.” This story will have great power to unleash the mouths of enemies who will spread stories that will shame God's servants and draw curses rather than prayers for the Puritan project. Winthrop's sermon became a template that would guide the first generation of Puritan settlers in the making of a civic society based upon principles of human affiliation and collaboration. He delivered his sermon while aboard the Arbellia, en route from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and listeners included Anne Bradstreet, who, as we have seen, turned to literary expression as spiritual outlet and alternative. Winthrop's sermon continues to be read as a founding piece of American literature as well as a founding document of American religion, and is consistently featured in anthologies of American literature.

During the colonial period, subsequent ministers did sometimes strategically rely on literary devices to challenge the spiritual comfort of their parishioners—often to great effect. The most powerful example of this technique can be found in Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741). In this classic “fire and brimstone” sermon, Edwards effected religious conversion or “awakening” in congregants by describing the precariousness of human life and redemption through extended simile and the rich use of metaphor. Edwards paints a terrifying picture story in which an angry God holds sinners over a pit of hell, burning with glowing flames that represent the wrath of God. Confronted with hell's wide gaping mouth, the sinner has no defense against this final moment of reckoning—nothing except the power and unearned mercy of a justly angry divine presence. The sinner is held by God “like a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire,” dangling precariously and subject to the vicissitudes of an all-powerful and wrathful divine will. Human will is no more than a spider's web trying to stop a falling rock the weight of which reflects the magnitude of human evil. Edwards's sermon, like Winthrop’s, was powerful. Both ministers painted different visions of divine providence, but they transformed Americans’ spiritual realities with their dramatic and highly effective imagery.

**Religion and Literature in the Nineteenth-Century**

These diverse literary engagements with religiosity—whether in the form of poetry, fiction, nonfiction prose, or even the sermon, as we have observed—suggest a growing need of Americans to think seriously about the place of religious practice in their lives. Between 1785 and 1850 a growing number of ministers and congregations became dissatisfied with traditional theology and what they found to be impenetrable, esoteric theological debate. Many ministers, in this time of liberalization and secularization, turned to narrative and the novel to overcome religious opponents and to advance a simple code of morality and pious feeling. Indeed the rise of religious tolerance throughout the nineteenth century was
accompanied by the tendency to communicate religious lessons with narrative and stories rather than with sermonizing. Edwards's and Winthrop's impulse to turn to literary tools to awaken the interest and engage the moral conscience of congregants, in other words, became more developed and widespread as theological debate became increasingly dry and disconnected from the moral conundrums that Americans faced in daily life. By late in the nineteenth century this trend had become so marked that Mark Twain would assert, in 1871 (in The Galaxy), that the Jesus story was disseminated to the American public through “the despised novel … and NOT from the drowsy pulpit!” Although literary expression was anathema to most seventeenth-century and much of eighteenth-century theology, literature in the nineteenth century was religion's most powerful vehicle.

Why did American congregations turn away from the pulpit and to the novel for spiritual and religious guidance? And more particularly why and how did Americans come to see the novel as diverting and the pulpit as “drowsy”? First, many churchgoers found that conventional religious literature and sermons focused on orthodox dogma to the exclusion of all else. Ministers’ entrenched resistance to casting moral lesson in the garb of lived experience caused resistance and incomprehension among congregations. As one church member, Caroline Thayer, put it, “the light, unthinking mind, that would revolt at a moral lesson from the pulpit will seize, with avidity, the instruction offered under the similitude ‘of a story’” (in The Gamesters; or, Ruins of Innocence, p. iv-v). In order to meet their parishioners' increasing need to understand theological truth in relevant, everyday experience, popular ministers such as William Ware, E. P. Roe, and Charles Sheldon became popular novelists, promulgating their religious messages. Ministers less successful at sermonizing likewise experimented with novel writing to try to generate interest in their religious views.

**Domestic Literature and Women Writers**

Ministers were not the only or even the primary literary agents of religiosity in the antebellum United States. Popular author Catherine Sedgwick, declaring herself frustrated by “the splitting of … theological hairs” and “utterly useless polemical preaching,” turned to the novel to explore important religious and spiritual themes (in Life and Letters of Catherine Maria Sedgwick, p. 59). Not only did Sedgwick become an avid novel reader, but she wrote numerous fictions that carried important religious messages to readers. She began A New England Tale (1822) during a period of intense spiritual indecision. She disliked Calvinism's rigidity but was disappointed in Unitarianism, which she found cold and overly rational. Begun as a Unitarian tract, A New England Tale quickly became a novel about the follies of orthodoxy and the power of celestial imagery. Jane Elton, the novel's heroine, is an angel of goodness who confronts and conquers those characters who uphold the evils of Calvinist dogma. The novel does not include lengthy disquisitions on religious doctrine but rather encourages readers to identify and sympathize with Jane because of her goodness.

Like A New England Tale, Sedgwick's most popular novel, Hope Leslie (1827), features female protagonists who take on angelic qualities in order to redeem their communities. Hope Leslie and Magawisca, the Native American protagonist, save a Puritan community that is compromised from within and from without. By setting her novel in Puritan times, Sedgwick put her critique of contemporary religious practice at a historical remove from readers, but the
message of the novel had great currency for its antebellum readers: Spiritual redemption and religious faith are achieved by recognizing the potential divinity (rather than dwelling on the essential sinfulness) of each human being, no matter how different. Magawisca is a spiritual exemplar whose self-sacrifice inspires Hope, but Hope, as her name suggests, personifies a virtue from which her stern Puritan town leaders eventually learn. Not only does Hope teach the Puritan community spiritual principles of liberality, free thinking, and inclusiveness, but she has the power to root out the social threat of Roman Catholicism. At one point mistaken for the Virgin Mary by a Catholic laborer, Hope successfully uncovers a plot intended to establish Catholicism as the one true religion in the infant colonies. The novel's message is clear: Spiritual vitality and democracy are jeopardized by dogma.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Beecher's immensely popular domestic handbook *The American Woman's Home* (1872) would develop this theme of religious patriotism by equating the principles of Christianity with the principles of democracy. Enjoying the same kind of popularity that Martha Stewart does today, Beecher and Stowe imagined the middle-class bourgeois home as a blueprint for a civilized world, and at the center of this home were religious principles, albeit ones that tacitly worked against as much as in concert with Puritan models of Christianity. The middle-class world of the antebellum era normalized not only a class identity but a religious identity, thereby ensuring that a particular strand of Protestant Christianity became a symbol of middle-class values. Indeed, white Protestants within the emerging middle class attempted to convert the entire nation and eventually the entire world to the truths of Protestant Christianity, and they used narrative and the novel to achieve their ends. *The American Woman's Home* was literally a guide to help American housewives create a successful home through teaching domestic and religious principles.

But it is in Harriet Beecher Stowe's earlier writings that she makes her most profound contributions to American literature and religion. When asked about the authorship of her internationally famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Stowe replied that she did not write it—God wrote it. In the book that, as Abraham Lincoln declared, started the Civil War, Stowe features religious feeling as the cornerstone of her antislavery argument. “Feeling right” is more important than legal arguments that uphold slavery. Fictionalized religious leaders who condone slavery are lambasted in Stowe's novel, as they are in slave narratives by such writers as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. But most important, the promise of spiritual salvation and redemption guide characters and readers alike toward the promised land of freedom. Uncle Tom is a Christ figure who agrees to sacrifice himself for the greater good of his family, the other slaves, and the Shelby family who own him. His gradual descent into the hell of slavery culminates in his final, and fatal, confrontation with his third and most demonic slave owner, Simon Legree. Legree tries to force Uncle Tom to take up the whip against the other slaves. When Tom refuses, he is beaten to death. But it is not only Tom's refusal to comply with his owner's demands that incites Legree. As Stowe writes, Legree “understood full well that it was GOD who was standing between him and his victim and he blasphemed him” (in *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, p. 558).” Legree's violence toward Tom is violence toward God, and Tom's spiritual reliance on Jesus sustains him as he too becomes a martyr.

Many Americans described the reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a spiritual awakening—an awakening that transformed them from being passive bystanders in the anti- and proslavery
debates to becoming active participants in the abolitionist movement and finally into taking their stands as courageous soldiers on the battlefield. Many Union soldiers carried copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in uniform pockets over their hearts because they believed that it had talismanic power to protect them during battle.

Conversely, popular southern proslavery novels such as Caroline Lee Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854) and Augusta J. Evans's *Beulah* (1859) served the same spiritual purpose for Confederate soldiers. In such novels bourgeois northern women with preconceived notions about the evils of slavery move to the South only to learn that benign slave owners protect and guide their slaves in spiritual principles. Converting the heathen to the one true faith, slave owners function as de facto missionaries and ministers for their easily misguided charges. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* recognizes southern slave owners' capacity to model Christian principles to the needs of slaves and acknowledges the limitations of northern Calvinism in the project of assimilating African slaves into Protestant Christianity. Miss Ophelia, for example, is a northern spinster whose Calvinist worldview is insufficient to instruct the unruly child slave Topsy in Christian values. It takes the example of the truly spiritual, angelic child little Eva to exert moral suasion successfully such that Topsy wants to be good—to be just like Eva. When Eva's goodness and angelic nature confront the evils of slavery they “sink into her soul” and prove to be too much for her, causing her to languish and finally to die. Eva's death crystallizes Topsy's desire for moral goodness and leads Miss Ophelia to recognize that her religious principles have not enabled her to overcome her unchristian prejudice against slaves. Unruly black slave and rigid Calvinist spinster form a Christian bond, recognizing the power of love to overcome prejudice.

In her lesser-known novels, Stowe returns to these themes of the Christianizing influence of middle-class true womanhood. *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), for example, features a young girl through whom Stowe attempts to work through the torments of New England Calvinism. Mary functions as a Protestant Madonna in the novel, bringing James, a middle-aged minister as well as Mary's true love, a renewed spirituality and religious passion. This bundling of amorous passion and religious passion is a pervasive feature of much woman-authored sentimental fiction in the antebellum era. Maria Cummins's novel *The Lamplighter* (1854) was second in sales only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during the 1850s, and its popularity was due in large part to the story of religious awakening at its center. Gerty Flint, the young, indigent heroine of the story, is a street urchin, abandoned by her parents and evicted by a wicked caretaker when she tries to nurture a stray cat. She is informally adopted by a local lamplighter, Trueman Flint, whose childlike religious faith, once coupled with the benevolent religious ministrations of a local gentlewoman, gradually transform the unruly and violent child. When the lamplighter brings her a Samuel—a figurine of a child praying—Gerty begins to learn in earnest about God, prayer, and the redemptive power of love. Much like Uncle Tom, Trueman Flint has a seemingly infinite capacity for love of others, which is required to transform the young delinquent into an icon of true womanhood. Gerty must go through many tests of her faith, but she learns the lesson of Christianity and is rewarded by novel's end. Not only does her father reappear, but she marries her one true love, has her fortune restored, and finds herself surrounded by loved ones as she creates a happy home of her own.

A variety of novels during the antebellum era would treat this theme of religious education through domestication. Indeed, the ties that bound middle-class domesticity with religious
integrity were so profound that many began to criticize the ministry for becoming feminized. Once theologically rigorous and male dominated, American Protestantism was in danger, according to some social critics, of becoming overrun by women religious zealots who used novel writing as a kind of pulpit from which to preach.

The American Renaissance: Hawthorne and the Transcendentalists

It was to this group of women writers that Nathaniel Hawthorne was referring when he railed against the “damned mob of scribbling women” overrunning the U.S. literary scene. This now notorious comment has been interpreted by scholars as a sign of Hawthorne's discomfort with literary competition from the ladies, but it also reflects his more particular discomfort with the competing religious visions distinguishing his less popular dark romances from best-selling woman-authored domestic fiction.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

In his writing, Hawthorne returns to the Puritan religious culture of his forebears rather than to the antebellum visions of benevolent, infinitely redemptive and theologically indeterminate domesticity with which his female contemporaries were concerned. In his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), as well as in short stories such as "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836) and "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), Hawthorne explores the Puritan origins of nineteenth-century American life, and he considers the influence of this legacy on his contemporaries who are facing unprecedented challenges to national unity. The scarlet A for which Hawthorne's novel is named is a symbol of the adulterous affair in which the novel’s heroine, Hester Prynne, is involved. Although the Puritan community does not learn what is going on until late in the story, readers soon discover that the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, the most prominent religious leader of the community, is the father of Hester's illegitimate child. Dimmesdale is complicit not only in the affair but in the punishment meted out to Hester by religious leaders once the affair becomes apparent, in the person of Hester's daughter, Pearl. The scarlet A that Hester must wear as punishment brands her as an adulterer, but it also symbolizes the hypocrisy and weak-mindedness of religious precepts that target one sinner but leave another at large.

What happens when the unpunished sinner continues to be responsible for the spiritual well-being of a community? This is one of the questions that *The Scarlet Letter* asks. Scholars have long acknowledged Hawthorne's interest in Puritan religiosity and the damage that hypocritical and self-interested holiness does to innocent victims. Hawthorne's own family history was traceable to Puritan settlers, and his critique of the Puritan practices upon which the United States was built reflects a sense of personal gain at the cost of human pain and suffering. In *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Hawthorne explores how religious leaders' acquisition of a homestead through unfair manipulation of religious law continues to poison the happiness and opportunity of future generations of a family who must live in the shadow of this destructive religious legacy. In *The Scarlet Letter* Dimmesdale internalizes his culpability—too weak to wear a scarlet A on his ministerial vest, he literally stitches one on his breast. Branded on his skin, the scarlet A is the cross that Dimmesdale carries undetected through his daily religious duties. Is his own self-inflicted punishment greater or lesser than
Hester's? Is it fair or right to punish two individuals for loving one another? Is it ethical to scapegoat one individual—demanding that she carry the burden of another's sin? These are the questions that *The Scarlet Letter* asks its readers to consider.

Because it is set in Puritan times, Hawthorne's novel at first glance can appear to be unconcerned with the questions Americans were wrestling with at midcentury. Is it right to enslave one race of people and justify the institution of slavery as a necessary part of liberal democratic ideals? How can a nation based on the concepts of liberty and freedom for all strip these rights from certain sectors of the national community? How can a religion be used to justify enslavement? These were the questions Americans were asking with increasing frequency as Hawthorne was writing. But these are also questions that Hawthorne explores through critique of the Puritan mores upon which the nation was founded. According to some readers the scarlet A may stand not only for "adultery" but also for "abolition." Nineteenth-century abolitionists' challenge to an established order that refuses freedom to some community members is not unlike the Puritans' challenge to a national order that refused them freedom of worship. And the corruptness and weak-mindedness of Puritan leaders such as Dimmesdale is similar, Hawthorne seems to be saying, to American leaders' hesitancy to speak out against the social injustice of slavery. In such an interpretation of Hawthorne's writing, the religious history of the United States is integral to envisioning the future of the country. The nation's Puritan roots are not irrelevant to contemporary political debate—far from it. The corrupt legacy of some religious practice is what the nation must contend with, and the fight to free slaves becomes nothing less than a fight to save the religious integrity of the country.

**The Transcendentalists**

Novels thus became a rich medium for commentary, critique, and contestation of religious precept. American transcendentalist writers, as with their novel-writing peers, found much to criticize in religious tradition. Originally a protest against the doctrine of the Unitarian Church as it was taught at Harvard Divinity School, the American transcendentalism espoused by such writers as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sophia Peabody, and Margaret Fuller argued that an ideal spiritual state transcended physical, doctrinal, and empirical precepts and was achieved through individuals' intuition rather than their conformity to the laws of religious institutions. Writing primarily in nonfiction prose, American transcendentalists sought to reclaim the authenticity and honesty of human interaction and spiritual being that they perceived to have been compromised by religious and intellectual institutions.

**Views of Islam and Roman Catholicism**

In Hawthorne's writing we begin to see how American literature not only engages but also dissents from American religious practice. Herman Melville's literary career is a case in point.

**Melville's Literary and Religious Explorations**

When we think of Melville's mariner stories we may not think of religious commentary, and yet
Melville's interest in religious practice and social welfare spanned his entire literary career. From the time he was a teenager in 1839 through the later poetry preceding his death in 1891, Melville engaged with—and sought alternatives to—the Protestant culture of the mid-nineteenth-century United States. In particular, as Timothy Marr has illustrated, Melville utilized Islamicist rhetoric as a literary resource. In so doing, Melville was taking part not only in his own thought experiment in religious practice but in a larger, sustained exploration among American literary figures of Islam. While Hawthorne, as Luther Luedtke has shown, embedded Orientalist notions in his fiction, Melville developed a more transgressive literary vision of Islamicist practice. The famous opening line of *Moby-Dick* (1851), “Call me Ishmael,” announces Melville's interest in the figure more widely known in the nineteenth century as the Abrahamic ancestor of the Arabs, but it is in his long poem *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (1876) that we see the most developed Muslims in American literature. Through fictional figures that represented his poetic Islamicism, Melville expressed his continued search for contentment and spiritual fulfillment in what he found to be an increasingly materialistic American culture. Melville visited Palestine in 1856, and over the following twenty years used literature as a way of exploring questions of faith, doubt, and God. Yet it is in his twenty-thousand-line poem that we get his most complex theological commentary. The poem is nothing less than a quest for religious clarity and a poetic wish to believe. It asks why humans suffer and die, why God remains hidden and silent, and why spiritual comfort and certainty are so difficult to achieve.

**Other American Writers and Islam**

Why might Melville turn to Islam to ask these religious questions in his poetry and prose? Not only did Islam offer Melville an alternative spiritual model in an increasingly secular American culture, but it had long offered American writers a means of commenting on and critiquing American religion. Islam is the only religion other than Judaism and Christianity commonly invoked by American writers, in large part because its precepts are not dissimilar to the three major strands of American liberalism—Arianism, Unitarianism, and Arminianism. American writers used an Orientalized motif for representing religious ideas that challenged the tenets of New England orthodoxy—the reward of virtue; perfectibility; toleration; and the universal benevolence of God. These ideas were still unpopular with late-eighteenth-century Calvinist thinkers, and so fiction with invented Middle Eastern settings allowed American liberals to challenge Calvinist precepts while avoiding strict theological debate. Popular novels such as Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797) featured American sailors who are taken prisoner by Turks or Algerians and so have the opportunity to report on unfamiliar religious practices. Conversely, novels like Peter Markoe's *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787) and Samuel L. Knapp's *Ali Bey* (1818) feature visitors to America who write home about doctrinal controversies in ways that implicitly weigh in on religious piety and make pleas for religious toleration.

**Anti-Catholic Writing**

While Islam continued to offer writers rich opportunities to rethink prevailing tenets of American Protestantism, Roman Catholicism offered them equally important opportunities to advocate for Protestant Christianity as the one national religion. Anti-Catholic writing abounded throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The villain of Sedgwick's
Hope Leslie, for example, is an Italian Catholic who infiltrates an American Protestant community with the secret goal of setting up a Vatican in the New World. In his popular tract *A Plea for the West* (1835), prominent Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher spread anti-Catholic sentiment by suggesting that the pope planned to take over the American West as an outpost of a Catholic empire. Anti-Catholicism or nativism flourished in the 1830s and 1840s because devastating potato famines in Ireland brought unprecedented numbers of Irish Catholics to the United States and because the United States acquired vast territories from Mexico (through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848) that transformed a large number of Mexican (predominantly Catholic citizens) into U.S. citizens. Anonymously written sensational accounts of convent life fueled anti-Catholic sentiments. Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu* (1836) created such a public outcry that the convent in question was searched by civic leaders to determine whether the “firsthand” accounts of rape, infanticide, and torture were truthful. Southern and border fiction such as Augusta J. Evans's *Inez: A Tale of the Alamo* (1855) likewise represented priests as propagating sinister plots to seduce young girls and the nation away from Protestant ideals. Catholic characters represented pervasive threats to religious integrity throughout much American literature.

If Islam offered authors alternatives and opportunities to challenge Protestant hegemony, Catholicism became a rich tool for upholding and encouraging it. With novels such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), literary commentary on Catholicism moved beyond the geographic borders of the United States to Italy, where the Vatican and Italian Catholicism become rich subjects of literary contemplation of the American nation's religious traditions and exclusions. Hawthorne's interest in Italian Catholicism reflects many nineteenth-century American writers’ association of Catholicism with the splendid corruption of an Old World Spanish and Italian past. Henry Longfellow's *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847), for example, was one of the most widely read narrative poems in the nineteenth-century United States. It sold tens of thousands of copies, was translated into many languages, and subsequently generated spin-offs and even movies. As scholars have observed, part of its popularity results from its rewriting of Catholicism as Protestant romance.

**Native American and African American Traditions**

As we have seen, American evangelicalism and its democratizing, charismatic, and separatist energies were not simply important touchstones for much American literature; rather there was a mutually interdependent dynamism at work between American literary and religious pursuits that made the two integrally connected and, arguably, inseparable. African American and Native American communities, like their Anglo-American counterparts, developed effective literary strategies for engaging, contesting, and channeling American evangelical zeal. As early as 1774 Native Americans such as Samson Occom, a member of the Mohegan nation, wrote hymn texts (published as *A Choice Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs*) that strategically adapted Christian theologies to separatist movements. Occom was a friend of Phyllis Wheatley, and he and Joseph Johnson, a Native American colleague, developed literary strategies not unlike Wheatley's to stimulate an intertribal Christian community in Brotherton, New York. Occom and Johnson were the only Native Americans who wrote and published their literary works in the eighteenth century, and these literary works simultaneously engaged existing religious communities and were a key to the development of alternatives to American evangelicalism.
In 1790 African American evangelist and author John Marrant published his *Journal*, in which he described his three-year mission to the people of Birchtown, Nova Scotia, the largest all-black settlement in North America. In his *Journal* Marrant described a covenant theology that reflected and was practiced by this particular community. When we think about African American writing in the pre–Civil War period, we tend to think about the famous slave narratives of writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Hannah Crafts. Key to these narratives is a critique of ministers who use scripture to uphold the institution of slave owning and of religious communities that condone human injustice. In Douglass’s narrative, slave songs as well as religious practices and beliefs deriving from voodoo become powerful gateways to slave resistance. However, writers such as Marrant, Absalom Jones, and Richard Allen used literature to describe new religious communities to others even as they used their firsthand involvement with these communities as the occasion to credential themselves as writers. Jones and Allen, who founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* (1794) to tell the story of their community’s involvement in a yellow fever epidemic and their endurance as a spiritual community in the face of disaster.

**Conclusion**

The interconnections between religious practice and literary expression intensified as the Civil War neared. Not only did the question of slavery generate writing that turned to religious precept for guidance, but religious figures increasingly relied on literary form, popular narrative techniques, and poetic techniques to affirm their congregants’ pro- or antislavery leanings. Abraham Lincoln, in 1858, while running for the U.S. Senate, paraphrased Jesus when he asserted that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” and this metaphor held true for the house of God as well as for the nation’s domestic policy. The Civil War (1861–1865) produced a crisis of faith as well as a crisis of literary expression among Americans, and the interconnections between faith and writing would dramatically change form in the postbellum period. However, the bonds between literary and religious imagination were forged during the period of the early Republic and the first half of the nineteenth century, when both literary form and religious life were instrumental in developing a new nation—a nation that emerged from Puritan ideals and that imagined separation between church and state. American literature was key to this development, connecting people to their preachers, challenging spiritual smugness, and conceptualizing ethical responsibility in a changing national landscape. Religious and literary innovators formed a loose but lasting collaboration that continues to shape how Americans read, listen, and pray.

See also *Abolitionism and Antislavery; Church and State: Revolutionary Period and Early Republic; Cult of Domesticity; Great Awakening(s); Literature: Colonial; Puritans; Roman Catholicism: Catholics in the New Nation and the Early Republic; Transcendentalism; Visual Culture: Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts from the Revolution to the Civil War,*
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- Catholicism
- spirituals
- gods
- uncles
- religious leaders

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