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Thomas D. Hamm. *God's Government Begun: The Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform, 1842-1846.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. xxv + 312 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-32903-5.

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In the forward to *God's Government Begun*, Indiana University Press's Religion in America series editors Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein refer to Thomas D. Hamm's work as "the account of record" for a little-known group of radical religious reformers known as the Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform. While it is certainly that, Hamm's study is much more: meticulously researched, it is, on the whole, that all-too-rare academic product, a good read. Equally important, it is an example of the growing scholarly recognition of social movements rooted not in the urban East, but in the rural West, and underscores the impressive networks of reformers across the antebellum North.

Founded in Clinton County, Ohio, in 1842, the Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform was "an alliance of Hicksite Quakers and New England Garrisonian abolitionists committed to the reconstruction of American society according to the principles of non-resistance and the Government of God." Determined to reform the world through the power of their example, the Universal Reformers organized eight independent communities: one (Skaneateles) in New York, three (Marlborough, Prairie Home, and Highland Home) in Ohio, and four (Union Home, West Grove or Fraternal Home, Kristeen, and Grand Prairie) in Indiana. None lasted more than a year; most disbanded after scarcely six months. Beset by the financial woes common to many antebellum enterprises, the communities also wrestled with an updated version of the old Puritan Dilemma: how to build a separate and pure community while maintaining those ties to the larger world so necessary for its survival. The Puritans couldn't pull it off, and, two centuries later, neither could the Universal Reformers.

The study begins somewhat slowly, with a careful analysis of the New England evangelical roots of three of the founders of Universal Reform. As he explores the backgrounds of James O. Wattles, John A. Collins, and Orson S. Murray in Chapter One, "The New England Roots of Universal Reform," Hamm stresses not their uniqueness but the extent to which their lives were similar to "thousands of other young reformers in the 1820s and 1830s." Devout Christians, each was also conscious of the impact of the unfolding market revolution, and aware of the potential for restructuring American society. Each also came to Universal Reform via a circuitous route, which, Hamm argues, suggests the ways in which individuals moved from narrower religious interests into "a broader vision of reform." Wattles, an orthodox Congregationalist, initially thought to become a missionary, but his time at Lyman Beecher's Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, led him instead into the fledgling abolitionist movement. In 1839, in the wake of the split

among abolitionists, Wattles decided to bring the ideas of William Lloyd Garrison to the vast territory of the West. By 1840, however, Wattles was exploring nonresistance and antisabbatarianism as well. John A. Collins, also a Congregationalist, spent a year at the orthodox Andover Seminary, but turned instead toward abolitionism. What might have sparked this shift, Hamm notes, is unknown. Like Wattles, Collins aligned himself with the Garrisonian radicals, and by 1839 had joined the abolitionist lecture circuit. A fundraising trip to England in 1840 led Collins to appreciate the deleterious effects of capitalism upon British society, as when he described to a friend how the grinding poverty he witnessed was the result of a "system of exchange, by which one class of men can secure the fruits of the poor labourer without returning him an equivalent." As Hamm explains, Collins concluded that the outcome was a nation "eaten up with sin. The entire social system had to be changed." Orson S. Murray, raised a Free Will Baptist, aimed at the Baptist ministry. As a young man he took up temperance reform, then anti-Masonry. In 1832, after reading Garrison's *Liberator* and *Thoughts on African Colonization*, Murray embraced abolitionism, and was a successful agent of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. By the mid-1830s, Murray undertook to organize local antislavery societies, and assumed the editorship of the *Vermont Telegraph*, that state's Baptist organ, which he used as a platform for his increasingly radical social ideas. Murray, too, accepted nonresistance, as well as women's rights and a growing commitment to economic communitarianism. Thus, by the early 1840s, these three New Englanders had reached a similar conclusion: America–indeed, the world–was endangered by the sin that contemporary social and economic relations engendered.

Meanwhile, back in Ohio, three Hicksite Friends were following their own paths to a new social vision, one which they would eventually share with the New Englanders in the Universal Reform Society. Chapter Two, "The Hicksite Quaker Roots of Universal Reform," follows the careers of Valentine Nicholson, Abraham Brooke, and Hiram Mendenhall. Valentine Nicholson was no stranger to religious radicalism; not only had two maternal uncles converted to Shakerism, but the 1827 schism of the Friends found him siding with the more radical Hicksites despite some family pressure. A farmer by trade, Nicholson was self-educated, with a curious mind that led him in many directions, from Thomas Paine to phrenology, and eventually into Garrisonian abolitionism. In interpreting Nicholson's intellectual drift, Hamm cogently notes that the sheer fact of his Quakerism is not a sufficient explanation, since, he points out, not only did most Quakers not respond similarly, but there was nothing inherent in Quaker theology to suggest that one would or should. Crucial to focusing Nicholson's mind on Universal Reform, Hamm argues, was Abraham Brooke, a Clinton County, Ohio, physician originally from Maryland. In 1836, Brooke's otherwise fairly conventional life took a new turn under the influence of Sereno W. Streeter, whom Hamm describes as "one of the shock troops of the early abolitionist cause." Initially intending to challenge Streeter, Brooke was himself converted into the secretary of a newly organized local antislavery society. In 1837, Brooke and his wife April moved their family to Clinton County, where they immediately organized an antislavery society noteworthy for its inclusion of both sexes on equal terms. In 1840, upon receiving word that a party of Virginians were passing through en route to Missouri with several slaves, Brooke leapt into the fray, mixing it up with the slaveholders and an antiabolitionist mob. Although his efforts at rescuing the slaves by filing kidnaping charges against the slaveholders proved unsuccessful, it prompted him to begin to question both the morality and the efficacy of participating in the legal system, moving him in the direction of non-resistance. Hiram Mendenhall, originally from North Carolina, was in the 1840s perhaps the best known of the Universal Reformers, although he has long since been forgotten. He, too, was a Hicksite Friend, and embarked on a prosperous career as a petty capitalist and landowner, first in Ohio then in Indiana. Charges that he was a "fanatical abolitionist" cost him a seat in the Indiana state house, but Mendenhall remained interested in Whig politics until the fall of 1842, when he locked horns with Whig leader Henry Clay over antislavery and was excoriated in the Whig press. Facing mounting financial problems, Mendenhall maintained his interest in reform. Hamm concludes this chapter by noting that economics and reform would unite for Mendenhall in Universal Reform.

Chapter Three takes this cast of characters and brings them together by outlining the context in which the Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform coalesced in Ohio and Indiana, then attempted to break out onto the national scene. The notion of universal reform, that is, the idea that antislavery, religion, and social morality were interconnected, was not unique to the Universal Reformers. In 1840, Garrison's *Liberator* published a discussion of communitarianism as a strategy for reform, and Hamm speculates that this article may have contributed to attempts by western Hicksite Quakers to put these principles into practice. Hamm describes at length how a grow-

ing discontent among some abolitionist Hicksites in Ohio and Indiana, as well as the increasing hostility towards abolitionists in general, contributed to the desire to separate themselves into a communitarian society. At an abolitionist convention in Oakland, Ohio, in 1842, radicals proposed the Society of Universal Inquiry and Reform, and drafted a constitution whose preamble asserted that "a better state of affairs can exist by organizing the social system in accordance with the principles of God's government, by which equality of rights and interests shall be secured to all…." The first meeting of the Society would take place the following spring in New York City, on the heels of the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, with the goal of broadening abolitionism to include universal reform. The meeting was not a success. Leading abolitionist lights such as William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, and Abby Kelley did not remain to join the Universal Reformers. Little is known about what did occur since few records were kept. "In fact," Hamm notes, "the first anniversary was to be the last. Never again would all of these reformers gather together." The lack of interest in Universal Reform exhibited by the national abolitionist leadership trickled down, and some of those who had been enthusiastic at the Oakland Convention decided against further involvement. One last chance remained for whipping up broad enthusiasm for Universal Reform: the Hundred Conventions of the summer of 1843, a scheme devised by John A. Collins to spread the word of nonresistant abolitionism across the North, with the Universal Reformers riding piggyback. The result was division among the abolitionists, and disillusion among the Universal Reformers.

In the fourth chapter of *God's Government Begun*, "The Hundred Conventions: Aspiration and Failure," Hamm's skill as a historian and storyteller come to the fore, and the book takes on a new spirit. Mixing vivid prose with an eye for the telling anecdote and a keen appreciation for the humanity of those involved, the narrative picks up speed and vitality as Hamm relates the seriocomic adventures of the Hundred Conventions. Bringing together some of the abolitionist movement's best and brightest–Charles L. Remond, Frederick Douglass and Abby Kelley, among others–the idea was to hold one hundred conventions across the North and West, from Massachusetts to New York, Ohio, and Indiana. An advance guard of abolitionists was to be followed by the Universal Reformers. But as Hamm explains "the two groups met with problems." In part, the trouble was caused by the violence or indifference that greeted abolitionists wherever they agitated. But the effort was also undermined by the different goals of the abolitionists and the Universal Reformers. In Syracuse, New York, for example, tension grew when Collins included the abolitionists in a blanket condemnation of sectarianism, something the abolitionists found particularly nettlesome since Collins was at the time a paid agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society, not for the Universal Reformers. The violence of the antiabolitionist mobs in Indiana knit the abolitionists together more tightly, but it did not make them more interested in universal reform. By the end of the summer of 1843, the Universal Reformers had separated from the abolitionist movement (although most remained committed to its principles). Universal Reform would have to be achieved by other means.

"The Communities" (Chapter Five) was that other means. Living as a community, under God's Government, the Universal Reformers would begin the work of redemption. Sharing many of the problems that beset other utopian communities, the Universal Reform communities also faced a unique challenge stemming from their belief in nonresistance, namely, how to create an orderly community without resorting to compulsion. Hamm takes the reader on a brief tour of the eight Universal Reform communities, although none is sketched in much detail due to a lack of sources. Hamm does, however, succeed in imparting the tone of the communities, which seem to have tolerated a high degree of individualism due to their refusal to adopt laws, the principle of majority rule, or tests for membership. For example, most members were committed to dietary reform, but at Prairie Home, British socialist John Wood raised pigs because, he explained, he liked "a bit o' meat" while Mary Mendenhall and Anna Dutton stalked wild chickens for impromptu barbeques. Because the scanty documentation makes it difficult to explain the rapid failure of the communities–finances were a perennial problem, but Hamm points out that at least three communities appear to have been self-sustaining–Hamm turns to Rosabeth Moss Kanter's analysis of the characteristics of successful communes. Of the six required characteristics–sacrifice, investment, renunciation of the outside world, communion, mortification, and transcendence–the Universal Reformers could claim only the last. The Universal Reformers "did have a vision," Hamm argues, and "if they left a legacy, it was that."

That vision, of the world remade, was expressed in the ideology of Universal Reform. Chapter Six, "The Ideology of Universal Reform," analyzes the central ideas of the Government of God. By bringing an end to gov-

ernment based on coercion, to religious sectarianism, to poverty spawned by competitive capitalism, to ignorance, to the oppression of women, God's Government would usher in the millennium. The community was the key, for unlike many of their contemporaries, who held that a transformed individual could transform society, the Universal Reformers believed the reverse to be true: to reform the individual, society first had to be reformed. When their attempts at community living did not work out, the Universal Reformers separated, and drifted back into mainstream society. Chapter Seven, "The Fates of Reformers," traces the subsequent careers of some of the better known members. Almost all became Spiritualists, which Hamm argues "held special meaning" for the Universal Reformers: "What was more reasonable than to expect divine guidance from angels and good spirits to lead humanity into the state that God intended?" In closing his study, Hamm notes that the obituary of Universal Reformer Esther Wattles, wife of James O. Wattles, heralded her commitment to abolitionism. "But of nonresistance and communities and Universal Inquiry and Reform," Hamm writes, "there was not a word." The legacies of Universal Reform, he concludes, were uncertain.

God's Government Begun is a well-told and well-researched inquiry into what motivates seemingly ordinary individuals to undertake seemingly extraordinary endeavors. But this is also where the study seems weakest. Hamm suggests that the experience of social isolation, common in rural settings, combined with their religious beliefs, may have spurred the Universal Reformers' commitment to communitarianism. I do not find this explanation altogether satisfying, since isolation was surely also common among the many more rural Americans who did not join communities. Perhaps, though, this is an issue that cannot be fully answered. In addition, among the virtues of Hamm's study is his attempt to integrate into his analysis the women of the Universal Reform communities. Universal Reformers supported the nascent women's rights movement, and although the voices heard most frequently in *God's Government Begun* are those of the male leadership, women's voices are present throughout the narrative. Moreover, Hamm's data reveal that women held leadership positions in at least some of the communities, as at Union Home, where Mary Patty sat on the business committee. Overall, though, Hamm concludes that "Universal Inquiry and Reform was very much a man's enterprise, with a few exceptions" and that women's role in the communities was fairly conventional. Considered to be morally superior to men, Universal Reform women, like women in mainstream society, were to find freedom through their work as wives and mothers. While I realize the extant records are limited, I wonder if Hamm's analysis sufficiently takes into account the documentary bias against the women of Universal Reform. Hamm concedes that he drew primarily upon the writings of the male leadership for his characterization of Universal Reform's gender roles and attitudes, and suggests that this was because "women were more skeptical, and thus less likely to enter into the discourse that was shaping the communities and the new society that was to emerge from them." One might, however, argue the opposite: that women had the most to lose by joining a community viewed with suspicion by the larger society–or, if the world were indeed transformed, the most to gain by joining one–and thus might have been more committed than the men. Given the evidence of women's equal participation in some of the abolitionist societies from which Universal Reform drew its membership, it would be surprising to find women withdrawing from the discourse of the communitarian societies. If so, then Hamm's reliance on the writings of the men of the community is all the more discomfiting. Historians of women might also question Hamm's sweeping statement that "the woman's rights movement began with the realization of some women abolitionists that they were bound in many of the same ways as the slaves they sought to liberate." In brief, there seems to be evidence throughout the narrative that women's roles in the communities were not as limited as Hamm concludes.

I would also liked to have seen more analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of the Universal Reformers and the communitarian societies they created. Hamm does break down the religious affiliations of the members of the Skaneateles (New York) community into Hicksite Friends, a Universalist, a few atheists, and "the rest were evangelicals." There is also a brief reference to Quaker-like worship services at the communities. Thus, throughout the study the Hicksite Quaker roots of many (if not most) of the membership are apparent; less so are the influences of non-Quaker beliefs. Hamm relies upon the common shorthand of "evangelical" to lump together Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists in a manner that is more descriptive than analytical. Not only were these distinct Protestant denominations with occasionally disparate theological beliefs, but, more to the point, it is not clear what role evangelicalism played in the world view of Universal Reform. For that matter, it is not altogether clear what role God was intended to play in God's Government. In part, this is a consequence of the limited

documentation, but it is also a sign that Universal Reform was very much a work in progress, the product of imaginative and committed individuals who, it seems, valued individualism, in the form of noncoercion, as much as communitarianism.

These criticisms aside, *God's Government Begun* is a thorough study that captures well an historical moment in which the possibility for universal social reform seemed only too real. It is as well an often engaging work. I will not soon forget Hamm's description of famed abolitionist editor and author Lydia Maria Child attacking her luggage with a hatchet while ducking the entreaties of several Universal Reformers that she support their convention. Scholars interested in the myriad innovations of nineteenth-century religion and social reform would do well to familiarize themselves with Thomas D. Hamm's *God's Government Begun.*

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