



# Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination

By Robert H. Abzug

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**Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination** By Robert H. Abzug

In the forty years before the Civil War, America was awash in political and social reform movements. Abolitionists stormed against the cruelties of slavery. Temperance zealots hounded producers and consumers of strong drink. Sabbatarians fought to make Sunday an officially recognized sacred day. Woman's rights activists proclaimed the case for sexual equality. This colorful text brilliantly reassesses the religious roots of these antebellum reform movements through a series of penetrating profiles of key men and women who sought to remake their worlds in sacred terms. Arguing that we cannot understand American reform movements unless we understand the sacred significance reformers bestowed on the worldly arenas of politics, society, and the economy, Abzug presents these men and women in their own words, placing their cherished ideals and their often heated squabbles within the context of their millennial and sometimes apocalyptic sense of America's role in the cosmic drama. Tracing the lasting impact of what began as a peculiarly Protestant, largely New England, style of social action on the uniquely American traditions of activism that flourish today, *Cosmos Crumbling* is invaluable for helping students of American and religious history understand the myriad ways in which the quest for enlightenment and salvation continues to shape American politics.

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### **Editorial Review**

#### Review

"A fascinating read and a wonderful window on an important phenomenon."--Daniel P. Murphy, Hanover College

"[A]ll students of American culture in the nineteenth century...will now rely on *Cosmos Crumbling* as the most useful narrative overview of the role played by religious imagination in the unfolding of the antebellum reform."--Thomas J. Brown, Harvard University in *The New England Quarterly*

"...a useful resource for students of religion and politics..."--*Perspectives on Political Science*

"...an original and provocative analysis of the religious roots of early nineteenth century reform movements....[Abzug's] analysis is unique....*Cosmos Crumbling* is important reading to scholars of American cultural and political, as well as religious history."--*American Studies International*

"...a detailed account of the many reform movements in Antebellum America."--*Theology Digest*

"Abzug's book has the double virtue of being informative and good to read..."--*Journal of the Early Republic*

"A readable, insightful work. Abzug rightfully stresses the role of religion in American reform movements. First rate!"--John Quinn, Salve Regina University

"A brilliant reinterpretation of the dynamic reform movements that proliferated in the five decades following the American independence....Succeeds in breaking out of the constraining cocoon imposed by our own secular era and in comprehending nineteenth-century reformers in their own terms, within their own cosmos. Abzug goes far beyond any previous historian in getting to the core of American reform and thus to a vital part of American identity."--David Brion Davis, Yale University

"Offers the freshest, most elegantly phrased and profoundest reinterpretation of the American reform tradition in the last fifty years....All students of nineteenth-century American history will need to read this work."--Bertram Wyatt-Brown, University of Florida

#### From the Back Cover

In the forty years before the Civil War, America rang with the cry of reform. Abolitionists stormed against the cruelties of slavery. Temperance zealots hounded producers and consumers of strong drink. Sabbatarians fought to make Sunday an officially recognized sacred day. Women's rights activists proclaimed the case for sexual equality. Others offered programs of physiological and spiritual self-reform: phrenology, vegetarianism, the water-cure, spiritualism, and miscellaneous others. "Even the insect world was to be defended", Emerson mused, "and a society for the protection of ground-worms, slugs, and mosquitoes was to be incorporated without delay". *Cosmos Crumbling* brilliantly reassesses the religious roots of these antebellum reform movements through a series of penetrating profiles of key men and women who sought to remake their worlds in sacred terms. Filled with vivid anecdotes and penetrating analysis, the book presents a genealogy of reform cosmology that begins with the American Revolution and ends with "the woman question", the issue that drove a wedge between traditional evangelical reformers and the more radical reformers who questioned the very foundations of the conventional Christian cosmos. Here is the story of

Declaration of Independence signer Benjamin Rush and his lifelong odyssey to bring together his unorthodox Christian ideals and his revolutionary republicanism. Other portraits highlight the guiding role of religion in the careers of the tireless abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the evangelical minister Lyman Beecher and his daughter, influential educational reformer Catharine Beecher, as well as of Angelina and Sarah Crimke, and Lydia Maria Child, fearless women who made enormous strides in reimagining the spiritual and moral power of women and their place in society. There is also an intriguing chapter on leaders of the body reforms, including phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler, who began his career reading the heads of his fellow students at Amherst College for small change, and William Andrus Alcott, who advocated a bland vegetarian diet, cold water bathing, and a profusion of daily rituals to guide his followers through their every waking moment. Arguing that we cannot understand American reform movements unless we understand the sacred significance reformers bestowed on the worldly arenas of politics, society, and the economy, Abzug presents these men and women in their own words, placing their cherished ideals and their often heated squabbles within the context of their millennial and sometimes apocalyptic sense of America's role in the cosmic drama. Tracing the lasting impact of what began as a peculiarly Protestant, largely New England, style of social action on the uniquely American traditions of activism that flourish today, *Cosmos Crumbling* is a signal contribution to our understanding of the myriad ways in which the quest for enlightenment and salvation continues to shape American politics.

About the Author

Robert H. Abzug is at University of Texas.

## **Users Review**

**From reader reviews:**

**Kevin Applegate:**

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