

**Kutztown University**  
**Research Commons at Kutztown University**

---

English Department: Traveling American  
Modernism (ENG 366, Fall 2018)

English Department

---

Winter 12-4-2018

# Culture of Modern American Theology

Evan Colon

*Kutztown University of Pennsylvania*, [ecolo132@live.kutztown.edu](mailto:ecolo132@live.kutztown.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/englisheng366>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Colon, Evan, "Culture of Modern American Theology" (2018). *English Department: Traveling American Modernism (ENG 366, Fall 2018)*. 11.

<https://research.library.kutztown.edu/englisheng366/11>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Department: Traveling American Modernism (ENG 366, Fall 2018) by an authorized administrator of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact [czerny@kutztown.edu](mailto:czerny@kutztown.edu).

Evan Colon

Dr. Vogel

ENG 366

Research Paper

4 December 2018

### Culture of Modern American Theology

While people travel and engage with others, they are exposed to new ideologies and cultures that cause them to question what they believe to be true. Therefore, travel influences the spiritual lives of those who are brave enough to break out of their comfort zone and ask questions pertaining to their identity. As communities of people change their perception of their identity, the culture they've created changes simultaneously. Billy Graham, an American traveling-preacher who founded a multi-billion-dollar Christian ministry, led many evangelic crusades in the United States with the intent of converting people to Christianity. In the United States there have been multiple Presidents who have claimed to be impacted by Billy Graham's ministry according to his website, BillyGraham.org. On his website, Billy Graham gave an account of his relationship with President Lyndon B. Johnson saying, "There was a spiritual side to Lyndon Johnson that many people did not know. Billy was probably closer to Johnson than to any other President. He was invited to the family ranch several times and spent more than 20 nights at the White House during Johnson's administration. Every time Billy would say to him, "Let's have a prayer," the President would get on his knees to pray." President Johnson had also written to Billy Graham in a letter where he said, "My mind went back to those lonely occasions at the White House when your friendship helped to sustain a President in an hour of trial." President Johnson was one of many presidents that had a relationship with Billy Graham, who has preached to over 215 million people across the globe since 1950. The microcosm of Billy

Graham ministering to the leaders of the United States depicts the heart of a nation that has been seeking spiritual guidance for generations. This is evidenced by the wide-spread success of Billy Graham's organization traveling around the country to provide guidance to anyone seeking understanding. This success is credited to Billy Graham's capacity to travel and share his messages via multiple media outlets including TV, radio, recordings, magazines, internet, and speaking engagements. The emerging practices of modern travel have reshaped the culture of spiritual seeking. Walt Whitman, Peter Cartwright, James A. Hedges, A.A Allen, and William Least Heat-Moon are all people who were willing to search for spiritual truths and although some of them came to different conclusions, they each share the mode of travel as their primary means for both searching for answers and sharing what they've learned.

According to the Whitman Archive, Walt Whitman was not a Christian and he expressed antagonism toward organized religion. However, through his writing in "Song of the Open Road", which was published in 1856, we can see that Whitman recognized that there was a spiritual aspect to reality that manifested while traveling. Walt Whitman expresses this notion with a vibrant and outgoing mindset in his poem "Song of the Open Road" in the 4<sup>th</sup> stanza where he writes,

"I think heroic deeds were all conceiv'd in the open air, and all free poems also,  
I think I could stop here myself and do miracles,  
I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, and whoever beholds me shall like me,  
I think whoever I see must be happy."

Whitman is utilizing the tone of a preacher in his poem. He is expressing ideas of defying the natural laws that govern our life (miracles) through the outlet of traveling on the road. Then he

goes on to end the poem by inviting others to join him, so he can share what he has received from his experiences on the road.

“Camerado, I give you my hand!

I give you my love more precious than money,

I give you myself before preaching or law;

Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?

Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?” (Whitman 15).”

Even though Whitman says “before preaching”, the context of this stanza is still similar to how Christian preachers inviting people to convert to Christianity at the end of a sermon with the hope that the new converts will have join them in their quest and experience the same joy on their journey of faith. Therefore, the traveling experience has euphoric and spiritual components that aren’t limited to any particular organized religion, but are accessible to seemingly anyone through the mode of travel as it was accessible in the mid-1800s, before automobiles were common in the United States.

Over time, travel has also reshaped the culture of how missionaries and itinerant preachers both came to their faith and shared it. Robert Bray wrote the biography, *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher*, about that explains Peter Cartwright’s conversion to Methodist Christianity and his development as a preacher. Peter Cartwright was a young boy when his family made their home in Kentucky available for any Methodist Circuit Rider preacher to live in and preach out of during the early 1800s. After a night of partying and dancing, which are unacceptable in Methodist tradition, Cartwright had an incident where he lost his sense of sight for

a day. He took this as a sign from God and this motivated him to not only change his character, but also become a Methodist preacher (Bray 22). Peter Cartwright was ordained prior to the American Civil War, was notorious for sharing his views about politics, especially slavery, without regard for offending any listeners. This upset many people including a ferryman who disagreed with Cartwright's views and was telling a crowd of people how he'd drown Cartwright if he saw him (137). Cartwright, hearing this ferryman slander his name, decided to engage in a fight with this man, "He souses him down under the tide, while the companions of the vanquished ferryman look on, the distance insuring fair play. Cartwright souses him under again and raising him, says: "I baptize thee in the name of the Devil, whose child thou art." He thus immerses him thrice, and then drawing him up again, inquires: "Did you ever pray?" (137). This aggressive method of preaching the gospel would be considered totally unorthodox and unacceptable in a few decades, but during this era of the Second Great Awakening, where Christianity was becoming increasingly popular, Cartwright didn't experience any backlash for it. The Second Great Awakening was the result of many Methodist preachers traveling throughout the United States to share their theology with people who both agreed and disagreed. That made Christianity very prevalent in most parts of the United States and reshaped the culture accordingly.

When another man of faith, Sprague, challenged Cartwright and the General conference of Elders of the Methodist church the conversation went as such, "When, on Friday morning, May 7, Sprague spoke in his defense before the general conference, "he openly avowed that he could tell what was going on in heaven, earth, and hell; that he had foretold the results of many of the important battles in Mexico . . . and that he knew how the decision of that General conference would go, before the trial ended" (277). After this impressive if insane declaration, Sprague walked through the doors of the Bromfield Street Church and left the delegates to decide whether such a

great seer into national destiny should have his humble Methodist preacher's credentials restored. Cartwright followed him out and buttonholed him: "Now, brother S., can you tell how this conference will decide in your case beforehand?" "Yes, I can," said he. "Well," said I, "if you will tell me now, and they should decide as you say, you can very easily make a convert of me. Do tell me here, privately; I will say nothing about it till the verdict is rendered." "Get away," said he, "I will not do it." "No," said I, "because you can not." (277). Sprague's bluff was called: Cartwright had exposed him as a religious fraud." (Bray 222). This scenario shows the character standards that well-respected members of the church were expected to uphold and how firm Cartwright was in his personal beliefs. It also shows that religious men like Cartwright didn't handle disputes with fellow Christians physically. This aspect of the culture makes preachers seem like they're above the law because Cartwright dared to assault a man who slandered him and was not penalized for it. This is an example of how travel has reshaped the culture of spiritual seeking in the United States.

Another traveling preacher, Reverend James A. Hedges, was a man from Montana that graduated from Seminary to preach the Gospel as a missionary in the western United States. He continued his missionary work in the west until his retirement in 1936 (Hedges 131). He traveled to a small town where the majority of the citizens were White and he described the first church service he held there saying, "There being no super intendent I took charge and things began to adjust themselves. Several classes were formed and teachers chosen for that day at least and altogether I felt we were making a good beginning. When the Sunday School hour was over the most of the scholars and adults staid for church. By this time others had come in untill the room was practically filled." (137). Hedges went on to say "Sabbath School missions was the greatest investment the church ever made. Nearly all of the great churches of the far west as well as the lesser were once only outposts on the hazardous trail of the Sunday School Missionary" (137), to pay homage to the

missionaries that came prior to his arrival because if they hadn't then there would be no demand for his services. Hedges described the service he attended as a guest missionary to the Native American people by saying "Never could I forget the first service I attended that evening in the tent of meeting in the Christian camp. Miss McBeth introduced me to the Indian ministers and people. How respectful and reverent. How clean and tidy in their dress. How dignifiedly they assembled for worship, the men sitting on one side and the women on the other." (140). These quotes show how traveling missionaries were able to change the culture of both White and Native American people over decades of persistent travel. As a result of decades of missionaries traveling into the area, Native Americans began to assimilate to White culture and receive Christian theology on their reservations. According to the previously mentioned quote, The Native American people were dressed as the White people deemed appropriate and adopted the church custom of separating men and women during the church service. This quote also shows that the culture and theology of this group of Native Americans was reshaped by the repeated encounters they had with missionaries that traveled through their lands and introduced them to the Christian method of spiritual seeking.

Asa Alonso Allen, better known as A.A Allen, was a popular Christian Evangelist during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His ministry and "Miracle Magazine" narratives were criticized by Ronald D. Baker, a professor who published his article in the "Journal of American Folklore". In this article, Baker wrote and quoted "In 1934, after spending a short time in jail for theft, Allen converted to Methodism for a couple of weeks before joining a neighboring Pentecostal church. In 1968 he explained this switch: 'Thirty-three years ago the Lord saved me in a Methodist Church when I repented of my sins, and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior. But I soon parted company with the Methodist Church as I saw it going backward into liberalism, socialism, and modernism! Any church is a good place for a sinner to start for heaven, but no church is good enough to continue in

unless it is going forward, onward, and upward with God' (quoted in Morris 1973:7-8). Not long after his conversion, Allen attended a camp meeting in Oklahoma, where he "found the baptism of the Holy Ghost ... spoke in tongues, and lay prostrate in the sawdust until after midnight," persuading him that he wanted to become a preacher." (205). This quote shows the transformation A. A. Allen underwent as a result of his spiritual seeking. The supernatural experience of "finding the baptism of the Holy Ghost" during his travels caused him to be dissatisfied with simply converting to Christianity. It ignited a passion for him to preach so others could experience this spectacular occurrence. Then later in Allen's career "When his church refused to construct a new building and sponsor a proposed radio program, he resigned his pastorate and started holding his own revival campaigns in a used tent he bought in 1951 from fellow evangelist Jack Coe...Now an independent tent evangelist, Allen, through radio, television, and Miracle Magazine, spread his ministry far and wide. In 1957, Allen's television commercials across the United States proclaimed, "See! Hear! Actual miracles happening before your eyes. Cancer, tumors, goiters disappear. Crutches, braces, wheelchairs, stretchers discarded. Crossed eyes straightened. Caught by the camera as they occurred in the healing line before thousands of witnesses" (Faith Healers 1957:39). As an independent evangelist, Allen prospered. In 1958 he founded Miracle Valley, a community growing to about 2,400 acres" (206). The same theology that caused Sprague to be put on trial by the Methodist Church pushed A.A. Allen to leave Methodism and join a different denomination that shared his theology. Then when that church wouldn't provide Allen with the assistance he required to share his views with the rest of the nation Allen decided to become independent. His theology was widely accepted by the public despite the push-back he received from his former denominations, so successful he was able to build a community on 2,400 acres. This shows the dramatic culture shift in America over the course of a few decades from Methodism, which didn't

support miracles, to Pentecostalism which did support miracles. As communication became more widespread in Allen's era with access to television, postal mail, radio broadcasts, and modern travel methods, advertising for the ministry was much easier than in the days of the Circuit Riders. This helped Evangelists like Allen and Billy Graham to grow their organizations much quicker by reaching more people effectively and consistently.

Finally, a contemporary traveler named William Least Heat-Moon recorded the account of his cross-country road trip in the 1970s in his book "Blue Highways". His purpose for embarking on this journey was for the sake of learning about his Native American ancestry and to spiritually heal/ escape from life's hardships at home. Least Heat-Moon's story reveals America's diverse culture from the perspective of people he met along the back roads of the United States. One of the people he met during his travels in Idaho was an Adventist Christian missionary named Arthur O. Bakke. Least Heat-Moon described Bakke's conversion testimony saying "Some years ago he lost in a divorce most of what he owned and had never bothered to gather more. After recuperating from the car wreck, he went on the road to serve Jesus." (254). This quote shows how a man who had lost most of what he acquired throughout his lifetime finds peace from the turmoil in his life by converting to Christianity and finds fulfillment by traveling to share the source of his peace with everyone he comes in contact with.

Later, Least Heat-Moon says, "The journals of Lewis and Clark. Lewis was recounting his thirty-first birthday, which he spent not far from here. He surveyed his life and found he'd done very little with it. He vowed right then to live for others the way he had been living for himself" (259). This quote explains what Least Heat-Moon was expecting to experience during this part of his journey. He was interested in the knowledge that could make a man comfortable living his life entirely for others without seeking material gain. In other words, he was seeking the same peace

that Bakke received from Christianity without committing to an organized religion. This attitude is similar to that of Walt Whitman, who also sought spiritual experiences without committing to a religion. The culture has been repeatedly reshaped by travel over the 114 year gap between Whitman and Least Heat-Moons works of literature. Travel itself has evolved and as a result interaction amongst people who are traveling has changed. However, as much as culture has changed, the premise that travel correlates with spiritual seeking still remains.

When people travel, they bring their ideology with them. While traveling, people interact with one another and this results in the transfer of ideologies amongst groups of people. The constant change of ideology within a region causes the reshaping of the culture. Walt Whitman traveled carrying his personal beliefs and concluded his journey by beckoning everyone to join him and experience the wonders of the world. The Methodist ideology and culture, which strictly prohibited dancing and miracle supporting theology, that was preached by Peter Cartwright was the same ideology and culture that A.A Allen quickly became dissatisfied with. That discomfort led to A.A Allen preaching in tent-revivals and building a community from scratch. This ultimately diminished the influence Methodism had on Christian culture and American culture. Billy Graham capitalized on this new movement with A.A Allen and founded what is now one of the largest Christian organizations in the world. Least Heat-Moon was seeking the peace that he lost due to his drastic life situations by traveling as a means of seeking peace within himself through understanding of his identity. The experience of travel causes people learn more about themselves in an experience that is euphoric and spiritual in nature and as people learn and grow throughout their travels they reshape the same cultures that they embrace.

Works Cited

- “Billy Graham: Pastor to Presidents.” *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*,  
 billygraham.org/story/billy-graham-pastor-to-presidents-2/. Accessed 4 December 2018.
- BRAY, ROBERT. “Conversion.” *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher*,  
 University of Illinois Press, 2005, pp. 24–49. *JSTOR, JSTOR*,  
 www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt2ttc9x.6. Accessed 4 December 2018.
- BRAY, ROBERT. “Preacher.” *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher*,  
 University of Illinois Press, 2005, pp. 220–243. *JSTOR, JSTOR*,  
 www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt2ttc9x.14. Accessed 4 December 2018.
- Heat-Moon, William Least. *Blue Highways: a Journey into America*. Back Bay  
 Books/Little, Brown, 2013.
- HEDGES, JAMES A. “PIONEER PREACHER IN IDAHO.” *Journal of the Presbyterian  
 Historical Society (1943-1961)*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1949, pp. 131–160. *JSTOR, JSTOR*,  
 www.jstor.org/stable/23324699. Accessed 4 December 2018.
- Keurbrich, David. “The Walt Whitman Archive.” *Twentieth-Century Mass Media  
 Appearances - The Walt Whitman Archive*, Garland Publishing, 1998,  
 whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\_628.html. Accessed 4  
 December 2018.
- “Peter Cartwright: Fighting Preacher.” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*

(1908-1984), vol. 39, no. 1, 1946, pp. 136–138. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40188195](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40188195). Accessed 4 December 2018.

Ronald D. Baker. “Miracle Magazine in the Sixties: Mass Media Narratives of Healings and Blessings.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 118, no. 468, 2005, pp. 204–218. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4137702](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137702).

Whitman, Walt. “Song of the Open Road by Walt Whitman.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48859/song-of-the-open-road](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48859/song-of-the-open-road). Accessed 4 December 2018.