



Simply put, to understand Dickens's hold on the American imagination is to understand the hold morality and religion had on American life. These two forces, when allied with the fervor for reform, touched all aspects of life in nineteenth century America, from fiction to farming, and from science to slavery. The question confronting religious leaders and social reformers was how to spread their message. They soon discovered that the novel, with its felicitous combination of imaginative and intellectual thought, was the perfect vehicle for instituting this divine "plan." And the nationality of the writer made no difference to them. In an 1860 article, ponderously titled "The Attempts of Modern Writers of Fiction to Inculcate Doctrines of Philantropy [sic], and Promote Schemes of Social Reform," a Harvard professor singles out Bleak House as the "finest example" of its kind: "This work alone is sufficient to establish the ability and the right of the novelist to discuss in his writings questions of social and political reform" (Cram 83).

Social policy and religion were often intertwined in nineteenth-century American culture. For example, the American Tract society, during its crusade early in the century, was interested not only in promoting religiosity; its writings and missionaries embraced a wide spectrum of issues that modern sociologists would term secular ills, including substance abuse, addictions to gaming and vice, and more abstract "evils" such as procrastination and materialism (Bode Anatomy 132-140). What injected religion into this moral crusade were the underlying

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Draft #1?

Bordelon 1

This is the new introduction from original draft.

Chapter 2

"God Bless Us, Every One!": Dickens as Moral and Religious Exemplar

In an 1870 December editorial in the popular illustrated journal Every Saturday simply entitled "Christmas," the writer uses the religious spirit of the season <sup>as a springboard</sup> to express his desire to see all lands <sup>adopt a similar spirit &</sup> convert to Christianity. "~~In that day,~~" the writer concludes his jingoistic? article, <sup>looking forward</sup> ~~anticipating~~ <sup>the day</sup> when all the tribes and races of men shall keep this high festival together, perhaps, in just recognition of its best apostle, the Santa Claus of its earlier dispensation will give way to ST. DICKENS of the new.

...we say with Tiny Tim, 'God bless us, every one.'

("Christmas" 858)

Earlier in the century, during a Christmas festival for the <sup>his</sup> prisoners, the warden of the State Prison in Massachusetts gathered his charges into the prison chapel and read from A Christmas Carol (Hanaford 336).

These two seemingly disparate uses of Dickens's fiction in nineteenth-century America -- as proselytizer and as moral guide -- help explain the incredible popularity of his work throughout the period. Examining the cultural forces behind <sup>is there?</sup> this protean <sup>employment? use? appearance?</sup> conversion to a saint on the one hand, and to a social worker on the other, sheds light both on nineteenth-century American culture, and on Dickens's dominance of the literature of the period.

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In this chapter, I will describe how these three ideas, morality, religion and reform were reflected and shaped by Dickens's fiction. This chapter will recreate the nineteenth century

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when all the tribes and races of men shall keep this high festival together, perhaps, in just recognition of its best apostle, the Santa Claus of its earlier dispensation will give way to ST. DICKENS of the new.

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DICKENS of the new.....we say with Tiny Tim, 'God bless us, every one.'" ("Christmas" 858)

Earlier in the century during a Christmas festival for prisoners, the warden of the State Prison in Massachusetts gathered his charges into the prison chapel and, hoping to instill in them a sense of moral purpose, read from *A Christmas Carol* (Hanaford 336). These two seemingly disparate uses of Dickens' fiction in nineteenth-century America – as proselytizer and as moral tonic – help explain the incredible popularity of his work throughout the period. His fiction tapped into the guiding forces of nineteenth-century life, morality and religion, animating the society's concerns over values while affirming its vision of a pious nation blessed and looked over by a benevolent god. Simply put, to understand Dickens' hold on the American imagination is to understand the hold morality and religion had on American life.

While the wealth of books on Dickens and religion and Dickens and morality<sup>1</sup> suggest that yet another examination of these themes would be an exercise in, if not futility than in mere repetition, my emphasis on American life – and by extension culture – marks a distinction between my focus and the focus of the critical works which have preceded it. Specifically, I am interested in religion and morality

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (1970); Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens, Resurrectionist* (1982); Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (1981)