
Religious Crossings: How the Protestant Reformation Guided Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Literary Career.

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Abstract

In 1775, when the British conservative Edmund Burke commented on revolutionary and religious zeal in America, he drew attention to the unique relationship between the Reformation and the identity of America, the site for what he called "the protestantism of the Protestant religion." In this description, Burke locates America as the place where the Reformation manifested itself and where the events that took place in sixteenth century Wittenberg and Geneva came to fruition. Consequently, when Catharine Maria Sedgwick began her long and prolific literary career with the publication of *A New-England Tale* in 1822, she interacted with the principles of the Reformation as she attempted religious reform in America through her fiction. *A New-England Tale*, therefore, was specifically written to advance freedom and equality while encouraging Americans to reject the despotic authority of Calvinism, a form of Protestantism she believed contradicted not only Protestant but American values. My presentation will focus on the ways in which Sedgwick draws upon the Reformation in Europe and the Revolution in America to contend for spiritual and intellectual freedom, especially in *A New-England Tale* and *The Linwoods*. In a letter from 1852, she defines "the great principle achieved and fixed by the Protestant battle" as "the right of private judgment," a definition that aligns with the American vision of self-government achieved in the eighteenth century. Sedgwick's interpretation of the Reformation and its relationship to the American Revolution illuminates her vision for spiritual and intellectual freedom, which participates in promoting values that fueled reform movements of the nineteenth century. By drawing attention to the incorporeal aspects of societal reform, found specifically in religious beliefs, Sedgwick's fiction not only promotes and adapts Reformation ideals for an American context but demonstrates the ideological assumptions underlying what Robert N. Bellah will eventually call America's civil religion.

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