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ROBERT BAIRD AND THE EVANGELICAL CRUSADE
IN AMERICA, 1820-1860

Abstract

by

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The resurgence of evangelical Protestantism in America (1820-1860) was effected by groups of largely eastern individuals, both clergy and laity, that succeeded in creating a system of religious beliefs and social and cultural attitudes that attracted the allegiance of large numbers of Americans. Evangelicals, through the agencies of the Protestant denominations and the non-denominational benevolent societies conducted a crusade designed to bring America's mass culture under their sway. Among the important figures in the movement was the Reverend Robert Baird (1798-1863).

Baird, born and raised in western Pennsylvania and educated at Princeton, spent nearly forty years in the service of non-denominational benevolent societies. Because he and the organizations he served relied upon support from a large cross-section of the Protestant community, the ideas he promulgated while in their service can be taken as representing the mean of Protestant thought during the period.

Baird held positions of importance in four societies illustrative of the types of benevolent enterprises current during his life: quasi-political activities (the New Jersey Missionary Society

and its part in the battle for common schools in New Jersey), propaganda activity (the American Sunday School Union and the Mississippi Valley Enterprise of the 1830s), an organization specifically devoted to reducing inter-denominational tensions and fostering good will (the Evangelical Alliance), and a proselytizing society (the American and Foreign Christian Union).

During the common school campaign, his writings illustrated the reliance of social conservatives on common school education as a means of establishing cultural homogeneity and as an instrument for gradual social reform. While with the Sunday school cause, he faced the tensions between national and sectional forces of the day. His efforts may have been significant factors in the creation of religious homogeneity throughout the nation. Furthermore, they illustrate the organizational problems benevolent societies and secular interests alike encountered in the transition from local to national spheres of activity.

The failure of the Evangelical Alliance, partly over the slavery issue, indicates the frailty of a sentimental approach to Christian union, and the insufficiency of the consensus-oriented evangelical approach to serious moral and social problems.

An analysis of the philosophy and program of the American and Foreign Christian Union suggests that traditional interpretations aligning mainline Protestantism with virulent anti-Catholicism and political nativism requires serious modification. This study places them within the context of evangelical missionary expansionism.

Finally, Baird's major literary effort, Religion in America, together with many of his minor productions, provides a comprehensive exposition of the evangelical world-view, highlighting Evangelical faith in the potency of voluntary association, material and physical progress, Christian benevolence, and individual responsibility.

The study concludes by suggesting that many contemporary American mass attitudes may have had their origins in nineteenth century evangelical thought, and that studies of contemporary social, religious, and cultural attitudes and studies of the ideas of men like Robert Baird may enhance each other.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	ROBERT BAIRD'S ORIGINS AND TRAINING.	49
III.	LOOKING FOR A VOCATION: NEW JERSEY, 1822-1829	70
IV.	THE GREAT EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN OF 1828-1829: A PHILOSOPHY AND A PROGRAM	92
V.	SERVING THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CAUSE: 1829-1834.	127
VI.	THE GREATER VISION: THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE.	180
VII.	AN APOTHEOSIS OF AMERICAN VOLUNTARISM.	226
VIII.	THE LESSER REALITY: THE AMERICAN AND FOREIGN CHRISTIAN UNION.	257
IX.	BAIRD'S LATTER YEARS--AND SOME REFLECTIONS	302
	WORKS CITED.	324