

VII. AN APOTHEOSIS OF AMERICAN VOLUNTARISM

By 1833, all American churches found themselves in a position unique in the western world. Only in America were the churches "equal before but independent of the civil power."¹ It was a system which took some getting used to, both at home and abroad.

Churchmen in Europe looked curiously at the American religious experiment. The doctrine of separation of church and state seemed dangerously radical. The multiplicity of denominations was bewildering. Revival extravagances needed explanation.² American clergymen visiting England or the Continent were confronted with hostile comments and deluged with questions. Robert Baird especially caught the cross-fire, because his long residence in Europe and the nature of his work brought him into close contact with evangelicals from all the European countries. Baird patiently answered their questions and countered their criticisms in his private correspondence, all the time becoming more aware that a formal exposition of the American system might accomplish much good. In order partially to fill this need, he issued a pamphlet discussing the effect of the union of church and state in New England on the development of religion in the United States, excusing his forwardness as arising out of a conviction that "as a citizen of the United States and at the

¹Mead, Church History, XXIII, p. 299.

²McLoughlin, American Evangelicals, p. 30.

same time a citizen of the world" his explanation of the American experience might prove profitable to the world at large.³ Thus began the career of the foremost expositor of the American "religious economy" of his time. In that book were the germs of ideas which permeated all his subsequent writings: the position of evangelical Protestantism at the core of American religious activity and the agency of the voluntary principle as the mainspring of its success.⁴

The theories which permeated that slim volume were the foundation for his most important work, Religion in the United States of America, first published in 1844. Baird took great care in preparing the volume. He corresponded with the leaders of the various benevolent agencies directly, in order to include the latest first-hand information about their efforts. He sought to assure accuracy by having leaders of the Reformed Dutch, Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, Lutheran, German Reformed, and Baptist denominations read pre-publication copies of the manuscript. He even showed the volume to a Roman Catholic, Mr. Robert Walsh, asking him for his comments and suggestions, and acknowledging his aid with "pleasure, because Mr. Walsh is a Roman Catholic, and yet with a kindness and liberality in every way remarkable, he tendered his assistance with the full knowledge that the Author is a decided

³ [Robert Baird], L'union de l'église et de l'état dans la Nouvelle-Angleterre, considérée dans ses effets sur la religion aux Etats-Unis (Paris: n. p. 1837), p. 81. The translation is mine.

⁴ Henry Warner Bowden, "Robert Baird: Historical Narrative and the Image of a Protestant America--1855," Journal of Presbyterian History, XLVII (June, 1969), p. 154.

Protestant, and that his work, however liberal the spirit in which it is written, was to be of a thoroughly Protestant character."⁵

The result of Baird's care was a book which received wide praise in its time for its fairness and judicious evaluation of denominational differences. Henry M. Baird wrote that the only significant criticism came chiefly from "members of sects which were classed by Mr. Baird among the unevangelical; or with a few Protestants, whose prelatical sympathies led them to the expression of the wish that their communion had rather been considered among the unevangelical denominations, with the Roman Catholic, than among the evangelical churches disjoined from that of Rome!"⁶ To this day Religion in America remains a standard reference work in the field of American church history. Many historians would agree with Henry Warner Bowden: "Its pages comprised the best historical summary of major denominations and the most judicious assessment of the distinctive features of religious life in the new world."⁷

Religion in America, taken together with Robert Baird's other writings, offers more than a summary of the highpoints of religious life and thought in mid-nineteenth century America. Baird's publications present systematically the evangelical's exposition of the relationship between religion and American society--beyond that, of religion and civilization. Studying them offers an introduction

⁵R. Baird, Religion in America, p. xi.

⁶H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, pp. 205-06.

⁷Bowden, Journal of Presbyterian History, XLVII, p. 151.

of American evangelicals, at the center of which lay the voluntary system. The vision which Baird presented was nationalistic and parochial, but in these respects was very much a product of its culture, for it differed little at all from secular versions of American "manifest destiny."

As Baird saw it, the most outstanding characteristic of the nineteenth century was the material and spiritual progress the world was experiencing. It was the rate of progress that caught Baird's attention: it did not surprise him to find spiritual and material progress travelling hand in hand. In fact, material progress was thought by evangelicals to happen through the instrumentality of the spread of Christianity. One had only to notice the "contrast between the world as it was during the four thousand years which preceded the introduction of Christianity, and the eighteen centuries and a half which have succeeded" to grasp the significance of the relationship.⁸

Material and spiritual progress were so intimately related that it was impossible to separate the two. There was no increase in the physical comfort of mankind which could not be traced in some way to the beneficial influences of Christianity. Conversely, every physical improvement, no matter how insignificant it seemed, was given to humankind by their Creator for the express purpose of fostering their spiritual welfare. Of course, it sometimes took a sensitive

⁸R. Baird, American and Foreign Christian Union, I (November, 1850), p. 487.

Imagination to notice the connection:

In all directions, the progress, in whatever concerns the welfare and prosperity of the human race, is wonderful. Great discoveries in Science, and most useful inventions in Art, are almost daily announced--discoveries and inventions which are adapted to increase the comfort and augment the population of the civilized world. All these things contribute to the furtherance of the Kingdom of our Lord. We are led to these remarks by having seen the FIRE-PROOF PAINT, manufactured by Mr. Blake, announced in the newspapers, which promises to be a great blessing.⁹

Should cynics doubt that fireproof paint had been provided by Providence to further the works of the Spirit, Baird could remind them of the numbers of churches which had burned to the ground, to the great expense of their congregations.

With smug complacency Baird pointed to further evidence that Christianity and material progress proceeded from the same Heavenly source. A survey of the world situation convinced him that the nations of Christendom were ahead of the rest in every significant respect. They had greater military strength. To Christendom belonged "all the commerce worth speaking of. If she has not all the wealth, she has a very large share of it. To her belong the Sciences, the Arts, the Literature, the Press, and all the high Civilization of the world."¹⁰ Out of such attitudes grew the cultural imperialism which

⁹Ibid., p. 523.

¹⁰Robert Baird, The Christian Retrospect and Register: A Summary of the Scientific, Moral and Religious Progress of the First Half of the XIXth Century (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1851), pp. 198-99. Portions of this work were written by the Reverends Charles Washington Baird and Benjamin N. Martin. H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, p. 255.

was so much a part of the nineteenth century missionary movement.

Baird thought it worth noting that the fruits of the earth were not distributed indiscriminately among the nations of Christendom. The Protestant nations--England, Holland, Prussia, Scandinavia, and the United States--received the lion's share.¹¹ More remarkable, in Baird's view, was the fact that the countries in which Protestant practice was the purest were the strongest of all.¹² Baird could not believe that such a state of affairs happened by pure chance. Material success was obviously a reward for fidelity to the truths of the Gospel.

Baird made a further observation. The years 1815-1851 had witnessed remarkable growth in the economic and spiritual welfare of the United States.¹³ The future seemed to hold forth promise of even greater things. England itself might soon be surpassed:

America has already formed her plan for the commercial centre [sic] of the world. Europe and Asia are to exchange at her depot the commodities and productions of foreign continents. And her own commercial and mineral resources have such new and wonderful developments, that palaces are to be erected and cities gilded with the magnificent transparency of the New Jerusalem.¹⁴

There was every indication that America's spiritual wealth would increase proportionately. Men could look far and wide for explanations of this remarkable turn of events, but Baird knew that there could be

¹¹ ibid., p. 200.

¹² ibid.

¹³ R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, II (July, 1849), pp. 400-01.

only one reasonable explanation. The "religious economy" practiced in the United States was in some way superior to the British system.

The most obvious difference was that England had an established church, while America had none. This was the great "voluntary system," which Europeans found so difficult to understand, but which Baird felt was really a very simple matter. At its heart, was but one simple precept:

The voluntary system rests on the grand basis of perfect religious freedom. I mean a freedom of conscience for all; for those who believe Christianity to be true, and for those who do not; for those who prefer one form of worship, and for those who prefer another. This is all implied, or rather it is fully avowed, as the first step in supporting religion upon this plan.¹⁵

Europeans were skeptical that the magnificent spiritual and social edifices being built in America could rest on such a simple foundation, and rightly so. The American evangelicals, resting comfortably in their spiritual and national pride, had no such doubts. In their names, Baird set out to convince foreign observers that such was indeed the truth.

Baird began by vigorously attacking the idea of a state church, which he felt was the greatest curse which had ever befallen Christianity. He wanted to isolate the attack on the union of church and state from the attack on the Church of Rome, which was obscuring the issue for evangelicals. The union of church and state was as degrading to the cause of true religion in Protestant countries as it was in Roman Catholic ones. The catalogue of its sins seemed endless

¹⁵R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 71.

to Robert Baird. He displayed his disgust in the plainest language. Established churches opened the "doors for simony," and made it easy for "worldly and even ungodly men" to avail themselves of the ministerial perquisites. He resented the class distinctions church establishment created. The established clergy affected aristocratic airs, while dissenters, some of them "infinitely better" men, were rendered "servile and base in spirit." Under such conditions, the cooperative efforts the need for moral reform demanded were impossible. Baird found it hard to contain his argument within the bounds of polite discourse. Addressing a British audience, at least partly composed of members of the Church of England, he said, "when I have seen all these evils, and even more and greater ones if that be possible, how can I avoid feeling a profound abhorrence for this dreadful evil?"¹⁶

All the evils Baird brought before the attention of his audience in the passage above happened within the church, or at least among the churches. Beyond these, and even more corrupting in their influence, were the evils created by giving the secular authorities power to make ecclesiastical decisions. Baird could imagine nothing worse than placing decisions concerning doctrine in the hands of magistrates and other petty civil functionaries.¹⁷

Great as religious progress had been in America, Baird was assured that it would have been far greater had church establishment

¹⁶R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., pp. 42-43.

¹⁷R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, II (October, 1849), p. 578.

been left in Europe. State churches hindered the cause of religion in most of the American colonies, but

. . . this was more manifestly the case in the north than in the south. In both it was at first intolerant, and even exclusive. It engendered bitter feuds among the people, and occasioned innumerable embarrassments to the governments. It laid the foundation in the north, for some of the most dangerous heresies,--such as Socinianism and Universalism.¹⁸

It was this latter development which intrigued and puzzled European evangelicals. The story of the noble experiment of the Pilgrims and Puritans was well known in Europe, as was the apparent defeat of Orthodoxy at the hands of Universalism and Unitarianism in New England. The less informed blamed Orthodoxy's winter of discontent on the absence of a centralized spiritual authority defending the truth with the aid of the civil powers. Baird wished to prove that the opposite case was in fact true: true religion's alliance with the state led to her downfall.

In order to prove his case, he recreated the epic of colonization and settlement in minute detail. The first settlers came from among England's most substantial citizens. These Anglo-Saxons, he said, possessed all "the characteristic perseverance, the spirit of personal freedom and independence, that have ever distinguished that race."¹⁹

¹⁸R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., p. 9.

¹⁹R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 35. Baird's opinion of Anglo-Saxon "character" was not entirely uncritical. His description of Anglo-Saxons caught some of the spirit of classical tragedy, for the very characteristics which were their glory also were the source of shame: "No race certainly, possesses greater capacity for doing

Baird described the colonists as if he were looking in a mirror and caught the reflection of himself and his class. They were sturdy, hard-working men, a group not "composed of the rich, the voluptuous, the idle, effeminate, and profligate," or of the "poor, spiritless, dependent, and helpless." They were also well educated: "not an ignorant rabble, such as many ancient and some modern States have been obliged to expel from their borders They were moreover a thinking people, and very unfit to be the slaves of despotic power." A third characteristic Baird ascribed to the early settlers was virtue. They were not "a vicious herd, such as used to be sent out by ancient States, and such as colonised South America and Mexico--men of unbridled passions and slaves to the basest lusts."²⁰ But

great things, or has done greater things; and none has done more unworthy. So that it may be pronounced at once, the greatest and meanest of races. Whilst on the one hand, in arms, in commerce, in the useful arts, jurisprudence, in all efforts to extend the gospel, it has done the greatest things; on the other, it has subjugated, and in some cases annihilated, the other races over which it has gained control: Celtic, Hindoo, African, and Aboriginal in America and Australia.

"It is enough to make the blood of benevolent men boil to listen to the absurd and ignorant laudation of the Anglo-Saxon Race, and the cruel deprecation of others, which are sometimes uttered. 'They are worthy to govern others,' said a gentleman in my hearing, a few weeks ago in Ireland! I could not avoid saying to friends near me: Yes, worthy to govern the poor Celts! This is the very language which one may sometimes hear from our irreligious slave-holders: The Anglo-Saxon race are worthy to rule the Negroes! Both the one and the other assertion are unworthy of humanity, to say nothing of christianity [sic]." R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., p. 61. Baird's approach to the slavery issue might have been naive, but he could hardly have been called a rabid racist.

²⁰R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 176.

most important of all, they possessed true religion--a religion based on the Bible, "friendly to the diffusion of knowledge," inciting to self-denial, possess of a "noble patriotism," and "eminently fitted to enlarge men's views of the duty of living for God, and promoting his kingdom in the world."²¹ Thus Robert Baird dressed the colonists in the clothes of nineteenth century middle-class evangelicalism. His idealized history contained enough of a germ of truth to be plausible, and gained for the evangelicals a revered, if mythical past. An aura of tradition gave the evangelical life style a certain legitimacy it might otherwise lack. They alone were true descendants of the founders of English America: other ideologies were somehow "foreign." The success of Baird and others like him in recreating an evangelical past has been demonstrated by the number of evangelical traits (temperance, etc.,) which have been popularly described as "Puritanism."

The founding fathers of colonial New England were fortunate men, driven by noble ideals, yet they failed in their mission. Baird blamed their failure on their inability to shed certain European misconceptions. Virtuous as those men were, they possessed but an imperfect knowledge of the proper application of the principles of civil and religious liberty. As far ahead of the rest of the world as the Pilgrims and Puritans might be in everything else, on this one point they shared a common error with other Protestants and Roman Catholics as well.²² All believed that only Truth should be allowed

²¹ Ibid., pp. 119-21.

²² [R. Baird], L'union de l'Église et de l'État, p. 17.

liberty. Persecution was a legitimate weapon in Truth's arsenal. Persecution in the name of Truth had driven the Pilgrims and Puritans to the New World. Once there, they applied the same means to suppress their enemies.

The New England colonists set out to establish a Holy Commonwealth, governed according to precepts the Puritans and Pilgrims found in the pages of the Bible. Baird thought that their efforts were based on the noblest of ideals. The experience was a Grand Experiment, yet it was hardly practical, for New England was not Judea. Practical or not, the religious beliefs and motives of the settlers shaped the political institutions they fashioned--institutions which contained flaws fatal to religion's own best interests.²³

The most serious flaws were three in number. The first, and most serious, made church membership a prerequisite for the "rights and privileges of citizenship." As long as the truly pious predominated in the society (in prestige, if not in numbers) the evil effects of the "fundamental law" remained hidden. Soon social power passed into the hands of men, who, while they led lives "perfectly regular and moral," were not among the converted. Baird understood very well that the demands of such men for a share in the civil government could not be long resisted by the believing minority. Instead of separating civil from religious privileges, however, the colonists compounded their original error by granting civil rights through the medium of the "Half-way Covenant." This led to a situation in which

²³R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 57.

the churches were filled with "baptized people," but "comparatively few 'communicants.'" Pastors like the Reverend Solomon Stoddard sought to ameliorate matters by opening the Lord's Table to serious, though unconverted members of their churches. By this chain of events, "in the course of a few generations the standard of religious truth and practice fell lower and lower." Congeniality, rather than piety, came to be the most important ministerial qualification, and, like attracting like, the pastoral call would often fall upon a man "equally low in point of religious character with the parties by whom he was chosen."²⁴ Such were the dangers of allowing the unconverted masses to supplant the spiritual elite. In matters religious Baird was no democrat. Orthodox belief could remain safe only in the hands of pious, prudent, conservative men--men who were immune to the virus of theological innovation--satisfied, complacent men like Robert Baird.

The situation was hardly improved, from the Orthodox point of view by laws which allowed dissenters to apply their portion of the public tax to the support of churches of their choice. By such laws "infidels" and other "haters of evangelical Christianity" were able to call together "societies, for it would be improper to call them churches," of like minded individuals before which the heresies of Unitarianism and Universalism could be preached at public expense.²⁵

The ultimate blow came when orthodox ministers found themselves, together with the remnant of the faithful, dispossessed of the churches their fathers built, by towns in which Unitarians or

²⁴ibid., p. 204. ²⁵ibid., p. 205.

Universalists had obtained the majority.²⁶ Such was the sad state of affairs at the time of the crisis over disestablishment.

Disestablishment came about at least partly through a set of fortuitous circumstances. In many of the colonies the established church was seriously weakened by the consequences of the successful War for Independence (proving that the Lord could turn as evil a thing as war to His own benefit). The work of the "infidel" Thomas Jefferson also aided the cause, although it was "not Jefferson that induced the State of Virginia to pass the act of separation." Rather it was the earnest entreaties of pious Baptists and Presbyterians that led the battle against church establishment.²⁷ The contribution to the cause made by Jefferson and other enemies of religion were not made because the principle of separation "embodied the principles of eternal justice, but because by putting all religious sects on an equality, it seemed to degrade Christianity, and 'to comprehend,' to use his [Jefferson's] own words, 'within the mantle of protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mohammedan, the Hindoo and the infidel of every denomination.' It was this that made the arch-infidel chuckle with satisfaction."²⁸

Baird thought it nothing less than Providential, that the supposed "death-blow" to Christianity delivered by its enemies should turn out to be its greatest boon. It was no less remarkable, and further evidence of the corruption engendered by church establishment, that the area which had suffered the most from the union of church and state should resist severing that union the most stubbornly.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 205-06.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 230-31.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 240-41.

The situation which occurred after disestablishment was unique. All Christian churches found themselves on equal footing before the law. How were they to act in this new situation? There were few, if any precedents to be found in tradition. There was no tradition of religious liberty in any modern country which could be looked to for models. Bowden claims that Baird and other like him fell into the old pattern: rights for themselves but not for those of differing persuasions. On the basis of this argument the only difference between the colonial Theocrats and their evangelical progeny was that the latter cast a looser net around acceptable religious beliefs:

Within a broad and generous structure of doctrinal standards, men could fashion their faith as they wished. Yet any dissent from that loose net of orthodoxy cast grave doubts not only on the validity of their spiritual orientation, but on their right to hold such an opinion at all.²⁹

There is a germ of truth in Bowden's contention, but the evangelical position was less simple than such a statement would make it seem to have been. According to Baird's explanation, the American system operated on the premise of complete religious liberty. This meant that the rights to "entertain and utter religious opinions, and to enjoy public religious worship" were guaranteed to all.³⁰ These rights were given (and rightfully so) to evangelicals and unevangelicals ("Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Christ-ians, Universalists, Hicksite Quakers, Swedenborgians, Tunkers or Dunkers, Jews,

²⁹Bowden, Journal of Presbyterian History, XLVII, p. 170.

³⁰R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 273.

Shakers, and so on . . .³¹) alike. They were even the right of the Mormons, and Baird considered Mormonism "one of the silliest and basest of all delusions that arch-villainy ever attempted to propagate, from the days of Mohammed to this present time."³² Such heresies hardly fell within any "loose net of orthodoxy," yet Baird believed the proper role of the government was "utter indifference." It should wait patiently until truth found its way into the hearts of deluded men, overthrowing their "absurdities and impieties."³³

What of those who preached "irreligion?" Baird was not so certain that they could claim any right to preach their opinions. Rights of religious freedom were obviously religious rights. As such, anti-religion, "opinions contrary to the nature of religion, subversive of the reverence, love, and service due to God, of virtue, morality, and good manners," could not legally claim their benefits. Yet the freedom which could not be their legal right Baird proposed to grant them on the grounds of expediency and prudence, arguing that "it is sometimes the best way to silence a noisy brainless lecturer on atheism, to let him alone, and the immoral conduct of some preachers of unrighteousness is the best refutation of their impious doctrines."³⁴ In Baird's America all voices would have access to the public ear.

³¹ Ibid., p. 654.

³² R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., p. 30.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 274.

Under the American system, the primary defense of Truth rested in the hands of those that Providence had entrusted with it. This did not mean that the government had no responsibilities, however. No legislation could make men Christians. Legislation could confirm Christians in their possession of certain civil rights, and this the government was bound to do. Its only responsibility to the church was to protect it "in all its rights of property, defending it in all its modes and seasons of worship, maintaining and enforcing the observance of the Sabbath, almost as far perhaps as it can well do without interfering with that degree of natural liberty which must be allowed in every well-ordered commonwealth."³⁵

In other words, government did no more for the churches than it did for other institutions. It provided them with the basic security necessary for them to go about their business. This was one of the basic functions of Sabbath-enforcing legislation. It helped assure that the noisy world would intrude as little as possible into the sanctuary, and eliminated obstacles which might keep some of the faithful from attending Divine Services.

Baird hastened to assure his readers that the essentially passive role of government was not to be interpreted as meaning that the United States was an "infidel" or "atheistical" country, notwithstanding that no mention of the Supreme Being or Christianity appeared in its Constitution.³⁶ Quite to the contrary, America was an eminently

³⁵R. Baird, Christian Retrospect and Register, p. 204.

³⁶R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 259.

Christian country. With more enthusiasm than accuracy, Baird claimed that "the religion of the overwhelming majority, and which may therefore be called the national religion, is in all essential points what was taught by the great Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century."³⁷ He attributed the omission of reference to the Creator to simple oversight on the part of the Founding Fathers, preferring to gloss over the controversy over the issue which occupied many during the Constitutional Convention and the period of ratification following.³⁸ In their haste to legitimize their version of the American experience, evangelicals like Baird were prepared to sanctify all but the most deistic heroes of the revolutionary era. Benjamin Franklin or George Washington might have shuddered at some the the statements and sentiments the evangelicals attributed to them.

Baird did not rely solely on reconstructing history in order to prove that evangelical Protestantism was the only legitimate religious expression of Americanism: he pointed to national behavior as well. He argued that the actions of the government in everyday affairs, as well as the spirit in which they were carried out, demonstrated the government's essential Christianity. Americans preferred peace to war. They attempted to "act with simple integrity and good faith to foreign nations."³⁹ The government invoked Divine aid on its enterprises and employed chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of its workers. Baird felt that such attitudes and actions amply demonstrated which nation was really Christian--the United States, not

³⁷ ibid., p. 42. ³⁸ ibid., p. 261. ³⁹ ibid., p. 266.

any of the European nations which claimed that characteristic through the union of church and state.

The American government, although forbidden to favor one religion over another, was not forbidden to promote the general cause of religion. Those that claimed otherwise misread both the language and intent of the First Amendment, Baird declared.⁴⁰ The government sat with benign neutrality at the side of the religious arena, bestowing its favor on the churches therein, and aiding their objectives by assuring that their operations would take place in a friendly atmosphere.

European inquirers wished to be told exactly how churches did operate in a society which gave them no governmental support or sanction. Baird replied that it was really quite simple. They relied "under God, upon the efforts of [their] friends, acting from their own free will, influenced by that variety of considerations comprehended under the title of a desire to do good. This, in America, is the grand and only alternative."⁴¹ Lacking the power to coerce, churches had to rely upon persuasion alone to fill their pews and coffers. The responsibility for supporting religion rested upon the shoulders of interested individuals, and they enjoyed performing their duties. "The people feel that they can help themselves, and that it is at once a duty and a privilege to do so," wrote Baird. This fact was the "true secret" of the success of the voluntary system.⁴²

⁴⁰ ibid., p. 253. ⁴¹ ibid., p. 288. ⁴² ibid., p. 292.

The churches did not have to rely solely upon the converted for aid. The "non-professing hearers of the word" eagerly joined in, donating generously to the cause of religion, and even serving the church in such capacities as trustee or Sunday school teacher.⁴³ Under the voluntary system, such persons could be entirely trusted faithfully to prosecute religion's interests, for the only reason they participated at all was because they felt it beneficial to do so.⁴⁴ Discipline remaining in the hands of the Orthodox, serious but not pious followers of evangelicalism were restrained from instituting any dangerous innovations.

Baird argued further that voluntarism protected the purity of the ministerial calling. When all citizens had been forced to donate to the support of the church the participation of the unconverted in the calling of a minister had proved disastrous to the interests of piety. Under the voluntary plan, the unconverted could be invited to participate with perfect safety, for only the truly serious would be in the churches at all, and such men would know that "if they are to become the religious men they hope one day to be, they need a faithful pastor to secure that great blessing. Such men have sense enough to know that a light-minded, worldly, cold preacher of the gospel, is not likely to prove a blessing to them or their families."⁴⁵

The religious portion of the country's citizenry could count on significant aid from those who belonged to no church, as well.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 424-25.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 310.

"Thousands and thousands" of them supported Christianity's churches and benevolent agencies out of a "conviction of their importance to the best interests of the country, as well as to the happiness of every individual."⁴⁶ After all, everyone knew that religion was "necessary even to the temporal well-being of society."⁴⁷ Baird never became suspicious of the support given to the churches by non-religious persons, as he no doubt should have become. He was far too complacent to recognize the church's prophetic role--too much himself a priest of Americanism.

As Baird saw it, the result of relying only upon the support of persons who gave it voluntarily was a "religious economy" characterized by peace and harmony. Because of the voluntary system, ". . . in no country in the world are ministers of the gospel more respected by the people. A great many of them are well educated men, and with few exceptions, possess agreeable manners." Perhaps looking back over his own experience, he recognized that the ministry had its temporal advantages. Far from being a refuge for displaced members of a former status elite, it remained an avenue for social advancement. He declared happily that many ministers "belong to families of the first rank in the country; and as they can at least give their families a good education, with the advantages of such an education, as well as of a good character, and the good name of their fathers, their children

⁴⁶R. Baird, State and Prospects of Religion . . . , p. 37.

⁴⁷R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 292.

are almost invariably prosperous, and often form alliances with the wealthiest and most distinguished families in the country."⁴⁸

Having proved to his own satisfaction that American churches survived very well under the voluntary system, Robert Baird proceeded to establish the existence of benefits to the churches which went beyond mere survival.

The voluntary system left the churches free to defend sound doctrine. This was thought by Baird to be the system's greatest advantage. Under the voluntary system, 'mercenary' men had no reason to insinuate themselves into the church pulpits, nor could the state appoint godless men to suit its own purposes. Both practices produced malign results as far as church purity was concerned. The state of piety in the nominally Protestant countries in Europe amply demonstrated the truth of this proposition.⁴⁹ Evidently Baird counted upon pressures from above (in the form of ecclesiastical courts of one kind or another) and from below (pious congregations) to keep ministers pious and dedicated. If the ministry carried with it the social prestige he thought it did, it would seem that charlatans would attempt entry regardless of whatever safeguards voluntarism provided. Such tricksters would be hardly likely to voice dangerous opinions, however, and outward purity would be maintained in spite of them.

Baird thought that the second great advantage of the voluntary system was that it increased the true piety present in the churches'

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 306.

⁴⁹ R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, I (August, 1848), p. 451.

congregations. While there might be a few professed Christians who were "self-deceived" in their profession, there were in all probability very few hypocrites among the professors of religion--for the simple reason that hypocrisy gained no "special honour, or temporal privilege." Baird challenged the European state church systems to produce a body of Christians which compared favorably with the Americans "in point of intelligence, proper walk and conversation, liberality and zeal."⁵⁰ While Baird was correct in noting the unparalleled activity in the American churches, he no doubt overestimated the numbers in the congregations motivated by disinterested piety. In his complacency, he never stopped to consider that social pressures, as well as legal measures could coerce persons into supporting institutions in which they felt little personal interest. One wonders how many clerks and apprentices pressured into attending Divine worship by pious (and/or socially conservative) employers would have attended of their own free will.

The third advantage of the voluntary system was that it promoted harmony within the individual churches. At this point in his analysis Baird seems to have been essentially correct. Under the voluntary system, dissenters were free to leave one denomination and seek another more to their liking. The spectrum of evangelical churches was broad enough to allow practically any man to find a denomination within which he could "minister without objection or

⁵⁰R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., p. 20.

difficulty.⁵¹ Churches were, after all, "voluntary societies." Persons were free to join the one of their choice--they were also free to leave, should their opinions differ from the majority. Baird had little patience with those who, "when they deem themselves aggrieved, instead of retiring . . . commence an attempt to overthrow the whole structure, whatever pretext of zeal for truth, or concern for the rights of others, they may profess to have."⁵²

Baird recognized that it was this point that gave European evangelicals the most difficulty. They considered America a breeding ground for division and dissension. The American religious economy seemed to mock the Christian unity ideal. State churches, for all their faults, at least attempted to keep the Christian family under one roof. Baird admitted that "external union has indeed been sacrificed by acting on this principle."⁵³ He doubted whether the system did in fact create division. People might appear united in countries which denied religious freedom, but such unity was little more than a facade, covering divisions as deep as those Americans admitted openly:

People in that case may be constrained to acquiesce, ostensibly at least, in one certain ecclesiastical organisation, and in certain modes of faith and worship sanctioned and established by law. But such acquiescence, it is well known, instead of being real and cordial, is often merely external and constrained; and, if so, its worthlessness is no less evident and palpable.⁵⁴

⁵¹R. Baird, Religion in America, pp. 535-36.

⁵²R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, III (April, 1850), pp. 194-95.

⁵³R. Baird, Religion in America, pp. 535-36. ⁵⁴Ibid., p. 604.

As long as human beings differed in "constitution, temperament, education, or society" differences in religious opinion could be expected. True Christian unity overcame differences with Christian love and charity; it did not eliminate them.⁵⁵ Divisions might even be considered as a Providential advantage. Through them, persons of different classes, customs, or prejudices might all be led into a proper relationship to the grand truths of Christianity, which all the evangelical denominations held in common. Baird felt he spoke from personal experience. The division of the Presbyterian Church was proving to be far less a disaster than it had seemed at the time it happened. Baird pronounced that the Old and New School branches "in their separate state . . . will accomplish more than if united. There will soon be the most perfect intercourse between their churches and pastors. The energies of both find free and ample scope which was never the case before with either."⁵⁶

Denominationalism, then, proved no obstacle at all to the advance of the cause of Christ, provided it was not accompanied by a spirit of illiberality. Men of good will recognized that the differences among the branches of the evangelical army sank to insignificance along side of great truths they held in common. "The sectarian, the bigot, who turns the entire interest of the truth and the church privileges to his own account and rejects others, either with coolness or a persecuting frown, has no participation . . . [in the]

⁵⁵R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, II (1849), pp. 708-09.

⁵⁶R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 558.

spirit of Christ who prayed for all, and loves all equally."⁵⁷

While there was too much of the former spirit--too much of man--present in the intercourse of American Christians, there was less than the casual reader of the writings of the too-vocal religious demagogues was led to believe. Baird believed that such sectarian spirit as existed would shrink in time. The voluntary system had been instituted for only a short time, and there were centuries of prejudices and practices to overcome. As ministers came to realize that equality before the law left them "little occasion for envy and jealousy," they would act in closer accordance with the law of Christian love.⁵⁸

Baird assured his readers that the benefits of true religion and the voluntary system extended beyond the churches into the society as a whole. The arguments he used leave no doubt as to his essential social conservatism. In Baird's hands, religion became a tool for sanctioning social practices. The conservative's dread of anarchy often blinded him to social ills. When society's sins were too conspicuous to ignore, his essential caution forced him to reject all but the very mildest programs of reform. Even moderate reformers were driven to distraction by the temporizings of evangelicals like Robert Baird. An analysis of his concept of the relation of religion to government demonstrates why.

⁵⁷R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, III (January, 1850), p. 10.

⁵⁸R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., p. 26.

Baird was certain that true religion was essential to one of the "greatest blessings which mankind can enjoy," good government. Without the influences of religion, good government was practically impossible. This was especially true in republics, which could be no more virtuous than their people were. Baird despaired of ever seeing a successful republic established in France, for instance, for the French were "not fit for one, nor will ever be until true religion prevails extensively."⁵⁹ True religion being a necessity for just government, the voluntary system became a corollary necessity, for it unfettered religion and allowed it to exert its beneficent influence most efficiently.

Chief among the gifts religion bestowed upon society were stability and order. Under its influence, rulers could rest easily, for "to the 'powers that be,' Christianity enjoins obedience and respect, whatever they may be. In its prevalence is to be found the only sure and peaceful remedy for all the political evils of the world; for it teaches both rulers and the ruled their appropriate and reciprocal duties."⁶⁰ Pious ministers were the greatest allies of government in the battle against the machinations of demagogues:

To the labours of such men more than 10,000 neighbourhoods in the United States are indebted for their general good order, tranquillity, and happiness, as well as for the humble but sincere piety that reigns in many a heart, and around many a fire-side. To them the country owes much of its conservative character, for no men have inculcated more

⁵⁹Robert Baird to John Maclean, Paris, August 7, 1835. Maclean Papers, Princeton University Archives.

⁶⁰R. Baird, American and Foreign Christian Union, II (June, 1851), p. 254.

effectively those doctrines which promote obedience to law, respect for magistracy, and the maintenance of civil government, and never more than within the last year or two, during which they have had to resist the anarchical principles of self-styled reformers, both religious and political.⁶¹

Robert Baird would not have liked to have been classified among the enemies of social reform, yet the stance he took usually prohibited his advocating any but the most superficial ones. "True reform" was possible only on the basis of "proper principles" under the aegis of religion, and operated most effectively when religious sentiments were organized on the voluntary principle. The great advantage of voluntarism was its social versatility. Combinations of men formed to pursue the interests which most concerned them. Thus every social evil had its own specific cure, applied by its own set of enlightened reformers. "Not an exigency occurs in which its application is called for, but forthwith those who have the heart, the hand, and the purse to meet the case, combine their efforts," boasted Baird.⁶² Under such a system everyone had a part to play. Voluntarism brought forth the best from the country's citizens. No person was too humble, or too poor to become a "co-worker for God."⁶³ Unfortunately, Baird was concerned primarily with "reforming" individuals, and the "co-workers for God" devoted most of their energies toward enforcing rather narrow standards of moral respectability.

Baird claimed that the ministrations of religion cost society little, and that it received its money's worth. The American public

⁶¹R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 434.

⁶²Ibid., p. 410. ⁶³Ibid., p. 411.

voluntarily supported the churches, denominations, and benevolent societies to the tune of around \$25,000,000 per year. In return, religion and her handmaiden, benevolence, did many a good work. Baird claimed that evangelical Protestantism "softens and refines the manners, promotes health by promoting attention to cleanliness and frequent changes of apparel; [!] it diffuses information, and rouses minds that might otherwise remain ignorant, inert, and stupid."⁶⁴ Truly, evangelical Christianity organized on the voluntary plan was "the only effectual panacea for . . . political as well as social diseases . . ." at home, and in the world at large.⁶⁵

As Robert Baird looked at America at the mid-point of the nineteenth century, he saw a country which had made astonishing spiritual and material strides. It could not, however, afford to cease striving for further progress. The laws of nature and society demanded that it either grow or decay.⁶⁶ Baird expected America to continue to progress as the spirit of voluntarism and Christian benevolence exerted their gentle, but irresistible influences. In the future he saw American political institutions governing a great nation, spanning a continent peopled by happy, virtuous, and industrious citizens drawn from all corners of the earth--Europe, "the islands in the Pacific Ocean," and even from

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 412.

⁶⁵R. Baird, American and Foreign Christian Union, I (October, 1850), p. 477; Christian Union and Religious Memorial, I (September, 1848), p. 553.

⁶⁶R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, I (October, 1848), p. 632.

eastern and south-eastern Asia. Light from this great nation would proceed to all the countries whose sons had helped to people it--light showing the way to material and spiritual prosperity.⁶⁷ In such words Baird demonstrated the evangelical's complete allegiance to the concept of American manifest destiny.

Under the influence of the voluntary system American evangelical Christianity would continually perfect itself. Heterodox creeds, such as Unitarianism, would decline, no longer being shaded from the light of orthodox truth by government support.⁶⁸ Convulsions in doctrine which developed during the battles between establishment and dissent would fade away. "Religious opinion" would tend "towards a higher appreciation of the simplest and most scriptural Christianity."⁶⁹ Christians would cease to bicker over "inconsequential," but would rather lose themselves in the great work of saving souls. Working together toward this end would "tend to produce uniformity of sentiment on every point of doctrine and polity," thus ending interdenominational strife, if not denominations themselves.⁷⁰

Such was the happy future which evangelical Christianity organized on voluntary principles promised. Baird allowed himself to

⁶⁷R. Baird, Christian Retrospect and Register, pp. 194-95.

⁶⁸R. Baird, State and Prospects of Religion . . ., p. 38.

⁶⁹R. Baird, Religion in America, pp. 660-61.

⁷⁰R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, III (November-December, 1850), p. 556.

entertain no doubts that the promise would be fulfilled eventually, provided every Christian did his part. Every act, no matter how small, would contribute to the triumph of Truth, for "if the slightest disturbance of the least particle of matter is felt throughout the confines of the material universe, and the influence of a single thought is perpetuated forever throughout the universe of mind, who shall undertake to limit the influence of a single impulse of good!"⁷¹ Baird and other evangelicals might have been mistaken in their optimism, but it gave their crusade tremendous impetus nevertheless.

Robert Baird never undertook to limit his own "good impulses." He continually looked for places to practice what he preached. The things he preached modified his behavior. Preaching reason, he had to behave reasonably. Counseling prudence, moderation, and charity, he acted in the spirit of those qualities--at least by nineteenth century standards. His conservatism kept him from confronting directly society's most pressing problems. It is not much of a compliment to say that the restraint which kept him from attempting great and good things also kept him from doing much harm.

Baird seldom deviated from his cautious principles in the services he performed for the benevolent societies that employed him, and, to the extent that his position gave him leverage in a society's affairs, his principles moderated that society's attitudes and actions. At no time was this more clearly demonstrated than during the years of service to the nation's leading "anti-Catholic" societies.

⁷¹R. Baird, Christian Union and Religious Memorial, II (May, 1849), pp. 259-60.