Introduction

Between 1835 and 1860, evangelical pulpits and religious journals in the North aggressively attacked slaveholders and Catholics as threats to American values. Criticisms of these two groups could often be found in the same northern evangelical journal, if not on the same page. Words such as “despotism” and “tyranny” described both the theological condition of the Catholic Church and the political condition of the South. Slavery and Catholicism were labeled incompatible with republican institutions and bereft of the virtues necessary to sustain a democratic people. They were remnants of an old order, the depraved relics of monarchy, clerisy, and feudalism. Beginning in the 1830s, the northern evangelical campaign against Catholicism and slavery initiated a twenty-five-year political and religious struggle that culminated with the collapse of the Second Party System and the conflagration of the American Civil War.¹

Although tremendously influential, the northern evangelical moral crusaders did not go unchallenged. There were many Christians who did not agree with the social ideals preached in the pulpits of the North. There were also those who disagreed with northern evangelical theological assumptions. The two groups who received the brunt of evangelical ire, Catholics and proslavery southern conservatives, put forth substantial and at times similar arguments challenging what they believed to be an erroneous and ill-conceived Protestant political theology.

In the decades leading up to the American Civil War, large numbers of Catholics in both the North and the South found themselves politically
aligned with southern proslavery apologists. Alignment, however, should not be confused with alliance. Between Catholics and southerners, most of whom were Protestants, there were no explicit treaties to bridge the theological chasm that had separated the two groups and their ancestors for some three hundred years. Indeed, vitriolic bantering between leading southern Catholic and southern Protestant theologians sometimes equaled and exceeded that of their northern counterparts. What little common ground they had came in the form of lucid arguments outlining the value of a stratified social order grounded in orthodoxy. The reason for this strange concord is that both Catholics and southern Protestants believed, for many of the same as well as their own distinct reasons, that northern evangelicals threatened sound Christian teaching and secure political arrangements.

Ironically, northern evangelicals never doubted that they were doing anything less than reinforcing sound Christian teaching and secure political arrangements. As champions of the idea that Christianity should influence public values, they believed that social ills could be corrected through the moral influence of the church. Not all Christians, however, saw northern evangelical causes as beneficial. In particular, the American Catholic hierarchy resisted their Protestantized ideal of a Christian society. The hierarchy believed that northern evangelicals overestimated Protestantism’s ability to serve as the moral conscience of the state. Northern evangelicals were dangerous, said Catholics, because they vilified the contributions of the pre-Reformation Church while simultaneously championing the notion that American political values represented the zenith of Protestant historical development.

In the antebellum period, northern evangelicals developed a distinctly Americanized Protestant political identity. Rhetorically, they upheld the legal separation between church and state. Their case for public virtue, however, rested on the idea that evangelical Protestantism alone guaranteed the proper balance between freedom and personal responsibility. In formulating their unique Protestant political identity, northern evangelicals went to great lengths to demonize the medieval heritage of the Catholic Church as well as the Church’s loyalty to Rome. At the same time, they strove to prove that certain American principles, such as liberty and equality, were products of the Protestant Reformation.
Here, however, northern evangelicals ran into a significant problem. Southern evangelicals might agree about the blessings of the Protestant Reformation, but they had to reconcile those blessings to a society that depended on enslaved labor, a society, it should be noted, that until the 1830s faced only moderate criticism from complicit and at times sympathetic northern industrialists. Put simply, southern evangelicals did not share the same vision of liberty and equality as their northern counterparts. Evangelical social reformers in the Northeast tried to justify their activism by appealing to the Bible. Southern evangelicals, who at times commiserated with issues of personal morality such as temperance, but never favored the immediate abandonment of slavery, also appealed to Scripture to justify their position.4

Ongoing disagreements over the correct interpretation of the Bible with regard to social and political issues created a serious quandary for those who wanted their faith to provide the moral underpinnings for republican political values. Evangelical arguments over slavery and the role of the church in a free society undermined the idea that the Bible alone was useful for forming social and political ethics. As a result, American Protestants found themselves vulnerable to the perennial criticism that troubled every Protestant country since the Reformation: the problem of unity and authority when there was more than one claimant to ecclesiastical authority.

This book explores a series of dilemmas that emerged within ante-bellum American evangelicalism. Despite efforts to define the young country as a Christian nation united in its commitment to Protestant ideals, northern evangelicals could not reconcile the place of Catholics or slaveholders in their narrative. Catholicism and slavery exposed serious disagreements in the nation’s fastest growing denominations. These divisions became increasingly apparent as evangelicals in the North and the South used the Bible to justify their respective political and social positions. One result of this discord was that Catholics and southern evangelicals found themselves in strange relationship. Theologically, they were worlds apart, yet they shared a common nemesis in the northern evangelical social reformer.

The first three chapters of this book profile the way in which northern evangelicals constructed a national narrative after their own image.
Chapter 1 looks at the rapid changes America faced as immigration and industrial advances shaped political loyalties. As the country struggled to find a truly national identity, personalities and arguments emerged that defined the northern evangelical agenda. In the Northeast, evangelical Protestantism became increasingly identified with revivalism, social activism, and modification of traditional Calvinist teaching on original sin and human depravity. New England, in particular, produced a spate of preachers who were optimistic that both their political and religious commitments would shape the future of the country.

New England’s quest for a comprehensive Protestant nationalism was tempered, however, by the presence of an articulate and intellectually gifted Catholic hierarchy. Behind the hierarchy, New England evangelicals argued, stood Europe, and behind Europe’s political problems, stood Rome. Current events in Europe as well as Europe’s pre-Reformation history loomed large in the northern evangelical imagination, and northern evangelicals devoted a great deal of intellectual energy on interpreting that history in ways that best fit their agenda. Included in their agenda was the notion that the United States was to be a Christian republic that served as a corrective to the social arrangements of the Old World. These themes are traced in chapter 2.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, southern slaveholders, like Catholics, found themselves relentlessly attacked in the northern evangelical press. Chapter 3 looks at the way in which denominational journals portrayed the slave system of the South as equally subversive of American institutions as Catholicism. Journals such as the Downfall of Babylon, Zion’s Herald, the New York Evangelist, the New York Observer, the Christian Watchman and Examiner, and the Oberlin Quarterly Review, though published by different denominations, voiced in equal measure a deep hostility toward Catholicism and slavery. Directly and indirectly, northern evangelicals compared the immoral authoritarianism of the Catholic priest to the immoral authoritarianism of the slaveholder. Both were portrayed by the press as brutal, lecherous, and most importantly, un-American.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the responses of both southerners and Catholics to northern evangelical aggression. Southerners, along with Catholics in the North and the South, shared a mutual distaste for north-
ern evangelical abolitionism, and specifically, they disliked the social agenda promoted from northern pulpits. Both were quick to compare northern evangelical political sympathies with radical movements in Europe, and both took care to outline what they believed to be the distinct responsibilities of the church and the state. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church and proslavery southern evangelicals challenged northern evangelical reformers in two important ways. First, southern evangelicals by and large rejected northern evangelicals’ faith in both theological and political “progress.” In doing so, they exposed a fundamental tension in evangelicalism that belied attempts to present American Protestantism as the univocal moral conscience of the nation. Second, Catholic intellectuals took on northern evangelicals’ caricature of Europe and the papacy by articulating the enormous contributions made by the pre-Reformation Church to the western political tradition. Between 1835 and 1860, northern evangelicals had to confront sophisticated arguments about the meaning of European religious and political history that resisted their challenges to abrogate spiritual hierarchy and to rescind caste-based social control.

Chapter 4 looks at Catholicism in the South and the dilemmas faced by southern evangelicals in the decades prior to the Civil War. Southern evangelicals were conservative in temperament, yet they shared with northern evangelicals the belief that the United States was a nation founded upon and perpetuated through Protestant values. Disagreements with northerners, however, exposed that American evangelicals were not united in their understanding of Protestant values. In the main, southern evangelicals overwhelmingly rejected northern evangelicals’ revisions to received Christian doctrine and, likewise, rejected all attempts by northern evangelicals to associate Christianity with social egalitarianism. Still, southern evangelicals did not entirely reject the idea that Protestantism played an important role in shaping the character of the nation. With the crises of secession and war, evangelicals in the South were as resolute as evangelicals in the North were that their understanding of Christianity provided a moral template for political republicanism.

While the American Catholic hierarchy disparaged Protestant triumphalism in both the North and the South, it was especially critical of northern evangelical hubris. Questions surrounding slavery, freedom,
and the relationship between religion and politics had long preoccupied Catholic thinkers. Chapter 5 shows the way in which leading Catholic intellectuals interpreted contributions made by the Catholic Church to American prerogatives such as religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Chapter 5 also explores how these same intellectuals vigorously defended the Catholic Church against accusations of divided loyalty between the pope and the Constitution.

The published writings and private correspondence of members of these three antebellum groups—northern evangelicals, southern evangelicals, and Catholics—suggest that divisions among them stemmed, at least in part, from disagreements over the role religious convictions played in a free society. When northern evangelical leaders challenged the place of Catholics and proslavery southerners in the republic, and the latter responded in kind to northern evangelicals, they were often debating the public meaning of Christianity. Central to these debates are the proper relationship between church and state in a country where there was no established church—and where Christianity itself had, in effect, become democratized—and the memory of European religious and political heritage in the midst of a growing national consciousness hostile to aristocratic and hierarchical concerns.
On the evening of July 29, 1835, Charleston, South Carolina’s postmaster, Alfred Huger, dutifully opened mail sacks delivered direct from New York City on the steamship *Columbia*. Once every two weeks the *Columbia* made the run between New York and Charleston, and for Huger, the monotony of sorting through stacks of letters on a balmy evening promised no more excitement than previous summer deliveries from New York. The night, however, took a turn when Huger made a remarkable discovery. The mailbags were full of pamphlets, thousands of pamphlets, with titles such as *Human Rights*, the *Anti-Slavery Record*, the *Slaves’ Friend*, and *Thoughts on African Colonization*. Huger quickly determined that the literature had been sent to South Carolina courtesy of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and he decided that this mail could not be delivered to the citizens of Charleston. The vigilant postmaster believed the pamphlets to be incendiary documents sent by abolitionists in an effort to prompt slaves to revolt against their masters. Delivering such mail would be tantamount to calling for black revolution. Huger quarantined the documents and petitioned Postmaster General Amos Kendall of the Jackson administration to advise him on his next move.¹

Within twenty-four hours, Charleston’s citizens learned of the sequestered propaganda. Unlike Huger, they were not willing to wait for instructions from the president. A mob of about three thousand people, led
by an ex-governor of South Carolina, broke into the post office, seized the controversial mail, and congregating outside the nearby citadel, piled the pamphlets below a mock gallows from which hung the effigies of three northern abolitionists: William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel H. Cox, and Arthur Tappan. A balloon signaled to the crowd that mob leaders were about to ignite the papers, and with that, the mail served as tinder for a large public bonfire on the parade grounds of Charleston.2

As the antislavery pamphlets poured into other cities throughout the South, southerners were quick to imitate the reaction of their neighbors in South Carolina. Throughout the month of August 1835 (a month that happened to mark the fourth anniversary of the Nat Turner slave insurrection in Virginia), anti-abolitionists held rallies in almost every large city.3 Citizens of New Orleans, Richmond, Norfolk, and Mobile believed Yankee fanaticism had crossed a tacit but understood line of political respectability, and leading southern statesmen decried the abolitionists’ postal campaign as an evil that had to be resisted, even to the point of disunion if necessary.4

In Richmond, several prominent citizens asked the postmaster to refuse to deliver the pamphlets, and the Richmond Whig demanded that civil authorities deport the financier of the literature, Arthur Tappan, from New York to Virginia for trial. The postmaster of Raleigh, North Carolina, did not have to be asked not to deliver the mail; he simply refused on his own. Farther south in Alabama, planters and farmers from the city of Greensborough gathered in angry mobs in the fall of 1835 to protest the distribution of the antislavery newspaper the Emancipator. When copies of the Emancipator arrived in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, a grand jury demanded that its editor, Robert G. Williams, be served with an indictment in New York for “circulating pamphlets and papers of a seditious and incendiary character.”5 In New Orleans, a group called the Louisiana Constitutional and Anti-Fanatical Society formed for the sole purpose of printing and distributing literature that countered the abolitionists’ arguments. Also in Louisiana, one parish posted a $50,000 reward for Arthur Tappan to be delivered dead or alive.6

Recognizing the severity of the situation, Postmaster General Kendall and President Jackson formulated a plan within weeks of the first
Charleston deliveries that would allow postmasters to confiscate suspect letters until citizens demanded delivery. The hope was that those persons who insisted on receiving dubious material would be made known to their communities “as subscribers to [a] wicked plan of exciting the negroes to insurrection.” A public record would be kept of those citizens who demanded the controversial letters, and they in turn would find themselves so socially ostracized that only the most resolute of them could withstand the disapproval of their fellow southerners. President Jackson and Postmaster General Kendall understood that they were calling for censorship of the mail service, but the gravity of the situation, they believed, demanded a swift and earnest response from the federal government. The South, in the summer and fall of 1835, faced the first in a series of crises prompted by abolitionist agitation. If government agents did not act to censor, then angry mobs would.

In the mid-1830s, the South was not the only region of the country to confront the problem of mob violence. Almost one year to the day before the mail controversy created an uproar in Charleston, South Carolina, a northern city—Charlestown, Massachusetts—faced its own conflict involving overheated public sentiment. A small community six miles north of Boston, Charlestown was known primarily for its brickyards and close proximity to the famous battle site Bunker Hill. Another feature of Charlestown was a large convent school built on top of Mt. St. Benedict overlooking the city. The convent school had been founded by Ursulines after they settled in Charlestown in 1818. Although a Catholic school, the convent attracted many of its students from the wealthier Protestant families of Boston who found the Congregationalist-controlled public school system too uncompromising. In fact, many girls attending the school came from Unitarian families who disdained the evangelical sympathies that dominated much of the political culture of the region.

The disgust New England Unitarians felt toward evangelical rigidity was equally matched by evangelical contempt for Unitarian latitudinarianism. In Charlestown, this mutual antipathy boiled because many of its citizens were working-class and middle-class Calvinists, albeit modified Calvinists, who believed that two of their worst theological enemies had united in a cloistered educational enterprise. And Charlestown was
not alone in its distrust of the Ursulines. Nearby Boston also took notice of the success of the convent school. As the number of liberal Protestant Boston families enrolling their daughters in the convent school grew, more and more conservative clergy from Boston and the surrounding area began to express concerns over the extent of Catholic influence in New England. The 1834 meeting of the General Association of the Congregational Church of Massachusetts adopted a resolution that urged ministers to actively confront “the degrading influence of Popery.” Likewise, periodicals produced by the Boston religious press warned that if the influence of Catholic schools was not controlled, then Massachusetts would face the calamity of seeing many of its prominent citizens come under the influence of Rome.9

To add to these concerns, a young girl named Rebecca Reed began to circulate malicious stories around Charlestown and Boston about life in the convent.10 Rebecca Reed claimed to have escaped from the convent, and she depicted life within its walls as one of priestly licentiousness and psychological torture. It mattered not that the Ursulines dismissed Ms. Reed from their employ after she served only a short time there as a custodian. Her stories appealed to the popular imagination, and when, in July 1834, a nun named Elizabeth Harrison briefly left the convent due to fatigue and other health concerns and then returned at her own request, Rebecca Reed's grim tale appeared even more inauspicious. A rumor circulated that Ms. Harrison had been returned to the convent by force and that she was now a prisoner held in the cellar against her will.11

In the midst of the melodrama generated by tales of “escaped” nuns, it did not help matters that the Reverend Lyman Beecher returned to Boston from Ohio in early August to plead his cause for funding Protestant schools and seminaries in the Western Reserve to counter Catholic expansion. On Sunday, August 10, Beecher preached three anti-Catholic sermons in three different churches. All the churches were filled beyond capacity, and each audience was treated to a barrage of denunciations of the pope, Rome, and Catholicism. Other evangelical clergy in and around Boston followed Beecher’s lead that day, and some directly denounced the Ursuline convent. The Sabbath ended without incident, but the following night the suburbs of staid Boston found themselves in the middle of a loud and disturbing commotion.12
On the evening of August 11, an angry mob gathered outside the convent shouting anti-Catholic slogans while several of its leaders went directly to the Mother Superior and demanded to see the sisters they believed to be imprisoned there. The mob leaders were told to come back when the sisters were not sleeping, and the crowd gradually dissipated. Later that night, however, around eleven o’clock, a pile of tar barrels was ignited in a field adjacent to the convent. Recognizing the fire as a signal, a crowd again swarmed the Ursuline’s property. By midnight the school was on fire. The nuns quickly evacuated the children from the building and fled for refuge. Apparently not satisfied with the destruction wrought the first night, another mob returned the night of August 12 and burned fences and trees surrounding the convent. Three nights after the initial aggression, a rumor spread that Irish laborers were about to launch a counterattack in Boston. This hearsay prompted over one thousand Bostonians to take to the streets as self-appointed guardians of public safety. Though the Irish attack never took place, angry Protestant rioters released their pent-up anxiety by burning a hovel in Charlestown occupied by poor Irish families.  

After the assault on the convent, Lyman Beecher expressed regret for the violence, but he denied that his sermons were responsible for inciting the mob. He argued that he preached “two or three miles distant from the scene, and not an individual of the mob, probably, heard the sermon or knew of its delivery.” Moreover, the excitement that produced the riot “had no relation whatever to religious opinions, and no connection with any denomination of Christians.” Beecher contented himself with the belief that the riot would have occurred regardless of his sermons about the dangers of popery. He was not, however, as easily satisfied with the opinion that Catholics did not retaliate with violence because the bishop of Boston restrained them:

Has it come to this, that the capital of New England has been thrown into consternation by the threats of a Catholic mob, and that her temples and mansions stand only through the forbearance of a Catholic bishop? There can be no liberty in the presence of such masses of dark mind, and of such despotic power over it in a single man. Safety on such terms is not the protection of law, but of single-handed despotism.
Apart from the incendiary violence, the episodes in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1834 and in Charleston, South Carolina, in the summer of 1835 appear to have little in common. The cities were separated geographically and culturally. The circumstances leading up to the actions of the mobs were very different, as were the objects of their respective scorn. Nevertheless, despite the differences, there are striking similarities between the two events that cannot be dismissed and deserve further examination.

The people of Charleston and the South, as well as the people of Charlestown and Massachusetts, believed that something fundamental about their way of life was being threatened by outside forces. For southerners, a small group of northern agitators—with little or no reflection about the enormous complexities involved in its demands—was using a public trust, the mail service, to try to overturn the slave system. For Bostonians, the success of a Catholic convent school horrified the heirs of the Puritans who held that a Protestant education was essential for continuing their social project. Both southerners and New Englanders believed that they were facing a potential crisis that contained a number of unknown variables. How many more “outsiders” might threaten their respective ways of life? Who would agree with them? What kind of influence would they have? Furthermore, both southerners and New Englanders found themselves challenged by persons who did not share the common heritage, values, and political sympathies that gave an identity and a purpose to their respective regions. Abolitionists knew as much about cotton production as Catholics did about Calvinist predestination. Who were they to make their presence felt so far from their proper spheres of influence?16

Beyond being responses to perceived threats, both protests involved evangelicals who believed that responsible Christians were to concern themselves with the pressing social issues of the day and that this concern could and should be organized into a program of political persuasion.17 In the 1830s, the strength of this type of Christianity was concentrated in the Northeast, and practitioners could be found across the four largest Protestant denominations: Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Congregational.18
Two principal players in the stories of the mail riots and the convent burning, Arthur Tappan and Lyman Beecher, are representative of these evangelical convictions. They were well-known leaders of moral reform movements in the Mid-Atlantic states and New England. They actively campaigned for causes such as temperance, maintenance of Sabbath laws, distribution of religious tracts and Bibles, and Protestant control of public education. Both men desired to transcend denominational differences in order to secure a vast network of local organizations dedicated to transforming society. They were allies in a struggle defined by a unique Christian commitment: not only the individual but also society could and should be regenerated.

To accomplish the goal of social regeneration, Tappan and Beecher, and many others who shared their convictions, believed that civil authorities needed the guidance of churches, specifically evangelical Protestant churches, in matters of moral legislation. Furthermore, they held that evangelical churches could exercise a social influence, in Beecher’s words, “distinct from that of the government, independent of popular suffrage, superior in potency to individual efforts, and competent to enlist and preserve the public opinion on the side of law and order.” In short, northern evangelicals believed that they had more to offer than salvation; they had a transforming worldview, and given the right means of moral salvation, their worldview could keep society from degenerating into anarchic lawlessness. In the summers of 1834 and 1835, however, citizens of South Carolina and Massachusetts had faced in the mail riots and the convent burning two frightening episodes of lawlessness, and northern evangelicals helped to incite both incidents.

The antebellum northern evangelical crusades against slavery and Catholicism were born over the same five-year period, in the same region, with many of the same leaders. Northern evangelicals embraced the causes of antislavery and anti-Catholicism with the same zeal that they brought to the causes of temperance and the enforcement of Sabbath laws. Both antislavery and anti-Catholic movements involved the application of theology to politics, and both had rather ugly beginnings. In Charleston, a northern evangelical mail campaign had incited the southern mob who opposed abolitionist activity in their community. In
Charlestown, northern evangelical preaching had provoked the northern mob who opposed a strong Catholic presence in their community.22

Joining Arthur Tappan and Lyman Beecher were a transdenominational group of ministers and laypersons who were dedicated to a social philosophy grounded in Christian activism. They were, in Ray Allen Billington’s memorable phrase, “Protestant crusaders,” rhetorical warriors who fought vigorously to sustain the idea that America had been providentially set apart to advance the twin causes of political and religious freedom.23 Northern evangelicals viewed Catholics and slaveholders as much more than an anomaly on the American landscape; they were competitors in the race to define and control public space in a rapidly changing young country.

**Immigration, Religion, and Politics**

How fast was the country changing? In 1800, a traveler who wished to cross the territory between Lake Erie and New Orleans would need to set aside a month for the journey. By 1830, the same distance could be covered in two weeks. Likewise, a trip from Boston to Baltimore required three days at the turn of the nineteenth century, while thirty years later the same distance could be traveled in a day. Improvements in transportation and road conditions were making mobility, both physical and economic, a reality for many Americans. Better highways and the introduction of steam powered boats, locomotives, and canals inspired new possibilities of western expansion. Between 1810 and 1830, over two million people exited the eastern states for the Northwest Territory, and by 1840, one-third of the American population lived west of the Appalachian Mountains.24

The push west did not simply result in urban drain. Cities also grew between 1820 and 1850. Pittsburgh went from being a modest town of 7,000 to a large city of 46,000, and Cincinnati mushroomed from 9,000 to 115,000. On the eastern seaboard Boston’s population increased from 42,000 to 137,000, New York’s from 123,000 to 515,000, and the manufacturing suburbs of Philadelphia jumped from 45,000 people to just over 200,000.25 The Northeast and the Midwest were growing. Charleston, South Carolina, and the rest of the South, at least the lower South,
appeared sleepy and listless by comparison. Between 1830 and 1850, the combined population of the three largest cities in the lower South—New Orleans, Charleston, and Mobile—remained under 200,000. At midcentury, a train trip from New Orleans to Charleston took an entire week, while a trip from western New York to Charleston could be made in five days.

In New England, urban growth coincided with changes in industry. Improved technologies brought increased productivity to many northern manufacturers, and in turn, manufacturers needed a reliable supply of labor. The need for factory workers was met in part by local populations. By far, however, the greatest supply of industrial labor came from the 500,000 plus immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1828 and 1844. Most of the newcomers were from Europe with the largest percentage emigrating from Ireland and Germany. Statistics help to highlight the pattern. In 1820, annual emigration from Ireland totaled 3,614, whereas by 1852, that number increased to 159,548. Germans comprised a relatively small percentage of the immigrant population in 1820, totaling only 968 persons. By 1852, over 145,918 Germans were emigrating annually to the United States. Irish immigrants settled in the large seaport cities of the Northeast, while German immigrants settled further west in both urban and rural areas. Both groups were exceedingly poor, congregating around the cheapest land or the cheapest housing available, and more often than not, they competed with each other for employment.

New arrivals from Europe brought distinct customs, cultural habits, and peculiarities of language with them. They also brought their religious beliefs. Some were Lutheran, some Pietist; a handful of Protestants from Ulster were among the immigrant population, as were a few Jews, but by far the overwhelming majority of immigrants were Catholic. European Catholics stood out in Protestant America. They brought with them a continental disposition toward the use of alcohol. Apart from attending Mass, they treated the Christian Sabbath like any other day of the week. They also enjoyed music and dancing. These factors alone prevented most immigrants from quietly blending into the emerging industrial towns of New England. But beyond cultural peculiarities, Catholics, especially Irish-born Catholics, often faced deplorable living and working
conditions. They were poor, and their poverty frequently subjected them to abysmal material circumstances. Wages were low, neighborhoods were unsanitary, and personal hygiene was inadequate due to the difficulties of their environment. Consequently, locals viewed them as uncouth and determined that they were the source of recurrent social unrest. Fighting, drunkenness, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency were all believed to have their worst manifestations in the foreign born.30

Even in the best conditions, the rapid collision of cultural differences strains the bonds that hold communities together. Suspicion, mistrust, and resentment are common reactions to large numbers of strangers moving into settled cities and towns. Antebellum Protestants in New England and the newly settled Midwest, however, faced a unique confluence of circumstances. Within the span of a generation, they had to confront accelerated changes that altered long-established patterns of agrarian economic and social life. At the same time, they had to deal with large numbers of newly arrived European Catholics who did not share their Protestant heritage. Perhaps most importantly they had to wrestle with how these changes fit with the exigencies of the American political system. Immigrants were potential voters, and how they participated in political life determined for many how they would be received.

In the 1830s and 1840s, political participation narrowed to two choices: either one was a Whig, or one was a Democrat. Democrats thought themselves more tolerant, populist, and religiously neutral than the Whig party. Whigs, by contrast, believed themselves to be direct descendants of the Federalists, and, like the Federalists, they carried the cause of conservative social values. They thought that the church should influence moral legislation; they supported an industrial aristocracy grounded in Protestant values; and they detested the legacy of Thomas Jefferson.31 Furthermore, what the Whigs disliked about Jefferson the Democrat they absolutely abhorred in Andrew Jackson the populist.32

By and large, Irish immigrants were drawn to the Democratic Party with its reputation for Jeffersonian broadmindedness. They viewed the Whigs as the heirs of the Puritans, and as Catholics, this made choosing their political affiliation rather easy.33 Northern evangelicals, by contrast, were sympathetic with Whig politics. They liked the notion that government action could be used to secure religious and moral improvement.
Religion provided a restraining social influence that tempered the liberating effects of political and economic freedom. Whigs were the party of economic progress and social conservatism, champions of freedom and personal responsibility. Rarely did their leadership discern the potential incompatibility between their love of progress and their desire for political constancy.34

French historian Alexis de Tocqueville recorded the unique religious impulse of American politics in his account of his travels through the United States in the 1830s. Tocqueville noted that in France he had witnessed the “the spirit of freedom and the spirit of religion pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other . . . but in America they were intimately united.” Although there was no established religion in the United States, religion was nevertheless “the foremost of the political institutions” because religion in America “facilitates the use of free institutions.”35

Tocqueville offered the keen observation that nineteenth-century Americans, unlike nineteenth-century Europeans, did not see religious institutions and political institutions as contestants locked in a struggle for power. This was especially true for evangelical Whigs. In fact, socially conservative evangelicals believed religion was indispensable to the progress of the young country. “Unless our course of national glory be checked,” wrote the Rector of Oldenwold, a minister from Boston writing under a pseudonym, “the present condition of our land is only a beginning of what it will be in years to come.” The reason for his optimism, he continued, was that Americans were committed to the “circulation of the word of God among her people, to the exercise of the right of private judgment, and the spirit of peace.”36

The Christian, like the country, was destined to move forward, and Presbyterians such as William Adams believed that anyone who earnestly studied the scriptures could not “imagine that the time will come when there will be a limit to his advancement.”37 Likewise, Henry Ward Beecher celebrated the “upward and progressive tendency of the great elements of good,” and boldly declared that “constant Progress rests chiefly upon one Association, THE CHURCH.”38

In Europe, religion might very well have conflicted with the interests of the state, but Europe was the Old World. In America, religion and the
state were believed to be compatible because the authority of both rested on the same agency: the free assent of the individual. Presbyterian Albert Barnes succinctly summarized the situation in 1844: “This is an age of freedom, and men will be free. The religion of forms is the stereotyped wisdom or folly of the past, and does not adapt itself to the free movements, the enlarged views, the varying plans of this age.”

In the 1840s and 1850s, many evangelicals believed that Americans faced an exceptional historical opportunity. In the Old World, church and state had been, more often than not, contestants locked in a power struggle because people lived under the dictates of arbitrary religious coercion. In the United States, however, individuals were free to choose for themselves what they would believe. If free people could be convinced that their spiritual and political interests were one and the same, then there was real potential for harmony between Christian moral teaching and public order.

Northern evangelical leaders were conscious of the importance of the historical moment, but they were also aware that new opportunities presented new dangers. If Christianity was to be moral leaven in a nation consumed with the possibilities of freedom and progress, then Christian leaders had to avoid the ominous prospect that freedom and progress might eventually undermine self-restraint. Alexis de Tocqueville well understood the problem. While Americans were no doubt a religious people, they still have “no traditions, or common habits, to forge links between their minds.” Moreover, as New England cities swelled with Catholic immigrants from Europe, and as scores of peoples migrated westward, Tocqueville speculated, “there is nothing of tradition, family feeling, or example to restrain them. . . . The woof of time is broken and the track of past generations lost.”

The Evangelical Dilemma and the National Identity Crisis

Antebellum evangelical conservatives faced a substantial dilemma. How was one to maintain a shared understanding of the common good in a culture that elevated the prerogatives of individualism and egalitarianism
over the authority of tradition? More pointedly, how could one both champion the virtues of progress and at the same time insist that progress not disrupt social stability? New England evangelicals found these questions particularly urgent given the large numbers of European Catholics pouring into the Northeast after 1830. Immigration together with rapid economic changes challenged their support of both commercialism and social conservatism. In addition, the aggressive populism that characterized the age of Jackson exposed a fundamental problem for northern evangelical Whigs. On the one hand, as evangelicals, they were champions of individual conscience and the right of private opinion over and against the dictates of inherited authority. On the other hand, as socially conservative Whigs, they were suspicious of populism, and they doubted that the rabble of the cities and the frontier could survive without strong moral leadership.

Many New England ministers struggled with the tension created by their commitments to both progressive theology and conservative social paternalism. Eminent preacher and theologian Horace Bushnell of Hartford, Connecticut, worried that the social changes brought by immigration and populism would undermine public order. He warned that “emigration, or a new settlement of the social state, involves a tendency to social decline. There must, in every such case, be a relapse towards barbarism, more or less protracted, more or less complete.” He insisted that under the political conditions of democracy some stability had to be guaranteed. In a lament that anticipated the work of Reinhold Niebuhr in the twentieth century, Bushnell said that partisanship in democracies had the subtle effect of convincing normally well-behaved individuals to “yield to impulse, to party spirit and policy, without any consideration of moral constraints and principles.” While he demonstrated a tendency toward social conservatism, he nevertheless rejected conventional theological systems such as Calvinism. He was convinced that modern Christianity had outgrown old confessional boundaries and that doctrinal disputes were futile because our “apprehensions of truth are here only proximate and relative.” Bushnell limited his taste for experimentation to religion. When it came to politics, he sought firmer ground, believing it was his “duty” to “assert God’s law.”

© 2010 University of Notre Dame Press
Like Horace Bushnell, Albert Barnes had difficulty reconciling his theology with his apprehensions about the social problems facing the young country. Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Barnes was instrumental in the 1837 schism that split the Presbyterians into a New School (theologically progressive) side and Old School (theologically confessional) side. Over the course of a forty-seven-year career, he championed interdenominational cooperation and innovations in received Presbyterian doctrine. He also published caustic but effective social treatises on subjects such as prohibition, abolition, and the threat of Catholic immigration. His influence on nineteenth-century Protestant thought cannot be underestimated. Between 1832 and 1853, he published an eleven-volume theological tome entitled Notes, Explanatory and Practical, which sold over one million copies.45

Early in his career, Barnes challenged the doctrinal positions of the Westminster Confession of Faith by claiming that people are sinful by choice rather than by an inherited depraved nature.46 In a blatant repudiation of Calvinist principles, Barnes argued that people have the potential to be good, or morally acceptable, before God.47 Barnes’ sanguine view of human nature translated into an equally confident view of America’s role in world history. He declared that the American Constitution “is the last hope of the world” and that in due course “the spread of intelligence and virtue cannot fail ultimately to extend the same principles of government through the earth.” Hardly understating his predilection for the idea of manifest destiny, he urged that “in the era of better things, which is about to rise in the world, our land shall be first; our counsels the guide of other nations; our countrymen everywhere the devoted advocates of the rights of men.”48

Still, for all his optimism about human potential and national destiny, Barnes, too, apprehended Tocqueville’s reservations about the problem of freedom and self-restraint. “America,” he wrote, was “fast becoming a nation of drunkards,” and if people did not sober up, the entire future of American civilization was in jeopardy. Likewise, he saw avarice as the besetting sin of the American character. As people migrate west, he lamented, “they go for gold . . . and they trample down the law of the Sabbath, and soon, too, forget the laws of honesty and fairdealing, in the insatiable love of gain.”49
Rhode Island Baptist Francis Wayland shared Barnes’ concerns. A native of New York, Wayland graduated from Andover Seminary in 1818 and worked for a time as a private tutor before accepting an invitation to serve as the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Boston. He returned to academic life in 1826, and soon after was elected president of Brown University, a post he held for almost thirty years. Wayland was a prolific writer whose 1835 textbook on moral philosophy, *Elements of Moral Science*, went through several editions in the United States and in England. He was quick to address political concerns, and he chastised Christians who failed to vote, or who argued that politics should be of no concern to ministers.

In 1842 after Thomas Dorr led a populist movement to extend suffrage to Rhode Island’s nonpropertied persons, Wayland assumed leadership of the party opposing Dorr’s activity. He used his political platform to champion a number of social causes, including prison reform, care of the mentally ill, gradual emancipation, and public education. He also directed attention to the threat slaveholders presented to the interests of New Englanders. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 broke the tenuous peace of the 1820 Missouri Compromise, Wayland added his voice to the many who believed that a minority of southerners had for too long dominated national politics. “The question,” he wrote, “ceases to be whether black men are forever to be slaves, but whether the sons of the Puritans are to become slaves themselves.”

As a New Englander, Wayland found a natural political enemy in the slaveholding South. Yet, at the same time, he understood that slaveholders were not the only Americans subject to the impulse of greed. Eastern manufacturers could fall prey to the “love of gain” as well. Still, Wayland was a committed capitalist. Rather than condemn the unsavory consequences of laissez-faire economics as some radicals did, he tried to cast the principles of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill in a favorable light. As one historian put it, Wayland “sought to harmonize classical economic thought with traditional religious principles” and his efforts resulted in two celebrated works, *Elements of Political Economy* and *The Moral Law of Accumulation*.

These studies in political economy reflected the growing ambiguity surrounding the problem of freedom and moral authority in the antebellum period. As a disciple of liberalism, Wayland could unflinchingly
declare that “every man be allowed to gain all that he can” and that “each has a right to use what is his own, exactly as he pleases.” Yet, at the same time, he could not discard his evangelical moral sensibilities. He insisted after the financial panic of 1837 that people had violated God’s laws for amassing wealth by “excessive avidity for the rapid accumulation of property.”53 He reasoned that Americans had the right to enjoy liberty, and to pursue the blessings of liberty, but personal freedom should never be elevated above the right of society to provide a check on unrestrained individualism. Some form of governmental paternalism was necessary in order for a democracy to function properly. Freedom provides “precious blessings. . . . But it is to be remembered, that no liberty can exist without restraint. . . . It therefore becomes all civil and judicial officers, to act as the guardians of society.”54

Francis Wayland, Albert Barnes, Horace Bushnell, and other northern evangelicals were not simply conflicted social conservatives caught in the all too human trait of self-contradiction. Their optimism about the progressive potential of the young country and their pessimism about its moral stability reflected the concerns of many evangelical Whigs. Their contradictions reveal the complexity of pursuing normative ethical principles in a culture that has no explicitly agreed upon repository of moral wisdom. Antebellum evangelical leaders, as Tocqueville observed of nineteenth-century Americans in general, were trying to hold disparate values together. They esteemed social stability, public order, and biblical ideals. They also, however, revered industrial growth, territorial expansion, and progressive theology. The dilemma they faced was how to maintain the proper balance between their love for freedom and their conviction that only coercive moral authority could keep freedom from becoming socially destructive.

The problem was not unique to the North. Conservative evangelical Whigs could be found struggling with the issue in the South as well. The South, however, did not face to the same degree as the North the social disruptions created by immigration, industrial expansion, and market competition. Irish and German Catholics never populated the southern states with the numbers they did in the northern states. At midcentury, there were an estimated 181,500 Catholics in the four largest dioceses
of the upper South combined, a figure roughly equal to the number of Catholics entering the Northeast annually. Similarly, in the lower South, the combined immigrant Catholic population of New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah, and Charleston was smaller than the number of Catholics in many individual cities in the North. Furthermore, social conditions in the South, premised as they were on the relationship between master and slave rather than between labor and capital, were not as threatened by bourgeois individualism as was the North. Southerners valued caste and hierarchy, and thus they were less subject to the leveling effects of the marketplace that made it increasingly difficult to maintain a conservative social vision in the North.

The problem of how to balance freedom with moral authority was not simply an abstract philosophical or theological question. It was a question relevant to the broader problem of American national identity and the development of nationalist ideology in the nineteenth century. The Jacksonian era was a period of uncertainty for many Americans. Evangelical Whigs recognized this uncertainty and spent a lot of political energy trying to capitalize on it. Complicating the Whig project was the fact that the United States was predominately a country of regions and regional interests, with the two most powerful regions being New England states and southern states.

Between 1835 and 1860, the United States struggled to find a truly national character. Heroic tales from the American Revolution and the War of 1812 provided something of a touchstone of common origins. But there were also memories, some fresher than others, of the divisions brought about by the Federalists and Anti-Federalists debates; of the Hartford Convention’s flirtation with the right of secession and their challenge to the president’s power over state militias; of the Congressional debates on the Missouri Compromise of 1820; and of the explosive tariff and nullification controversy of 1832.

In addition to political differences, there was the painfully obvious economic division of free labor versus slave labor. It is perhaps superfluous to note that before the Civil War there was no national consensus as to what type of economic system would govern the nation. Southern intellectuals spilled as much ink denouncing the horrors of capitalism
and the free-labor system as Yankee abolitionists did condemning the brutality of slavery. Although many southerners agreed that slavery could indeed be vicious, and many New Englanders questioned the social consequences of market-driven relationships between capital and labor, in the main, geography determined one’s commitment to a political economy of slavery or free labor.  

Similarly, the political economy set limits on how people interpreted Constitutional arrangements. In the case of the 1832–33 debates between Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, it framed how one understood the obligations of individual states to the Union. Even within the subregions of the North and the South there were disagreements over economics. New York City had a great deal of interest in the cotton market of the Deep South states, and New Englanders wanted to ensure a healthy commercial relationship between themselves and the newly settled Ohio Valley region. Likewise, the Mid-Atlantic states and the states of the upper South often shared material resources as well as the means for transporting them. The point is that no substantial accord existed between the different economic interests that comprised the Union, no nationwide preference for one kind of political economy over another.

In addition to lacking a comprehensive economic identity, the various regions lacked a unifying cultural identity. While the implications of the term “culture” are legion, a helpful definition that narrows the scope of the term has been given by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz defined culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.” In effect, “culture” can be considered a way of conceiving oneself and one’s society through the mediation of symbols that have been handed down from one generation to the next.  

The problem for antebellum Americans was that, unlike Europeans, they lacked a significant repository of inherited symbols. Apart from the Fourth of July and the doughtiness of George Washington, there was little available for Americans of all regions to rally around. A prominent New York attorney lamented this fact by noting that the United States
does not have “like England and France, centuries of achievements and calamities to look back on.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a celebrated speech before Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa society declared, “we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. . . . The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself.” American culture, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century, had no shared accomplishments in literature, music, or art—no Petrarch, no Milton, no Mozart. America’s cultural identity rested on two wars and abstract sentiments for liberty and union. As the decades passed, these sentiments were strained under differing sectional interpretations. As one historian described the situation, the North increasingly came to view “liberty and union” as a national mandate that justified political permanency as well as material and geographic expansion. The South, by contrast, while not opposed to wealth and geographic expansion, nevertheless understood “liberty and union” less as an idea of mission and destiny and more as an insurance policy against centralized abuse of governmental power.

As well as lacking enduring cultural symbols, antebellum Americans lacked a significant common ancestry. The New York Times noted that “the Cavaliers who emigrated to Virginia and the Puritans who planted themselves in New-England, may be regarded as presenting the most marked dissimilarities of character of the whole bulk of those who first populated America.” Unitarian minister and amateur historian John Gorham Palfrey concurred. He denounced the South’s pretense at having established an alleged aristocracy and declared that it was in fact the founders of Massachusetts who were “of the noble and gentle blood of England,” while the wretched settlers of Virginia were “much fitter to spoil and ruin a Commonwealth than to help raise or maintain one.” What little common genealogy antebellum Americans shared was eventually lost to regional biases. The very labels of “Cavalier” and “Yankee” give some indication of how each stereotype contributed to regional myth-making and the idea of separate origins.

As the first half of the nineteenth century progressed, regional rather than national interests dominated the concerns of most Americans. Conflicting political and economic agendas as well as a feeble inheritance of
symbolic cultural forms contributed to the fragmentation. Northerners and southerners sought opportunities to secure their respective regional identities as the nation’s collective identity. In the northern states, evangelical Protestants with their Whig sympathies were at the heart of the quest to define the “meaning” of America. Their cause was all the more urgent because of the increased Catholic presence in their region. Their cause was also all the more conflicted because they struggled with the problem of how to maximize freedom and yet still maintain moral authority without a universally accepted religious inheritance.\(^69\)

**Northern Evangelicals and Christian Nationalism**

In the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, northern evangelicals, most of whom were Whigs, tried to solve their dilemma by connecting their religious values to a larger meaning of America. The United States, they argued, was a Christian nation. Specifically, it was a Protestant Christian nation. It was not, however, a Protestant nation in the tradition of the Huguenots of South Carolina, or the German Reformed of Pennsylvania, or the Anglicans of New York and Virginia. Rather, the United States was a Protestant nation conceived in, and sustained through, the values of New England Protestantism.\(^70\)

New England, said the Reverend D. F. Robertson in a discourse entitled “National Destiny and Our Country,” is where “the external institution of Revealed Religion has existed in its *simple integrity, there* all the ends of civil organization have been attained to the highest degree; and there they have been perpetuated” (emphasis original).\(^71\) Likewise, Horace Bushnell claimed that though many parts of the “Old World” may look upon New England society as “still in the rough,” through the revitalizing power of New England religion “we are rising steadily into noon, as a people socially complete.”\(^72\)

The Reverend James P. Stuart shared Bushnell’s optimism. He maintained that the Divine Laws of the Bible constituted the first assemblies of New England and that the legislatures of the region remained substantially devoted to the same. Because of New England’s steadfast commitment to Protestant principles, “the United States are destined for new
forms of society, a new form of the Church, a new form of the State, a new and higher type of Christianity.”

Noah Porter, a professor of moral philosophy at Yale, argued that the legacy of the New England Puritan was “freedom and independence of the individual man . . . not, however, a lawless freedom, but a liberty implied in that separate responsibility, which each man holds to himself and his God.” Charles Boynton, a Presbyterian pastor from Cincinnati, provides one of the most striking examples of deference to the New England heritage. “Puritanism,” he said, “is but another name for Apostolic Christianity. Puritanism, Protestantism, and True Americanism are only different terms to designate the same set of principles.”

The Beecher clan contributed significantly to the romanticizing of New England’s Protestant heritage. Lyman Beecher frequently equated Protestantism with republicanism, and in a show of affection for Congregational church polity, he compared the office of Protestant ministry to the office of an elected official. “The opinions of the Protestant clergy are congenial with liberty,” he wrote, because the Protestant clergy “are chosen by the people who have been educated as freemen, and they [the ministers] are dependent on them for patronage and support.” Edward Beecher, Lyman Beecher’s second oldest son and once pastor of Park Street Church in Boston, also saw a relationship between Protestantism and democracy. For him, the idea of being “chosen” extended beyond the ministry to the nation as a whole. He declared that America was “chosen by God to enjoy the honor of being the receptacle of Puritan ideas.” With such a “glorious birthright,” the “Puritan Churches” have inherited “the power to lead this nation in the great work of education not only at the East, but at the West also.”

Although Edward’s esteem for his New England Protestant heritage may strike some as pretentious, he appears modest when compared to his brother Henry Ward Beecher. In a lecture intended to inspire lukewarm northerners to consider taking up arms against the South, Henry Ward reminded his audience that “the North is the nation, and the South is but a fringe.” “The brain of this nation,” he continued, “is New England,” and New England is “that part of this nation which has been the throne of God”; it “has been the source of all that is godlike in American history.” Even more:
Liberty, democratic equality; Christianity; God, the only king; right, the only barrier and restraint; and then, God and right being respected, liberty to all, from top to bottom, and the more liberty the stronger and safer—that is the Northern conception. And that is the precious seed that shall pierce to State after State, rolling westward her empire.78

Henry Ward, like his father, brought a crusader’s spirit to ministry. He held several Presbyterian pastorates in the Midwest between 1837 and 1847. In 1847, following the earlier example of his father, he left the Presbyterians for the Congregationalists and accepted a position at the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York. Here he developed a reputation as a colorful and dramatic preacher and on any given Sunday commanded the attention of up to 2,500 worshipers.79

Henry Ward was not shy about expressing his opinions on public questions. Assimilation of immigrants, especially Irish and German Catholics, along with challenging the slaveholding aristocracy of the South topped his list. In addition, he was enthusiastic about the temperance crusade and early efforts to establish women’s suffrage.80 Henry Ward vigorously denounced the compromise measures of 1850, believing like most Whigs that too much had been conceded to the South. Also, like so many other northern evangelicals, he actively campaigned for John Fremont in 1856 and Abraham Lincoln in 1860.81

While Henry Ward Beecher carried the evangelical banner in Brooklyn, Lyman Beecher’s son-in-law Calvin Stowe, husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe, fought to ensure that public education in the Ohio Valley was guided exclusively by Protestant commitments. Stowe was a professor of Bible at Lane Theological Seminary, the seminary founded by his father-in-law. He shared with his in-laws a deep fear of European Catholic “barbarism” transplanted to American shores.82 He believed that if the customs and beliefs of the immigrant population remained unchecked, public morality would suffer. What was needed was a medium whereby those who were not from America could be taught how to be Americans, citizens who would at least tacitly comply with, if not fully embrace, the moral consensus of the Protestant majority.83
For Stowe, as for the Beechers and their evangelical allies, the mediating institution between the immigrant and Americanization would be the public school system. Public, or common, schools were to be governed by Protestant principles and dedicated to ensuring a homogenous ethical vision for the country. Stowe spoke for many evangelicals when he argued, “it is altogether essential to our national strength and peace, if not even to our national existence, that the foreigners who settle on our soil, should cease to be Europeans and become Americans.” The common schools would oversee the process of reconstructing the children of European immigrants. They would be a perpetual institution that could sustain “national feeling” and ensure “national assimilation” without the undue influence of local peculiarities.

In many ways, the scions of the Puritans had every reason to be optimistic. Protestant evangelicalism at midcentury, due largely to the efforts of New Englanders, had seen dramatic success. Beginning in the early years of the nineteenth century, a series of sporadic and spectacular revivals captured the imaginations of young ministerial students coming out of Yale and Andover. By the late 1820s, preachers such as Joshua Leavitt, Charles Finney, Jacob Knapp, and Jabez Swan had made revivals commonplace in the Northeast and the Midwest. These seasonal “manifestations of the spirit” possessed their own internal logic, and they could be successfully produced and reproduced by “the right use of constituted means.”

To be sure, revivals were reproduced over and over again in upstate New York, the Western Reserve, and cities peppering the Atlantic seaboard states from Boston to Philadelphia. Although revivalism was initially controversial and divisive, most Protestant leaders eventually warmed to it, with Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists all participating. Revivals proved popular across the evangelical theological spectrum because they provided a way to minimize doctrinal and denominational distinctions in favor of a unified Christian front. In addition, they often served as a public forum for communicating the transdenominational vision of what a Protestant Christian America should look like. Revivalists were charismatic, politically active, and frequently published their own journals. They were also educated and shared with more reserved
evangelicals the common cause of promoting Protestant social reform in the public square.88

The revivalist preacher Joshua Leavitt had been active in benevolent causes since his student days at Yale, and in 1831, he began a career as an editor of a series of religious journals dedicated to New School doctrine, antislavery, and temperance. In 1837 after selling his paper, the Evangelist, Leavitt took over the Emancipator, the journal that created such a stir in Alabama during the abolitionist postal campaign in the autumn of 1835. In 1841 Arthur Tappan’s brother, Lewis, financed a trip to Washington for Leavitt so he could argue the antislavery cause before Congress. When the Emancipator ran into financial trouble in 1848, Leavitt devoted his talents to the Independent, a journal of religion and politics that actively supported the young Republican Party in the late 1850s and the presidential campaign of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.89

Jabez Swan served as the pastor of two Baptist churches in Connecticut and New York between 1827 and 1838. Known for his pulpit theatrics and his ability to arouse excitement in his audience, in 1841 he committed to full-time itinerant evangelism, a career he maintained into the 1870s. Swan was a strong advocate of temperance, and he insisted that all those who converted at his revivals sign a pledge that they would never again consume alcohol. The usual suspects—hyper-Calvinists, deists, Unitarians, Catholics, and Masons—were harangued from the pulpit at Swan’s protracted meetings, and to this group Swan often added German pantheists and Mormons. He was also dedicated to the abolitionist cause and in 1856 made several stump speeches for John C. Fremont, the first Republican nominee for president.90

Jacob Knapp graduated from Hamilton Literary and Theological Institute in 1825, two years before Jabez Swan. Like Swan, he had a reputation in the pulpit for flamboyant antics mixed with sentimental pathos, and also like Swan, he took to the itinerant circuit early in his career. Unlike Swan, Knapp did not limit his social evangelism to small communities in the Northeast. Knapp carried the evangelical abolitionist cause to the South’s doorstep, preaching against slavery in Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, and Louisville. He gained notoriety for claiming that “Christianity is a radical principle” and that “a Bible Christian cannot be
a conservative.” Radical Christianity for Knapp, in addition to supporting abolition, consisted in attacking a host of personal sins that he believed increased as Catholic immigration increased, namely, dancing, gambling, and drinking.\textsuperscript{91}

Charles Grandison Finney was perhaps the most notable religious personality of his day, and in 1835 he took a post at the newly founded Oberlin College.\textsuperscript{92} Oberlin was itself the product of a controversy that began at Lane Theological Seminary in 1834 when fifty students decided to hold a debate on the issue of immediate abolition. Sensing the heated controversy that was about to ensue, President Lyman Beecher and other faculty members agreed to delay the discussion. The students protested, followed through with their debate, and within a matter of weeks, formed their own chapter of the Anti-Slavery Society. This proved too much for Beecher, school administrators, and the Board of Trustees, who felt that colonization, not immediate abolition, would be the more prudent position for luring potential donors to contribute to the school. The young “Lane Rebels,” as the students came to be known, ignored the appeals of the faculty, and after hearing that Charles Finney had accepted a post at a new school funded in large part by the Tappan brothers, abandoned Lane in favor of the Oberlin enterprise.\textsuperscript{93}

The draw Finney had for the spiritually and socially idealistic Lane Rebels is understandable in light of his personal charisma and widespread reputation as a revivalist. Finney was the product of Presbyterian teaching in Oneida County, New York, and he rose to national prominence when he preached a series of revivals near his home county in 1826. Trained as a lawyer, Finney brought to the evangelistic task the skills of colloquial persuasion and emotional appeal. He convinced many other evangelical leaders that sinners would never understand the gospel message as long as religion was “some mysterious thing they cannot understand.”\textsuperscript{94} Rather, Finney adopted revival practices, or “new measures,” that focused on an individual’s relationship with God, including anxious meetings, for individuals to “take up all their errors” before God in a group setting; protracted meetings, held over several days “to make a more powerful impression of God upon the minds of the people”; and the anxious seat, where troubled individuals could be “addressed particularly, and be made subjects
Hundreds of people claimed to be converted at Finney’s revivals, and his success at winning people to the Christian faith brought both wanted and unwanted attention to his work. Presbyterian and Congregational stalwarts such as Lyman Beecher found themselves in conflict with Finney early in his career, but as his influence grew, even Beecher conceded that the positive effects of Finney’s new measures could not be denied.

Charles Finney, more than any of the northern evangelists, strove to free Christianity from the authority of learned clergy, the tangles of ecclesiastical bureaucracy, and the nuances of theological debate. In doing so, he unleashed what one historian has called a “Copernican revolution” in the world of the northern evangelicals by emphasizing the religious experience of the convert rather than the formal teachings of the church as the starting point of true Christian knowledge. Furthermore, Finney taught that conversion was just the beginning of religious experience. Christianity was much more than an assent to articles of belief written long ago in Europe. Converts were encouraged to apply faith to daily life, to find practical benevolent activities that could serve both as evidence of true conversion and as steps toward remaking society in the image of God’s kingdom. Christian interests were one with “the interests of God’s Kingdom,” and the believer was expected to “aim at being useful in the highest degree possible.”

The zealous emotions unleashed by Finney and his evangelical imitators formed the foundation of what would grow to be called the “benevolent empire.” In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, numerous religious organizations were dedicated to combating the deleterious social effects of personal and public vice. Lyman and Henry Ward Beecher, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, Albert Barnes, Joshua Leavitt, Jabez Swan, Jacob Knapp, Francis Wayland, and Charles Finney were evangelical generals in a war against both individual and social sins. Many joined them, and a few attained high positions in the ranks of evangelical leadership.

Although they never achieved perfect agreement, northern evangelicals shared the lofty, if ill-defined, goal to demonstrate the harmony between Protestant theology and republican political values. They wanted
to bring their religious convictions to bear on a culture increasingly hostile to inherited authority, class distinctions, and aristocratic privilege. At the same time, they did not want to sacrifice the formalities of social deference, their distrust of mass politics, and their attachment to the goal of cultivating a virtuous and still “free” society. To accomplish their goals, they set out in often uncoordinated but always earnest efforts to convince believers that the Christian life was a life of transforming activity, and that the virtuous activities of the individual believer ensured the proper balance between the potential deleterious effects of freedom and the need for social stability. As the Charleston abolitionist mail campaign and the Charlestown convent burning of 1834–35 demonstrate, however, the price of social stability was high for Catholics and slaveholders who were considered a threat to northern evangelical interests.

Fault Lines in the Evangelical Front

In the 1840s and 1850s, as the possibility for real political and economic unity grew increasingly elusive for the Whig proponents of nationalism, evangelical Whigs continued to believe that the churches could at least keep up the appearance of religious unity. They had witnessed, if not helped to orchestrate, the success of a growing network of benevolent, voluntary organizations and missionary societies that incorporated almost every Protestant denomination in the country. The achievements of these voluntary reform movements inspired a sense of pride and purpose in New England’s evangelicals. Additionally, revivalism and social reform had a significant southern component, a fact that reinforced the hope that in spite of the all the sectional posturing there was a common Protestant ethos that bound the two regions. Religious unity, however, had its limits. Southern evangelicals never wholeheartedly embraced two unique contributions New England evangelicals made to the American religious landscape: millennialism and modified Calvinism.

Much has been written about the millennial optimism that pervaded the churches in the 1830s and 1840s. Scores of Protestants of every denomination believed that God intended to use the United States to
usher in the reign of Christ on earth. Church leaders in both the North and the South looked upon the success of revivalism and the spread of benevolent religious organizations as proof that the kingdom of God would eventuate through the activities of the American churches. As Anne C. Loveland has noted, however, millennialism received much less emphasis in southern evangelical thought. Southerners in general did not share the same urgency and optimism that characterized so much of northern evangelical life. Furthermore, Presbyterians and Baptists in the South endorsed a more thoroughgoing Calvinism than did the same denominations in New England. Even Southern Methodists, though far from Calvinistic in their theology, did not embrace the idea that society could be perfected as did Methodists in the North.105

Southern Protestants believed along with northern Protestants that conversion would lead the individual to a life of moral improvement and charity. But the idea that the social activism of the churches could sooner rather than later usher in the kingdom of God never received the same kind of treatment in southern pulpits as it did in northern pulpits. Consequently, it may have been easy to find southern clergy who would agree with Charles Finney that “every truly converted man turns from selfishness to benevolence.” But it would have been more difficult to find a minister or theologian in the South who would agree with Finney’s claim that “if the church will do her duty, the millenium [sic] may come in this country in three years.”106

Similarly, southern ministers did not endow the industrial revolution with the same eschatological significance as northern ministers did. Horace Bushnell declared that the incredible gains in technology and industrial output were a sure indication that the age in which he lived had “some holy purpose . . . which connects with the coming reign of Christ on earth.”107 Although neither unaware nor in many cases unappreciative of advances in industry, southern ministers did not share the same hopefulness that Christ would return to earth following the sufficient growth of trade and industry.108

In addition to millennialism, revivalism divided northern and southern evangelicals. Northern preachers frequently used revivals to spread a more palatable version of New England Calvinism. Despite their rever-
ence for their Puritan heritage, many northern evangelicals struggled with Calvin’s teaching on human depravity. For some the idea of total moral corruption proved a critical stumbling block to missionary endeavors. Lyman Beecher attacked this problem head on. Since the mid-1820s, Beecher, along with his astute theological ally Nathan W. Taylor, had championed a benign Calvinism as the orthodox answer to the spread of Unitarianism in New England. He defended the old theology by advocating a new middle ground between the heterodox Unitarians and the annoying hyper-Calvinists.109

Popularly known as the New Haven Theology because of its association with Taylor and Yale, Beecher’s via media contained two crucial modifications of Calvinist doctrine. First, the idea that original sin was imputed through Adam to his posterity as hereditary depravity was denied. Original sin is not, as the earliest Puritan divines and later Jonathan Edwards taught, an inherited “physical quality,” but rather it is a “wholly voluntary” transgression of the law of God. Where earlier Calvinists believed that humans inherited both a depraved nature and an actual guilt before God through the “federal” headship of Adam, the New Haven Calvinists believed that people were born only with the potential to sin and thus not accountable for sin until they acted willfully. This theological adjustment had clear implications for the second substantial modification of the New Haven Theology. If people are not born depraved, and in turn not guilty as the progeny of Adam, then infants are born sinless. If infants are born sinless then God does not damn infants. For Lyman Beecher and other Neo-Calvinists, this modification of Calvin’s teaching removed one of the chief intellectual obstacles of Puritan theology. Modified Calvinism was not, claimed Beecher, a repudiation of orthodox theology but rather “the predominant doctrine of the ministers and churches now denominated evangelical.”110

Beecher was only partly correct. Modified Calvinist teaching on human depravity may have been the predominant doctrine of the evangelical churches in the North. In the South, however, modified Calvinism, or New School thinking, as it came to be called, never received widespread acceptance.111 Southern ministers, especially southern Presbyterians, joined a minority of Presbyterians in the North in condemning the
New School doctrine. The New School teaching was considered a threat to “the essential principles of Christianity.” It was also an ominous portent that the “very foundation of society” was in jeopardy.\textsuperscript{112} The gospel, argued the distinguished Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina, was being surrendered “to the same spirit of rationalism which . . . lies at the foundation of modern speculation in relation to the rights of man.”\textsuperscript{113} Charles Hodge, of Princeton Theological Seminary, agreed. New School doctrine, he claimed, led to “anarchical opinions” about the nature of social realities, and evangelicals who held to the teachings of modified Calvinism fell victim to the modern fallacy that “[our] own light is a surer guide than the word of God.”\textsuperscript{114}

Despite attempts to present a united Protestant front, antebellum evangelicals were divided over questions of doctrine and the way doctrinal commitments shaped public opinion about social and political realities. A spirit of missiology and moral reform allowed for the appearance of unity in the midst of growing diversities of opinions regarding the proper interpretation of Scripture and the application of Christian teaching to public life. This appearance of unity was, however, ephemeral, and it quickly evaporated as the northern and southern regions positioned to defend their interests.

Both northern and southern nationalism were predicated on how each region self-consciously exploited the vices of the other. Northern nationalism defined itself in terms of how the North was unlike the South as much as southern nationalism defined the South in terms of how it was unlike the North. Northern evangelicalism played a significant role in helping to construct a positive vision of northern nationalism, one that defined itself as much in terms of what it stood for as what it stood against.\textsuperscript{115}

Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the United States was the only country he had seen where the intimate unity of freedom and religion could peacefully work toward political ends. The unity that Tocqueville detected was, as he also noted, based on a tenuous peace at best. The meanings of both “freedom” and “religion” were contested in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and the notion that they could be amalgamated toward nationalist ends had yet to be fully realized. It would take
four years of armed conflict to achieve that goal. In the decades immediately preceding the outbreak of war, however, northern evangelical leaders were instrumental in helping New England, and the North in general, develop a powerful sectional ideology. Northern evangelical leaders contributed to the process of creating a nationalist ideology by forcefully expressing the idea that despite the regional differences characterizing the country, one factor bound Americans together: the United States was a Christian nation, specifically a Protestant Christian nation, unfettered from the burden of European religious and political history.