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Address communications to the Editor, Erich H. Heintzen, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

The Confessional Church In Frontier America

RICHARD BARDOLPH

Dr. Bardolph is Head of the Department of History at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He was graduated from the University of Illinois and is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and numerous learned and professional societies. An authority on American social history, he is the author of THE NEGRO VANGUARD. He is an active member of Ebenezer Lutheran Church, Greensboro, and of the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations. In 1963 he was sent to Helsinki, Finland, as an official observer to the Fourth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. In its original form the following essay was presented at Concord Theological Seminary, Springfield, on October 15, 1964.

THE familiarity of the common American, circa 1790-1850, with the interior structure of the Christian tradition has been greatly exaggerated by his descendants, who, incidentally, while they count theological literacy a sturdy if antique virtue in their forebears, show no inclination to recover the heritage for themselves. But it may be affirmed with equal authority that the century between did in fact see a marked and fateful deterioration of confessionalism in the American religious community.

This mutation has long fascinated me, in part because brought in its train, I would argue, as profound a shift in the quality of American life as any produced by technological revolution. But this transformation intrigues me even more because it fell my lot to be born in a Dutch immigrant enclave committed to a very strong confessional tradition,¹ and then to witness, as I grew to manhood, its uphill struggle to maintain that church's theological position, its all-encompassing world-view, and its pervasive discipline in the daily lives of its sectaries in an America which had been originally cradled and reared in a religious atmosphere almost perfectly identical with this one. This credo and life philosophy had the allegiance of much of American provincial society in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and in diminishing degrees thereafter, until it receded to live on for the most part only in attenuations and fragments.

The theme still awaits a master historian. I quickly add that I am not that prophet; but I hope I may be acquitted of presumption if I venture to suggest in this brief essay some of the influences in the Young Republic which eroded the old confessional orthodoxies.

I begin with a few definitions and disclaimers. When I speak of "the confessional church," I have in mind those Protestant denomi-

inations which have borne a more or less faithful allegiance to a careful, systematically articulated, and more or less intellectualized formulation of the whole system of Christian belief, which is carefully taught to its constituency by a highly trained clergy. I shall assume that in such confessional churches, as I am using the term, a reasonable familiarity with this corpus of information and doctrine—a sort of theological literacy test—is considered a condition of full membership.

By "frontier America" I intend those sections of the country (and sometimes I shall have in mind the whole nation) in which population was sparse, often of recent arrival, either from farther east or from abroad, where the economic and social order remained as yet somewhat immature and undifferentiated, and in process of evolving into the more complex culture of the larger cities of the seaboard and coastal plain: the regions, in short, where institutions, civil, social, religious, etc., were not yet fully developed, and where a sophisticated tradition had scarcely established itself. I shall be speaking not only of areas in the process of being newly redeemed from forest and prairie; rather, my definition of frontier society, for purposes of this paper, is commodious enough to include also much of rural and small town America, particularly in the century following, roughly, the establishment of the United States under the Constitution in 1789, when we were as a nation in the days of our youth, adolescence, and early maturity.

My purpose will be to suggest and comment upon some of the influences in young America's cultural environment which seem to students of our social and intellectual history to have undermined confessionalism. This is not to deny that there were influences at work, simultaneously, which *supported* confessionalism and helped to sustain a vital and deeply informed Christianity. That phase of religious history, however, lies outside the purview of this essay, for it is concerned only with negative influences, with counter-agents which sapped the creedal tradition.

What follows, then, is a selected and tentative catalog of a few of the forces that weakened the confessional faith of our fathers. Let me add that I am fully aware that some of the influences and tendencies here described were opposites intrinsically. But, opposites though they may have been in the immediate direction of their thrust, they did not cancel each other, but in fact contributed eventually to common consequences. It must be admitted too that a particular influence affected particular individuals and groups in diverse ways. The same impulse may impel two different people in divergent directions; a hardship that crushes one man nerves another.

A pressure to conformity, for example, makes some men conform; in others it evokes outspoken dissent. And again, historians are persuaded that the frontier social climate bred, at the same time, pressures both toward conformity and toward an assertive individualism. Antagonistic though these two frontier-bred traits were,

both converged ultimately to the same result so far as confessionism was concerned. Presumably no individual frontiersman at one and the same time turned into a sheeplike conformita and a fiercely independent maverick; but the evidence does in the inference that both of these traits were fostered by the conditions of early American life, and that both proved in time inimic to certain orthodoxies.

I impose one further check upon this paper's ambition by bringing out of the analysis various aspects of the decline of confessionism which seem at least in part to have derived from a different set of circumstances from those to which we here address ourselves. Little if anything will be said of the kinds of apostasy that were traceable to Deistic-rationalism, skepticism, the spirit of unitarism and universalism, and so-called higher criticism, to scientific and other similar vogues which flourished in spite, rather than because, of frontier circumstances. It was, as I conceive, movements like these that spawned the weakening of the sin concept, the tenuation of the doctrine of the atonement, the blurring of belief in immortality, and the retreat—now faltering, now headlong—from belief in the divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the veritable resurrection of the dead, the infallibility and inerrancy of Bible, and the like. These, of course, define a far more catastrophe falling away from the old orthodoxy than do the deviations from confessionism which this essay singles out. But it is the latter, not the former, that are our subject; and we confine ourselves to the influences in the early American context, which eroded the creeds and accelerated the drift *away from* a rationally elaborated dogma and an intellectualized theology painstakingly mined from the Scriptures, and *toward* a species of generalized Protestantism increasingly content with least common denominators; *toward* a so-called "simple gospel;" *toward* a laborious avoidance of worldliness; a predilection that shades off easily, at least in some quarters, something akin to a system of salvation by character, sanctimonious religiosity, and self-mortification.

I

To begin with, considerable weight must be assigned to America's predilection for conformity, a propensity which has been commented upon by students of the American psyche from Revolutionary times to our own day. Perhaps this trait has been most perceptively described and accounted for by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835. He noted then, as many still point out, that in America the way of the dissident is hard. More than any other society in the western world, we have small patience with the eccentric, the *rara avis*.

Our record of dealing with dissent is singularly poor. We expect people to conform, and nothing intrigued de Tocqueville quite so much as this American susceptibility to the "tyranny of majority."

I know of no country [he said] in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. . . . The power of the majority surpasses all the power with which we are acquainted in Europe. . . . The most absolute monarchs in Europe cannot prevent certain opinions hostile to their authority. . . . It is not so in America. . . . In the United States, the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own.³

In America a man who is different is a "character"; let him show an unwonted venturesomeness or deviation in clothing, some singularity in social philosophy or in recreational tastes, and he promptly encounters his community's censorious frown. Nowhere is there a greater propensity for "groupthink."

Tocqueville ascribed this extraordinary trait to the country's strong belief in equality and popular sovereignty. When the community's consensus upon a matter has been determined, we close ranks and insist on everyone's allegiance. In uncritical deference to the principle *vox populi, vox dei*, we count noses when we think it time to settle a point. Until the consensus is reached discussion and private idiosyncrasy are indulged; but once the majority mind is made up the tyranny of the majority settles upon the community. Majoritarianism, as dangerous to the free mind and the autonomous will as autocracy, is then, paradoxically, the fruit of an excess of democracy.

Historians and sociologists have also remarked upon the pressures to conformity that are exerted by the immensely variegated, pluralistic design of our culture, derived, as it is, from a bewildering proliferation of antecedents.⁴ The apprehension that so many diversities in detail, so many potentially centrifugal tendencies, may get dangerously out of hand in too permissive a climate constrains us to insist upon fidelity to consensus on those points upon which the community has chosen to pronounce. It has, so runs the argument, engendered a pathological obsession with deviants, a morbid fear of the novel, a loyalty-fetish that borders upon psychosis. Perhaps Washington himself was saying just this when, as his army faced a crucial test, he ordered "Let none but Americans stand guard tonight."

A special instance of America's surrender to conformitarianism was probed by Louis Hartz in a provocative study of a decade ago.⁵ His analysis of the origins of our obsession with unanimity begins with the premise that American was "born free" while European peoples were obliged to struggle upward to freedom out of feudalism. Because we were exempt from this experience, because we have no genuine and influential feudal classes, we have had no need for a revolutionary socio-political creed. We began as a nation with a liberal unanimity, a broad consensus about the ends

of the state and its proper powers, based upon the rights of and natural law.

Despite a "frustrated Hamiltonianism and a spurious Southern aristocracy that did not even believe in itself," we have a tradition of consensus and unanimity. Such competing blocs, factions, and parties as we have, have always had far more in common than in controversy. These antecedents atrophied the sophistical impulse, says Hartz, and created a monolithic, communal moral absolutism as it stifled the instinct of dissent. So far as public philosophy is concerned, there has been no major opposition but only an unquestioned and absolute Lockean liberalism which has rendered us incapable of understanding Europe's conflicts between conservatives, liberals, socialists, totalitarians—whose competitions were, after all, a response to an environment whose hallmark was the struggle to shake off feudalism and its vestigial survivals.⁶

We still shrink from controversy and significant public debate. One thinks also, in this connection, of the elaborate efforts of radio, television, and the press to avoid offending anybody. Controversial movies though not banned are boycotted, and radio networks have been known to discourage the airing of songs like "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," for fear of offending the cigarette manufacturers, "The Old Oaken Bucket" lest it encourage a vogue of drinking water instead of the beverages that big advertisers hawk in the commercials.⁷ Our political campaigns are candidate-oriented rather than issue-oriented, and in our electoral contests the parties, so far as philosophies are concerned, rarely offer the voter more than a choice between tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum.⁸

Now this habit of group-think and the avoidance of controversy sustains majority ideology, while it smothers speculation and debate that require men to stand apart and be a separate people. It sustains the outlines of confessional loyalty precisely because it is so much easier, indeed, so much more *American*, to minimize differences.

II

Another notable American characteristic which has excited comment from America-watchers from Tocqueville to the present is Arthur M. Schlesinger (see the latter's charming essay, "Biography of a Nation of Joiners")⁹ is our proclivity for forming associations. It was Will Rogers, I think, who suggested that two Americans scarcely pass in the streets without calling a meeting to order and electing a chairman. There is in the United States, said Tocqueville, "no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society."¹⁰

A mere listing of the organizations registered with the Congress of the United States in obedience to the Lobbying Act of 1946 strongly supports Tocqueville's impression that we have associations for every conceivable object.¹¹ It will come as no surprise to students of the American temper that there is a society for

unites folk who were brought up on McGuffey's Readers, and even The Blizzard Men of 1887 which holds in mystic communion those who survived that cataclysm.

While this may seem to contradict the bent for conformity, it is more likely another of those paradoxes which, in Chesterton's happy phrase, exhibits truth standing on its head to attract attention. The "joiner," perhaps, is only a timorous maverick, surprised and somewhat embarrassed by his syncretism, who seeks the shelter that companionship affords and the safety that comes of running with the herd.

This readiness to form new splinter groups, this quest for organized affiliation with comrades in idiosyncrasy, has multiplied sects at the expense of the big confessional church bodies. It has raided their membership and subtly influenced them to soften their affirmations. People who agree with older established groups on ninety percent and disagree on, say, ten per cent of their idea systems, will not infrequently form an association founded on the ten per cent deviation. This sort of atomization accounts in no small part for the fact that we have at the moment nearly 250 Protestant denominations.

It may well be doubted that there is any real contradiction between the over-arching conformitarianism on the one hand and the proliferation of sects on the other. Do not the latter arise precisely because of the tradition of unanimity and of hostility to deviation? When differences over a minor fraction of an otherwise wholly shared tradition arise, the tensions of living together in one household become too great. The dissident leaves the paternal roof—often with little parental remonstrance and seeks others with whom he can form a new society grounded upon a consensus that is nearer to one hundred percent. But, even if, as may be argued, this propensity runs counter to conformitarianism, it was evidently nourished by the tradition of frontier individualism and revolt against authority, and produced, in not a few cases, the same result so far as confessionalism is concerned.

III

Frontier society is, by definition, characterized by thinly settled communities, and wide dispersion of the population into the hinterland. The disastrous implications of such a demographic pattern for the preservation of a stable orthodoxy exhibited itself even in pre-eighteenth century New England, when the drift of citizens out of the village limits and into the surrounding countryside to take up individual farms undermined the authority of what Professor Thomas J. Wertenbaker has called the "Puritan Oligarchy." Once out of the immediate and continuous reach of their learned clergy, the erstwhile saints of the Wilderness Zion gradually let go of their carefully indoctrinated confessionalism.¹² And then as successive frontiers carried the edge of settlement Westward and Southward the deterioration was further hastened by the appalling

illiteracy that persisted in pioneer, rural, and small town America for generations.¹³

The limited fellowship of kindered minds that sparsely settled America afforded forced pioneer folk to be satisfied with associating with other Christians without regard to denomination, and that exclusive association with Presbyterians, or Dutch Reform or Lutherans, or Congregationalists was out of the question. What happened then to the old primacy of the Westminster Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, or the Cambridge Platform can be readily imagined. With this went also utter inability to support more than one (or even *one*) local church with its own trained clergyman. Wide areas were wholly unchurch while others were served (as under the Plan of Union) by rival denominations operating under a theological truce.¹⁴ With so few exceptions, the educated clergy avoided assignment to frontier parishes, and in any case, there were simply not enough of them to go around. The gap was filled, when it was filled at all, by unlettered exhorters and evangelists, who rushed boldly into the awesome responsibility of rightly dividing the word of truth, excusing their want of theology with the boast that they preached only a simple gospel. In such a climate dogma is minimized and even suspect, and emotional "activism" displaces the old creedal preoccupations.¹⁵

The thinness of the population compelled the submergence of difference, in favor of agreement around least common denominators. It doomed sectarian witness in the interests of peaceful existence—indeed, of Christian love, so that, ironically, orthodox faiths were weakened by the very ethic that they proclaimed. Once entered upon this process of compromise, a community of Christians drifted irreversibly into pallid non-controversial consensus. Perhaps this was necessary; the need for basic, emergency salvation on this shockingly wicked frontier was so insistent that denominational divisions divided up the territory and cooperated rather than competed, both foreign and home missionary endeavor. Working together for pressing ends, the brethren were induced to blur their doctrinal differences, and to confine their exhortations to the simplest outlines of the gospel. Contrary to legend, Americans in the social climate in the backwoods, in the rural interior, in the small towns were lonely, emotionally starved, workworn, and bored. Life expectancy was incredibly low by modern standards. For the short route of escape countryfolk and frontiersmen turned to intoxication of one sort or another, whethered bottled, spiritual, or both. Many found that the void could be filled and the aches assuaged by excitingly emotional religion.¹⁶

The camp meeting excesses are too familiar to require comment here. The rich cycle (in some cases endlessly repeated) of redemption, backsliding, repentance, and delicious reconciliation—the prodigal made his shouting return to the fold was far more satisfying than metaphysical musings and carefully rehearsed professions of divine predestination, irresistible grace, and the perseverance

the saints. There was, one senses, an obsession with ecstasy, a sort of spiritual eroticism, which slid easily into frank anti-intellectualism. These sentiments vibrated in unison with the contemporaneous strains of romanticism on the frontier, especially in the generation before the Civil War, when the stress was on the flow of emotions, on sentimentality, on the heart rather than the head, on enthusiasm and one's inner promptings, on the warmer passions rather than corpse-cold dialectics. Emerson and Jackson and Peter Cartwright were, in most respects, poles apart, but on the romantic and sentimental idealism of the age, they stood on common ground.¹⁷

The coonskin frontier democracy reacted stiffly against the elitism of Calvinism—indeed, against the aura of exclusivity that hung over all the formal, tightly reasoned theologies. An exciting, if cheap, and sensational, whosoever-will-ism was far more congenial to the optimistic, romantic, democratic, libertarian, equalitarian frontier mind. Besides, it gave men a greater sense of participation in the salvation transaction and conferred upon enthusiastic, emotional and unlearned sects like the Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostal cults a decided advantage in the competition for adherents. The more sedate orthodox bodies (like the Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Congregationalists) in sheer self defense, yielded, here a little and there a little, to the spirit and tactics of their less elegant rivals.

The simple, more regulatory religions seemed to plain folk to be more efficacious. One is reminded of the preference of simple-minded folk everywhere for inconvenient remedies; they seek out a physician who will insist upon one's doing this and giving up that. And if he prescribes foul-tasting, evil-smelling nostrums, faith in his wizardry mounts still higher.

Enthusiastic sects, by the way, even in the mid-twentieth century, still show a far higher rate of growth than do the stater religions. While it cannot be assumed that all small and enthusiastic sects represent a retreat from confessionalism, it would, nevertheless be easy to sustain the proposition that the increments enjoyed by these splinter groups are typically accounted for by simplicism and enthusiasm rather than by a theological maturation that weans these sectaries from their older allegiances. These lesser sects have drawn their membership most heavily from rural folk, the urban poor, the underprivileged and comparatively unschooled and uncultivated environments. And when such sects grow more sedate and "respectable" with age, they are replaced by others with the same initial pentecostal and millennialist fervors.

The ingenuous preference for a "hard religion" which sternly requires deprivations and mortifications of the flesh, operated powerfully to the advantage of Baptist and Methodists, and other more impassioned communions, in which an obsession with the evils of smoking, drinking, dancing, cardplaying, and other works of the devil have occupied the minds of the pious far more than have the great positive declarations of the Protestant tradition. The Baptists,

for example, benefitted incalculably from the fact that they put convert to far greater inconvenience than did the non-immersion sprinkling denominations. I read recently of an English traveler in America who witnessed very early in the nineteenth century mass baptism in a Rhode Island river in January when the temperature was ten degrees below zero. The ice, a foot thick, was broken through, and the opening could be maintained only by unrelenting agitation of the waters with staves, while the pastor and the converts stood in the icy stream for some ten minutes. To the zealot it was a hard religion and, beyond cavil, a good one.¹⁸

When anxious penitents were whipped on by untrained preachers, whose only qualification was that they had the call—or “sperritt,” to use the contemporary locution—it is scarcely to be wondered at that frontier folk should hear gladly these men so close to themselves. The frontier seemed to need nothing so much as plain honest preaching, and it is not inconceivable that a thorough education might well diminish an exhorter’s capacity to reach the hearts of his auditors. From this view it was but a short step to a frank rejection of learned preacher, and (in the tradition of romanticism everywhere) a distrust of intellect and rationality itself.

Meanwhile there were influences at work in urban America where industrialism was heralding a new economic dispensation. By the 1830’s, middle class congregations showed a notable preference for the sort of preacher who knew how to appreciate the spirit of Christian materialism and who recognized that the Almighty wanted His children to make money and rejoice in it. And because the older orthodoxy seemed to make a virtue of poverty and to harbor about it the faint odor of other-worldliness and asceticism, it began to fall into disrepute, and pastors shifted the emphasis in their sermons away from themes that were proving increasingly more unacceptable to these parishioners than they had been to their fathers.

IV

A bustling, acquisitive society from the beginning, Americans were preoccupied with the daily task of subduing the wilderness and building their national plant. The sheer magnitude of the enterprise deferred the maturing of artistic and other non-material interests, and this, along with the habit of material success, distracted the hustling young nation’s attention from intellectual and spiritual concerns. Absorbed with the here and now, less and less given to philosophical and religious introspection, they reserved their highest honors for the self-made man,¹⁹ who, as one wit has put it, has an incorrigible bent for worshipping his maker. Especially in the new but growing areas where economic opportunity offered exciting prospects was this a factor of real importance, though less so on the frontier. In any case, the hustling economic tempo of the country reinforced the preference for action rather than thought. The spirit of worldly optimism that it engendered was steadily sustained and

the very real rewards which followed upon exertion and which, like ever-widening ripples in a pond, raised still further the level of effort and expectation—and rewards. Such an environment, as foreign visitors were quick to observe, produced a nation of boastful, resourceful, optimistic, versatile men, always on the move, like mice in oxygen. Even in repose, as one observer noted, this trait persisted, for the hardworking American, when a summer's day was done, took to his front porch and the rocking chair, to rack up some more mileage. Such an ethos put a premium on hard work and tangible results while it boded ill for the arts and letters, for theology, and even for entertainment.

More specific in its influence has been the fact of our immigrant past, and this is no less true of the country's religious development than of other aspects of the national experience.²⁰ An immigrant, frontier people have a disproportionately large fraction of folk with shallow religious roots, because people with strong religious convictions and intense loyalty to particular theological formulations do not migrate in considerable numbers. American myth-makers have, to be sure, peopled our colonies and early commonwealths with a folk aflame with religious zeal. Something less than that comes closer to the truth. Massachusetts Bay was far more a fishing and trading venture than a Wilderness Zion; Virginia was scarcely notable for its piety; and even concerning saintly Plymouth it must be said that the 102 pilgrims who made the crossing in the *Mayflower* numbered only thirty-five who were members of the old Scrooby congregation.²¹ And whatever may be said of the first waves of settlers—some of whom did most certainly come over for reasons of religious scruple—religious reasons for migration to America from England (in the case of others the reason had never been important) disappeared after 1688. Migrants were, for the most part, not deeply rooted in a particular confession. Such folk stayed in Europe; or if they crossed the sea, were drawn to the larger seaboard settlements, where churches of their faith had been firmly established. They did not seek out the forested hinterland or the lonely prairies and plains.

Some notice should be taken of another consideration. During the first two centuries of the American experience a Protestant in Europe was really a *protestant*, a member of a militant group of naysayers. Not so in the New World, for here Protestants were from the beginning the majority group with no need of maintaining their position stoutly against popery or other formidable adversaries. The militancy of their forebears was forgotten, replaced now by a comfortable complacency which rendered unnecessary the vigorous affirmations and reaffirmations that are called forth in a less sheltered community.

Such energetic assertion as there was took instead the form of the primitivism to which I alluded earlier. It came especially in time of volcanic revivals, when, though preachers paid their respects to the changeless verities of the Christian faith, they did it, as Ar-

thus K. Moore has written, "in ways to summon up elemental sponges."

The mass of pulsating, ecstatic humanity reacted according to archetypal patterns rather than conventional form. The passion sublimated at the center apparently precipitated on the perimeter into frank eroticism, to judge from the after effects and the plentiful supply of corn liquor doubtless sustained the state described by observers as general disorder. . . . Religious enthusiasm, emphasizing the heart rather than the head, necessarily begets anti-intellectualism in some degree. It is in the very nature of things that learning should suffer as a consequence of the revival spirit, which, compounded of faith and feeling, omits rational process from the steps to salvation.

The immigrant past had other implications. Immigrants were not a random sampling of the homeland they leave behind, for immigration is a repudiation, a vote of no confidence in one's native land, a declaration of high expectations in the new land. There is among such folk a higher than normal proportion of venturesome and inventive, industrious strivers, a greater supply of the stuff of which self-made men are fashioned, and a correspondingly smaller patience for the contemplative life.

Notable too was the typical American immigrant's eagerness to become an American with the least possible delay. Indeed, who of us has not heard immigrants disparage as "foreigners" other immigrants of only slightly more recent arrival than themselves? The children, too, in the public school, that great homogenizer of the American melting pot, added further to this pressure, and historians and sociologists have remarked upon the curiosity that the new American is often a more heart-whole American than his townsman of ancient American lineage. The immigrant mentality has usually carried with it an early discarding of all the stigmata of difference; witness the rapid amendment of European survivals in clothing, dress, haircuts, and even in family names. Note the eager assimilation of American slang. It need hardly be added that drawing away from religious singularity is one important aspect of this urge; unwavering adherence to a distinctive religious witness is not.

V

In rural America generally, perhaps because there was as yet no direct exploitation of the common people by other *people*, but rather by drought, "hard times," and other impersonal forces, the individualist tradition long remained at the boil, strongly flavored by voluntarism, intense and assertive independence, and cultural pluralism. It was this mentality, perhaps, that was most quintessentially American; and it was the decay of this Arcadian ideal that led Stephen Vincent Benet to lament the day when the last lone

moonshiner would have bought his radio and the last wild rabbit of a girl be tamed by a mail-order dress.

In the urban environment, the Myth of the American Garden was receding and the shimmering view of the Happy Republic in its sunlit youth was fading upon our sight. Here the pinch of narrowing opportunity, the jostlings and heartless unconcerns of a competitive society, were beginning to be felt, and direct exploitation of man by man was becoming all too real for a people who had hitherto been spared such wounds. It was perhaps natural that a drift toward collective action for the relief of the distressed, and a demand for the socialization of religion should now assert themselves.

The reform impulse had, in fact, been powerfully stimulated in the generation that mounted the American Revolution, when men thought oftener and harder than ever of the responsibility of all to maintain a social order where all had equal access to the pursuit of happiness.²³ Earlier on, the Great Awakening, and later on, the Great Revival, accelerated the movement for a stronger emphasis upon the social obligations of the Christian, and one began to hear that the church should not only comfort the afflicted but also afflict the comfortable. And then as the reform enthusiasms, mainly secular (but prompted in no small degree by religious impulse) of the yeasty 1840's and 1850's burgeoned into wide-ranging reform crusades for immediate societal reconstruction, organized Christianity inevitably caught some of the spirit of the age.²⁴

But the Church soon checked itself, in part because there were those who insisted that social reform lay outside the church's great commission; in part because there were those who objected that the church's—as distinct from individual Christian's—enlistment in organized reform movements would set Christian against Christian and sow discord where the church's duty was to reconcile. And then, as industrialization and urbanization proceeded, and the victims of social and economic injustice became the concern of secular reformers, the reluctance of the great orthodox, conservative denominations—as distinguished from "liberal" churches, which eventually, espoused the "Social Gospel" — to lend their weight to the crusade offended many of the victims of misfortune (and their sympathizers). This ripened by degrees into a reaction against theology and otherworldliness, in favor of a new emphasis upon the social responsibilities of Christianity, a new penchant for religious activism, a growing distrust of dogma and its "pale negations."²⁵

In yet another way the reformist zeal of the second quarter of the nineteenth century injured denominationalism and the historic confessions. Leading churchmen, sensitive to the humanitarian strivings of the time, joined in founding great non-denominational associations like the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, the American Sunday School Union, the Connecticut Society for Reformation of Morals, The American Home Missionary Society, and The American Education Society, all of them (and there were many more) contributing, however unintentionally, to

the blurring of differences that had hitherto separated the denominations.²⁶ Additional impetus was given to this trend by the preaching of the Billy Graham of that day, Charles G. Finney, who proclaimed a plain foresquare gospel that minimized dogma.²⁷ Such influences infused a secular content into religious concerns and wittingly played into the hands of those who, like Octavious Frothingham and the later Robert G. Ingersoll, aspired to make humanitarian democracy the religion of America.²⁸

There was also the circumstance that frontier democracy deep within itself a revolt against authority, a propensity that might sooner or later express itself in defiance against religious no less than other imperatives and beliefs to which the faithful were under obligation to defer. This mood was further fed by the rapidly increasing material well-being of Americans, to say nothing of the crystallization in the American credo of the notion that Americans perform the merely difficult at once but take a little longer for the impossible. Such folk are peculiarly susceptible to the idea of salvation through achievement, and resistant to the doctrine of human depravity.

"Mixed marriage" was another feature of American life that boded ill for denominational purity. One of the partners in such unions perhaps entered the marriage in the expectation of converting the other, or, perhaps, one capitulated to the other's religious affiliation in a romantic gesture of splendid self-abnegation. Either way, the creed of one or both was almost certain to be weakened and their children would deepen the defection. Another solvent was the crossfire to which the older orthodoxies were exposed by the competition of homegrown creeds which showed a remarkable skill in harnessing peculiarly American aspirations and discontent. Spiritualists, Shakers, Millerites, Mormons, Christian Scientists.

There was also the great historical accident of the Civil War. The splitting of the great denominations along sectional lines, long before the political ties between the sections snapped, naturally shifted the hearts and minds of many to the secular concerns that had divided rather than to the older verities that had united them. Sectionalism had, in fact, a long history in American religion. Long before the Revolution, and long thereafter, the interior counties nursed a strong hostility to the seaboard and the older settled areas and not infrequently the antipathy expressed itself in religious rebellion against established forms and ancient religious loyalties which the frontier population associated with their toplofty rivals of the mountains and the coastal plain. Such wedges of separation led to schisms over the merest trifles, so that the aggrieved backwoodsmen might shake off the yoke, real or imagined, of their eastern antagonists.

Here we will conclude, even though we have done little more than suggest some lines for future inquiry. Because this essay is addressed primarily to faculty and students at a theological seminary that is still committed to a sturdy confessionalism, I venture to suggest that because Christendom still reacts powerfully in patterns which took their rise in our nation's past and in the peculiar circum-

stances of our origins, historical studies have much to contribute to the understanding of the human predicament. I may perhaps be pardoned for urging upon future pastors and those who train them, the importance of searching the pages of Christianity's record in America as one means of challenging and sustaining and admonishing them.

FOOTNOTES

1. A Calvinistic theology, as elaborated in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Canons of Dordrecht (1619), and taught by the Christian Reformed Church in America.
2. I am using the English version as translated by Henry Reeve, edited by Francis Bowen, and published in two volumes in 1863 by Sever and Francis, in Cambridge, Mass.
3. The fragments cited here are drawn from Vol. I, 336-337, and Vol. II, 11.
4. See, e.g., Robin M. Williams, Jr., *American Society; a Sociological Interpretation* (New York, 1951), 422-426. Williams observes (p. 423) that "American 'individualism' . . . has consisted mainly of a rejection of the state and impatience with restraints upon economic activity; it has not tended to set the autonomous individual up in rebellion against his social group. In a nation of joiners, individualism tends to be a matter of 'group individualism,' of the particularized behavior of sub-cultures."
5. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955).
6. See George Mowry's review of Hartz's book in the *American Historical Review*, XLI (October, 1955), 140-142.
7. Morris L. Ernst, *The First Freedom* (New York, 1946), 159-160.
8. For a brief statement of this view of American electoral politics by a leading specialist on American political parties, see Austin Ranney, *The Governing of Men* (New York, 1958), 320-322.
9. Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Paths to the Present* (New York, 1949), 23-50. The essay was first published, with documentation, in the *American Historical Review*, L (October, 1944), 1-25.
10. *Democracy in America*, I, 243.
11. E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York, 1942), 25-26.
12. Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *The Puritan Oligarchy; the Founding of American Civilization* (New York, 1947). See especially chapter VII, "More of the World, Less of Heaven."
13. The young state of Illinois may be taken as an example. Before 1840 the state was wretchedly supplied with schools; in some areas there were none at all, and in others only the crudest sort, kept for three or four months a year, by preachers. Much light is thrown upon this facet of frontier America by the collected papers of the American Home Missionary Society, an interdenominational association established in 1826 to evangelize the unchurched and underchurched American interior. This writer has examined these manuscripts in the Illinois Historical Survey, at the University of Illinois.

The Reverend E. G. Howe, writing from Springfield to the Society's corresponding secretary in New York, the Reverend Absalom Peters, on May 23, 1826, reported that he was devoting all his time except Sundays to teaching the bare rudiments of reading, writing, and ciphering to folk in and about Springfield. A shocking number of adults there could not read, he wrote the Reverend M. Bruen in a letter of February 11, 1826, and "at least half the children are growing up in ignor-

- ance." The Reverend John Matthews, writing from Kaskaskia on November 1, 1830, to the Society's home office, declared that in the course of a trip of a hundred and fifty miles he could discover only three schools. In one home where he stopped for breakfast he found the entire household illiterate, and learned that the nearest schoolhouse was eight miles distant. For similar statements in these archives, see Henry Rick, Carrollton, Ill., to Peters, March 16, and December 14, 1831; Enoch Kinsbury, Danville, Ill., to Peters, April 5, 1831; John F. Br. Belleville, Ill., to Peters, August 18, 1834; Theron Baldwin, Jacksonville, Ill., to Peters, December 24, 1834.
14. The most extensive study of the cooperative, interdenominational effort at evangelism, benevolent enterprise, and moral reform in the sparsely settled interior of the country is Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy; the Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1960). But see also Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1939).
 15. See the works of Foster and Goodykoontz, just cited; also, Ernest Sutherland Bates, *American Faith* (New York, 1940), chapter 22: "The Classless Frontier."
 16. Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment; Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis, 1944), chapter 2.
 17. For an introduction to revivalism and the emotionalization of religion on the frontier, see William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Origins, Growth, and Decline* (New York, 1944); the works of T. S. Foster, Ernest Sutherland Bates, and Colin B. Goodykoontz, cited above; Bernard A. Weissbecker, *They Gathered at the River* (Boston, 1958); Jerald C. Brauer, *Protestantism in America* (Philadelphia, 1953), especially pages 102-116; Chas. Albert Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting* (Dallas, 1955); Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District; the Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1950). A monumental work that must be consulted by every student of religion in young America is William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840* (4 volumes, Chicago, 1931-1939). Each volume offers general introductory chapters and a massive collection of documents. Vol. I deals with the Baptists, II with the Presbyterians, III with the Congregationalists, and IV with the Methodists.
 18. Nelson M. Blake, *A History of American Life and Thought* (New York, 1963), 195.
 19. The reader who is interested in this strand of American social history will profit by a reading of Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self Made Man in America; the Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1954).
 20. The immigrant factor in American life is examined in Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted; the Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People* (Boston, 1951); Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940); *idem.*, *The Atlantic Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940); Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America* (New York, 1939); Schlesinger, *Paths to the Present* (cited), chapter 3: "The Role of the Immigrant."
 21. Henry Bamford Parkes, *The American Experience* (Vintage Books edition, New York, 1959), 27. See also Daniel J. Boorstin, *The American Colonial Experience* (Vintage Books edition, New York, 1964), for a fresh interpretation of religion in early America.
 22. Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind* (McGraw-Hill paperback edition, New York, 1963), 230-231.
 23. Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 5-11; John Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, N. J., 1919).
 24. See T. L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-nineteenth century America* (Nashville, 1957); Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, passim.

- Henry Farnham May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York, 1949); Aaron I. Abell, *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism, 1865-1900* (Cambridge, 1943).
25. Foster, *Errand of Mercy*, *passim*; Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, *passim*.
 26. See the works of Foster and Smith, just mentioned; also, Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 32, 255; John Allen Krout and Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Completion of Independence, 1790-1830* (New York, 1944), 261.
 27. William Gerald McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism; Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959).
 28. See Ralph H. Gabriel's perceptive essay, "The Religion of Humanity," in his *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (second edition, New York, 1956), chapter 15.
 29. Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, chapters 4, 5, and 7; Marguerite Fellows Melcher, *The Shaker Adventure* (Princeton, N. J., 1941); Nels Anderson, *Desert Saints; the Mormon Frontier in Utah* (Chicago, 1942).
 30. Brauer, *Protestantism in America*, chapter 11, "Slavery and Schisms," 168-184; William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religions in America* (New York, 1930), chapters 16-20.