Religion

Christianity has therefore retained a stronghold on the public mind in America; and I would more particularly remark, that its sway is not only that of a philosophical doctrine which has been adopted upon inquiry, but of a religion which is believed without discussion. In the United States, Christian sects are infinitely diversified and perpetually modified; but Christianity itself is an established and irresistible fact, which no one undertakes either to attack or to defend.

Tocqueville, Democracy in America

The whole people appear to be divided into an almost endless variety of religious factions, and I was told, that to be well received in society, it was necessary to declare yourself as belonging to some one of these. Let your acknowledged belief be what it may, you are said to be not a Christian, unless you attach yourself to a particular congregation.

Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans

The story of religion in the West has usually been told in terms of circuit riders, revivals, and camp meetings. According to some popular accounts, pioneer religious experience was largely a matter of “jerks” and “holy whines,” of explosive conversions, hysterical women, and periodic carousals in canebrakes. Without denying that all these flamboyant manifestations characterized the religious behavior in many western areas, it is my purpose in this chapter to describe the less-familiar role of religion in a part of the urban West.

In this discussion of the place of religion in Cincinnati, it is important that the reader set aside most of his stereotyped notions about “frontier” re-
ligion. As I have said before, the people who settled in Cincinnati were not a crowd of emotionally starved backwoodsmen. Although the riffraff had come with the pious, the majority of the population, as the welter of sects and denominations clearly testify, were a churchgoing if not a spiritual people. All of the principal faiths were represented. Income and social position probably determined the choice of congregation, in many cases, rather than doctrinal scruples. To be a Presbyterian might mean that the communicant worshipped in “the handsomest building west of the Alleghenies” or that he belonged to a high social bracket. The Episcopalians, “that high sailin’, high falutin’ sect,” and the Unitarians also ranked well up in the social hierarchy. Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Jews, Campbellites, and the lesser sects, composed for the most part of artisans, mechanics, and petty tradesmen, occupied the lower rungs. Clearly the religious atmosphere in Cincinnati hardly resembled that of the more sparsely settled rural districts.

The failure to distinguish between the urban and the rural West created many misconceptions in the East. Easterners tended to look upon the trans-Allegheny country as one vast tract of wilderness settled by an amorphous mass of pioneers. To judge by their recorded impressions, New England ministers setting out for the forest outposts of Louisville and Cincinnati might have been traveling to Tibet. The amazement of visitors upon discovering the extent of western amenities in the West is expressed again and again.

Even though Cincinnati itself was recognized by some as a superior, more cultivated oasis in the desert of infidelity, apprehensive ministers in the East considered all sections of the western country as fields for missionary endeavor. “We know that the emigrants to the west,” Tocqueville was told, “are somewhat leaving behind the religious habits of their fathers. This spectacle fills us with lively fear, and we are so convinced of the political danger of letting an irreligious society establish itself near us, that we spend enormous

1. See F. L. Paxson, History of the American Frontier, 1763–1897 (Boston and New York, 1924), 115–18. F. J. Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920), 165. I find little evidence to support the view that religion in Cincinnati was any more evangelical than in the eastern cities, in spite of Mrs. Trollope's acid descriptions. Cincinnati's leading minister approved of camp meetings only in poorer localities where preaching was rare. Otherwise he felt that they stimulated disorder, intemperance, and impiety. Conversions at camp meetings, he felt, seldom endured. Nor do I believe organized religion was a democratic force in the Queen City. Indeed, as this chapter will show, the most powerful denomination tended to be undemocratic and socially restrictive although this fact does not conform to the usual views about western religion.
sums to aid westerners in establishing schools and churches. Many New England families are going to settle in the valley of the Mississippi solely to form a nucleus of religious men.”

2 If the “western part of the empire would be the glory of America for the poor and the pious,” as Reverend Francis Asbury predicted, then New England virtue must be disseminated throughout the land.

The missionary-minded in Boston, whose knowledge of western society was about as accurate as their geography, learned that “religion had no strong hold upon the affections of the people” in the West and that the majority of western males were free-thinkers. None other than Judge Joseph Story had corroborated this alarming fact, and Story had been informed by reliable correspondents. The reports of clergymen working in the dangerous areas only confirmed eastern fears. The West was filled with an uneducated mass. Political demagogues, by artfully controlling “the uninformed and disposable suffrage of our balanced elections,” could “overrule the intelligence, and virtue, and property of the nation, for the purposes of ambition, and the ruin of the country.” It would require the united actions of all good Christians, East and West, if the forces of evil were to be confounded and truth made to prevail.

Most of this apprehension, to be sure, was unwarranted, unless we assume that Jacksonianism was the subversive force referred to. Timothy Flint, who as a missionary had traveled extensively in the western country, scotched the notion of a sinful West crying for eastern guidance. But however godless their neighbors, the people of Cincinnati believed in the piety and morality of their own city and resented the imputations of depravity and ignorance made by uninformed easterners. Those who observed firsthand discovered that the “Christian virtues” were not “singularities in this town.” Congregations behaved with “attention and gravity,” and many persons attended church services three times a day. Visitors to the Queen City seem to have been

7. Timothy Flint, *Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* . . . (Cincinnati, 1828), 217–18.
properly edified by the number and beauty of the churches. They had only to note the frequency of religious lectures and debates and the many projects organized under church leadership to recognize the prestige and importance of the church in civic life. During the twenties and thirties Cincinnati needed no special spiritual assistance from eastern missionary societies. From the earliest days scores of ministers residing there had pointed the way to salvation.

The city of course had its free-thinkers, deists, and atheists, its "Fanny Wright–Robert Owen–Tom Paine" materialists, but the majority of citizens assumed the truth of general Christian principles as set forth by their particular sect or denomination. Christianity in America, as Tocqueville said, was "an established and irresistible fact." Robert Owen's notorious attempt to subvert Christian doctrines by enunciating his "twelve fundamental laws" had no effect on the Cincinnati fundamentalists. Owen debated Alexander Campbell in Cincinnati for nine successive days before audiences of literally thousands, but the wily Campbell knew that Mr. Owen, benign and scholarly, could do little more than shock his listeners. How could Owen refute Christianity when Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, and Condorcet had failed? At the end of the debate Campbell asked everyone in the audience who believed in Christ to stand up; all but three complied.

It would have been extremely unwise, as Owen later observed, for anyone who valued his social and business reputation to have remained seated after Campbell made his request. But even if Campbell resorted to trickery, it seems that the general acquiescence in the Christian doctrine resulted less from direct social compulsion than from the typical uninquiring attitude of a people content to accept philosophical and moral theories on "public trust." Even religion held sway in America "less as a doctrine of revelation than as a commonly held opinion."

This seemingly automatic acceptance of religious truths enforced by public opinion, almost a religion itself, could be explained or defended on more rational grounds. An un-Christian democracy was a contradiction in terms.

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Francis Bowen (Cambridge, 1864), II, 11. This casual acceptance of inherited and traditional beliefs by the Cincinnatians did not mean, of course, that they were stupidly acquiescent or cow-like. They argued endlessly over theological niceties, but they seldom questioned religion itself.
Every churchgoing citizen would have agreed that a free people are a religious people, that materialism and atheism would paralyze the American spirit. This is what Lyman Beecher meant by “withering scepticism.” Beecher had no difficulty in equating the Old Testament with liberty and equality, and idolatry with “the march of despotism and lust.” The Ten Commandments, he told the mechanics of Cincinnati, give the people “as much personal liberty as ever was or can be combined with a permanent and efficient national government.” He drew an interesting if not too convincing parallel between the tribes of Israel and the citizens of the United States and recommended the Bible to the mechanics as the greatest safeguard to liberty.14

Religion and the Bible were accepted as indispensable to a republican government, but public opinion sharply limited the extent of church participation in secular affairs. Men and women who remembered the days of established churches were still living in Cincinnati. No one would openly have advocated the union of church and state, and public censure was quick and unequivocating when ministers overstepped their prerogatives. “All that Religion can ask of Politics,” said William Henry Harrison, “all that it can safely accept is, to be let alone.”15 The rule of church and state spelled tyranny, tyranny from which the bedeviled nations of Europe were then extricating themselves. Even such an orthodox Presbyterian as Joshua Wilson, dean of the most powerful denomination in the city, warned against the unwarranted intrusion of the church into civil matters:

The Church then, which is the kingdom of Christ set up amongst men, bears her testimony against oppression, against Sabbath-breaking, against transgression of the seventh commandment; with as much freedom and force as she does against intemperance, theft, disobedience to parents, or any other thing forbidden by the word of God. But the true Church of Christ will not, nay, she dare not, under the laws and example of her Head, interfere with the civil institutions of the United States. Her members, whether bond or free, must submit to “the higher powers.” All the Church has a right to exact of her members is the faithful discharge of relative duties.16

15. W. H. Harrison, Address . . . Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1833 at Cheviot, Green Township, Hamilton County, Ohio (Cincinnati, 1833), 5–6.
16. Joshua Wilson, Relation and Duties of Servants and Masters (Cincinnati, 1839), 32.
Most clergymen recognized the bounds public opinion placed on their authority and were disinclined, as Tocqueville recognized, "to run counter to the ideas which generally prevail, or to the permanent interests which exist in the mass of the people." It would be easy, however, to underestimate the amount of clerical participation in secular affairs. The clergyman was a man of influence. He no longer, it is true, enjoyed the prestige which had surrounded the ministerial class of the last two centuries, but he still retained vestiges of his past authority. Not infrequently, Cincinnati ministers felt strong enough to overstep the invisible boundary and risk public hostility.

One example will illustrate the kind of religious "finagling" occasionally attempted by clerical pressure groups. Since 1811, Presbyterians all over the country had been urging the abolition of Sunday mail service. What became known as the Christian Party kept up the campaign, and in the year 1829 Cincinnati split wide open on the question. A militant and influential Presbyterian nucleus upheld the observation of the Sabbath "as one of the fundamental pillars of civilization and refinement." Opposing them were the "free press moral philosophers," members of rival denominations, and a host of businessmen who ordinarily respected religious opinion but who now protested against the unnecessary infringement on their private affairs. Many had already become alarmed at what they considered to be excessive Presbyterian participation in city life; many even suspected the Presbyterians of working toward an established church.

No religious group in Cincinnati could overcome this opposition, and the Presbyterians finally lost out. Their motives were immediately questioned. The "master spirits" of the plan, it was charged, had no interest in the pretended demoralizing effects of Sunday Mail travelling but were bent on "fastening upon the country a national ecclesiastical establishment." The attempt of the Presbyterians to impose their "horrible Calvinistic creed" upon a duped people was regarded as "a project worthy of the dark ages." Newspapers warned them not to interfere in politics, and most of the influential citizens made it clear that they considered the position of the Presbyte-

17. Tocqueville, II, 30.
rians as ultimately dangerous to civil and religious liberty. A report by the National Committee on Post Offices and Roads finally ruled against the proposed Sunday mail restrictions, and the controversy died down. But Cincinnati citizens, in administering a rebuke to the most powerful denomination in the city, plainly indicated their will: let the church confine itself to religious subjects.

The ministers of Cincinnati were usually so preoccupied with their immediate tasks and responsibilities that they had little time for excursions into political affairs. But those who did not want to submerge themselves completely in the round of parish duties and who liked excitement could satisfy their cravings by engaging in the various sectarian battles being waged continually throughout this period. Even those who had no wish to become embroiled in acrimonious debate sometimes felt obliged to repel the assaults of hostile denominations. No sect could remain completely aloof.

A detailed recording of every religious controversy which occurred in Cincinnati between 1819 and 1838 would be repetitious and unnecessary. The immediate issues themselves are no longer important. Only the deeper intellectual and social implications need concern us here. In order to simplify the discussion, I shall pay particular attention to the two denominations most frequently engaged in sectarian warfare, the Presbyterians and the Catholics. The latter were assailed by virtually every Protestant sect; the former, at one time or another, clashed with most of the religious groups in the city. The story of religious controversy in Cincinnati might well begin, therefore, with a brief account of the Presbyterians and the Catholics.

The Presbyterians had always been the largest and most influential denomination in Cincinnati, as well as the most indiscriminately militant. Parishioners of their six churches in 1832 included men and women equal in wealth and position to the communicants of the swanky Unitarian and Episcopal societies. But there were congregations of this denomination composed of mechanics and tradesmen, the same class from which the Methodists and Baptists were usually recruited. Presbyterian leaders, particularly those of the “old school,” tended to be hard, unamiable men whose minds, said Harriet Beecher, had “been brought up in a catechism treadmill,” who never said “Confession of Faith” without taking off their hats, and

22. CCLG, Dec. 12, 1829; Mar. 27, 1830.
who ranked the Bible as “the next best book to the Catechism.” They
followed the advice of their patriarch, Joshua Wilson, to “come out boldly
and smite your assailants with the weapons of truth, and righteousness,”
and they devoutly believed in the infallibility of their creed. The Presbyteri-
ans fiercely opposed all anti-Trinitarian religions, but they reserved their
heavy fire for the hated Romanists.

In their crusade against the “papish plot” to destroy American institutions
and place the halter of the “triple tyrant” upon the necks of American
freemen, the Presbyterians received the enthusiastic support of the Method-
ists, Baptists, and Episcopalians, but these denominations left the war
against liberalism in the capable hands of the Presbyterians. As a recent
historian of Kentucky has pointed out, the Episcopalians never attained the
prestige in the Middle West to combat deism or Unitarianism or “Atheism”
(they were considered the same thing), and the Methodists and Baptists
throughout this period still concentrated on converting the religiously indif-
ferent. Presbyterianism, with its intellectual tradition and learned clergy,
could meet the onslaughts of a sophisticated infidel or a sly papist with more
success than untutored Methodist and Baptist ministers. In Cincinnati it was
always the Presbyterians who smelled gigantic conspiracies and publicized
sensational exposures.

The Catholics, composed mainly of working-class people, had gained a
foothold in the Queen City in 1818. By 1838 they probably numbered less
than a third of the population. After weathering the initial shocks of distrust,
ignorance, and obloquy, they began to build modest churches and establish
their own schools. In 1831 they founded the Catholic Telegraph to disseminate
“correct” information about Catholics and answer their opponents in “a firm
and temperate manner.”

Catholic leaders faced an almost insuperable problem. They had to over-
come a prejudice deeply ingrained in the American past, a prejudice com-
pounded of fear and ignorance but based on political as well as on doctrinal
grounds. The western Protestant linked Catholicism not only with the sinis-

23. Lyman Beecher, Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher, ed. Charles
26. E. Bernhard, Travels Through North America during the years 1825 and 1826 (Phila-
delphia, 1828), II, 137–38.
27. Catholic Telegraph I (1831): 47.
ter rites of the Inquisition but also with absolutism and autocracy. He believed quite literally that the Catholics worshipped pictures and candlesticks in the church, that priests were paid for absolving sins, and that Catholicism denied the doctrine of future rewards and punishments. Most important, he believed that the Catholics swore political allegiance to the Pope.28

The charge of un-Americanism, the most serious accusation leveled against the Catholics, provided the one issue on which all Protestant denominations could unite. It will be remembered that the Protestant ministers in Cincinnati identified the Bible with democracy. The editors of the Catholic Telegraph, on the other hand, dared to malign the Holy Writ in this fashion:

Written in a language, which has ceased to be the vehicle of familiar intercourse, its truths are often veiled in the necessary obscurity of an obsolete idiom: its language is enlivened by all the animation of oriental metaphor, and obscured by the strong influence of exotic customs. Yet this is the book, which, it is confidently asserted, is adapted to persons of every age and condition.29

In opposing the introduction of Bible teaching in the public schools, the Catholics, it was felt, clearly demonstrated their anti-democratic position.

When the Presbyterians preached against the iniquities of popery, therefore, they believed they were subverting those very forces which, if left unchecked, would eventually destroy civil liberties. Consequently, they published their anti-Catholic tirades and retold hoary atrocity stories about the slaughtering of the Albigenses and Waldenses.30 More than any other denomination, they won the hatred of the Catholic leaders. "These Presbyterians . . . are wicked as vipers," a Cincinnati priest complained to Tocqueville; "you crush their heads and they rise on their tails."31

The editors of the Catholic Telegraph, militant, crusading, and intelligent, found it difficult to maintain the "firm and temperate manner" which distinguished the first numbers of the paper. Then they had resorted to irony rather than billingsgate. They had called the Presbyterian phrase "Protestant America" a solecism, "one of those quaint unconstitutional terms upon which the guardians of our independence have placed their vote,"32 and they had tried suavely and urbanely to convince suspicious Protestants that the

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., I (1831): 46.
30. Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette, Sept. 23, 1825.
31. Pierson, Tocqueville, 292.
32. CT I (1831): 23.
Catholic hierarchy had no secret designs upon democracy. It was harder, however, to preserve their even tone when goaded by the insulting gibes of the Presbyterians. James Ignatius Mullen, first editor of the Catholic Telegraph, became as intemperate as any of his persecutors. Mullen, described by Tocqueville as a man not unfriendly to civil liberty "but little fond of democratic government by the masses of the people,"\(^{33}\) conducted his paper brilliantly. But neither he nor his friends could stifle the ever-increasing hostility to Catholics.

By the 1830s the spirit of nativism spreading through the entire country became intensified in Cincinnati. Since the days of the simple frame Catholic church, what Joshua Wilson called "the houses of spacious and splendid idolatry," the "places of resort for the idle, the superstitious, the deluded,"\(^{34}\) had increased in size and number in the West. Catholics now openly proselytized to the unconverted. The success of Bishop Fenwick in obtaining financial assistance from abroad for his diocese further convinced many Protestants in Cincinnati that it would be only a matter of time before the hierarchy struck at American liberties. Then finally, in 1834, the destruction of an Ursuline convent by a Boston mob precipitated a controversy in the Cincinnati press.

The prominent Presbyterian minister and educator Lyman Beecher had played a dramatic part in the events leading up to the Charlestown riot. Before he accepted the call to Cincinnati's Lane Seminary in 1832, Beecher had excoriated the Catholics from his Boston pulpit. His visit to Boston in the summer of 1834 coincided with the reported mysterious disappearance of an Ursuline nun from the Charlestown convent, and his inflammatory anti-Catholic sermons at this time were believed by the Catholics to have provoked the outrage.\(^{35}\) Beecher, of course, flatly denied the charge and condemned the rioters. Cincinnati moderates agreed that Beecher undoubtedly disapproved of riots but criticized his failure to calm the excitement in Boston. In general, they steered a middle course between the Catholic and Presbyterian extremists. Credulous and ignorant Catholics, they felt, were safer in the hands of a respectable priesthood than under the influence of some fanatic or demagogue. Catholicism should be opposed because it enslaved the mind, but Catholics themselves should not be persecuted.\(^{36}\)

\(^{33}\) Pierson, Tocqueville, 299–300.
\(^{34}\) Wilson MSS, III, 315.
\(^{36}\) CCLG, Sept. 6, 20, 1834.
In 1835 Beecher published his *Plea for the West*, a clarion call to save the section from Catholic despots. As proof of his allegations the Presbyterians at first played up the notorious Alexander Duncan case to show how haughty papists in Cincinnati terrorized innocent Protestants. An angry Catholic, so the account went, knocked off Duncan’s hat when he failed to remove it at the consecration of a German Catholic church. The story acquired horrific embellishments as it moved eastward. In New York it was said that Duncan had been assaulted by a group of ruffians and practically murdered.\(^{37}\) The *Cincinnati Journal* later admitted that Duncan may never have existed,\(^{38}\) but the furor was not permitted to abate. Jittery citizens still suspected the Catholics of constructing secret prisons and plotting to overthrow the government. Even some who wanted to protect the honest, peace-loving Catholics from abuse believed that investigators of the Catholic menace should be allowed to carry out their research without being labeled bigots.\(^{39}\)

When it became evident, however, that the Catholics harbored no devilish designs and that social institutions remained unimpaired, the nativist spirit in the city subsided. The Presbyterians vainly tried to keep up the anti-Catholic campaign, but, as in the Sunday mail issue, many people suspected their motives. One had only to contrast the powerful, wealthy, and influential Presbyterian denomination with the poor and despised Catholics to recognize that the former constituted a greater threat to American liberties than the latter. Presbyterian editors were angered by the cool reception of Rebecca Read’s *Six Months in a Convent*. Charles Hammond even questioned the veracity of the author.\(^{40}\) Beecher’s *Plea for the West* received polite reviews, but his anti-Catholic outbursts were greatly deplored.\(^{41}\) Finally, the sober analysis of the Catholic problem by James Hall indicated that the Presbyterian crusade was on the decline.

James Hall, a conservative and belligerent man, could hardly be called a western Roger Williams, yet his stand for religious tolerance on “the Catholic Question” was perhaps the most courageous and noble action of his career. Hall calmly pointed out the stupidities of anti-Catholic hysteria and castigated those sects whose fanatical diatribes, he believed, had led to the Charlestown riots. He ridiculed the “convent books” and exposed the apoc-

---

37. Ibid., Mar. 7, 1835.
39. CCLG, Mar. 21, 1835.
ryphal Alexander Duncan story. His honest and well-written defense of civil and religious liberty\(^{42}\) not only criticized the Presbyterians but provided the Catholics with ammunition. Much to the distress of the Cincinnati Journal, the Catholics reprinted Hall's article and disseminated it throughout the West. Hall, the Journal alleged, not only undid the work of the Presbyterian propagandists, but struck a blow at Protestantism itself.\(^{43}\) Presbyterian pressure, judiciously exerted, ruined Hall's magazine, but he never retracted.

By this time it should have been clear to the Presbyterians that the "awful disclosures" of Catholic depravity only bored the people and that the mythical adventures of "demented and lascivious strumpets" could no longer be exploited.\(^{44}\) Few Protestants in Cincinnati had changed their attitudes toward Catholicism, but they preferred to have its "absurdities" pointed out by rational argument rather than by invective. For this reason they welcomed the jovial anti-Catholic onsloughts of Alexander Campbell.

Campbell, an amiable controversialist, had debated free-thinkers, Universalists, Catholics, and Presbyterians with equal proficiency, but his successful contest with Bishop Purcell was eclipsed only by his earlier victory over Robert Owen. Purcell and Campbell had clashed at one of the November sessions of the Western College of Teachers in 1836. Campbell resumed his attack a few nights later before a large audience assembled at the First Baptist church, and Purcell replied on the following evening. The disputants argued over the questions: "Ought every man to think for himself on all subjects especially on the important subject of religion? . . . Did the declaration of free thinking made by Martin Luther lead in the progress of the reformation to the declaration of American independence?" Joshua Wilson, who had observed this first exchange with extreme distaste, reported the opening skirmishes in his journal. Campbell he considered an "easy, loose, inaccurate, desultory popular declaimer," sometimes unanswerable but not always invulnerable.\(^{45}\) Purcell, he felt, was a dangerous advocate. "His whole discourse (which continued about two hours) was one of the most artful, methodical, eloquent and powerful displays of sophistry I ever witnessed. At the close the house rang with applause."\(^{46}\) Wilson felt that a controversy carried on by a

\(^{42}\) Western Monthly Magazine III (1835): 375–90.
\(^{43}\) Cf IX (1836): 26.
\(^{44}\) CG, Aug. 22, 1836; Cincinnati Mirror, and Western Gazette of Literature, Science, and the Arts V (1836): 239.
\(^{45}\) Wilson MSS, IX, 1219.
\(^{46}\) Wilson MSS, IX, 1219–20.
"reckless heretic" and a "bigoted Papist" would do the community no good. Public interest was aroused, however, and plans were now made for a more sustained and formal debate.

Shortly before the Baptist church meeting, fifty-seven Cincinnati citizens published an open letter to the Reverend Mr. Campbell, thanking him for his "exposure and illustrations of the absurd claims and usages of the Roman Catholic Church" and asking him to resume his discussions. The "present state of feeling in this city and the critical state of the country, with reference to Romanism," necessitated such action, the signers declared, and they expected it to benefit the cause of Protestantism in the West.47 In January of the next year the citizens were gratified when the two champions met at the Sycamore Street Meeting House to debate the following statement: "The Roman Catholic religion, if infallible and unsusceptible of reformation, as alleged, is essentially anti-American, being opposed to the genius of free institutions, and positively subversive of them, opposing the general reading of the Scriptures, and the diffusion of useful knowledge among the whole community, so essential to liberty and the permanency of good government."48

Purcell ably defended his cause and the victory, if any, was not one-sided. Campbell assumed the role of the blunt, practical man, and Purcell, the fluent, dialectical persuader. Both men resorted to all the obvious devices of florid rhetoric—name-calling, appeals to authority and the rest of the verbal tricks known to the trained controversialist—but it is hardly likely, as some Catholic historians have maintained, that Purcell won the victory.49 Most of the citizens, though tolerant of minority religions, were rabidly anti-Catholic, and the Philanthropist's prejudiced account in favor of Campbell probably typified the general attitude.50 The outcome of the debate is less interesting to us today than the fact that hundreds of people could sit for three and one-half hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon for a solid week while two men expatiated upon minute scriptural issues. There must have been a certain sensational appeal in hearing about auricular confessions and papal indulgences, but the popularity of the debate furnishes some evidence

47. CG, Oct. 17, 1836.
of the importance attached to religion in Cincinnati.\footnote{For description of the crowds and interesting anecdotes relating to the debate, see \textit{WMR III} (1829): 639–47.}

For once, at any rate, the Presbyterians did not take the spotlight and Campbell got back at his old enemy, Joshua Wilson, who had refused to publicize his debate with Owen.

But while Protestant spokesmen criticized Catholicism on scriptural and historical grounds, their main emphasis was social and political. In other words, they believed that Catholicism enslaved the minds of the poor and ignorant and inculcated anti-democratic principles. One suspects that the animus exhibited against the Universalists, a smaller but equally disliked sect, also grew out of the social implications of its tenets.

The Universalists, like the Unitarians, were Socinians, but here the similarity ended. Although a Universalist editor found no essential differences in the creeds of those two groups, a social if not a doctrinal gulf divided the membership. Cincinnati Unitarians, according to a young Unitarian minister in 1832, represented the intelligence, character, respectability, and wealth of the town. “There is scarcely an individual man in it,” he wrote, “who in intelligence would not rank much above the common mass of man. It is taken out of the very best part of the populations of the city.”\footnote{See \textit{A New England Romance. The Story of Ephraim and Mary Jane Peabody. 1807–1892. Told by Their Sons} (Boston and New York, 1920), 88.}

This estimate would hardly have applied to the Universalists, their equally heretical but less-elegant counterpart. Universalists, socially speaking, corresponded roughly to the Methodists or the Baptists. Because of their inferior social status, their unorthodox doctrines, and their militant spirit, they exerted little influence on Cincinnati’s religious life, but they incurred the inveterate dislike of most of the other denominations, especially the Presbyterians.

When Joshua Wilson, the Presbyterian watchdog, heard a Universalist minister from Vermont speak on the Lord’s Prayer in 1817, he immediately set him down as “a sophistical, bombastic declaimer.”\footnote{Joshua Wilson, \textit{Commonplace Book}, Aug. 2, 1817, Library of the University of Chicago, Chicago.} From then on, Wilson continued in his characteristic way to speak of the Universalist church as the “Devil’s Factory” and to identify the “all shall be saved” principle with deism, perfectionism, and immorality. It was obvious to any good Presbyterian that the notion of universal salvation opened the floodgates of license. It
encouraged murder, robbery, and vice. The Presbyterians, consequently, held the Universalists responsible for a good deal of social disorder.

The Universalists had no effective means of replying to their accusers until 1829, when Josiah C. Waldo, Jonathan Kidwell, and Samuel Tizzard founded the *Sentinel and Star in the West*. Progressive in religious doctrines, politics, and social thought, and far more tolerant than their Trinitarian adversaries, the editors followed a crusading and liberal policy. Methodists, Catholics, Baptists, and Campbellites were answered in the columns of this paper, but the editors directed their arguments chiefly against the Presbyterians, whom they singled out as the champions of clerical autocracy.

The Presbyterians, alleged the *Sentinel*, were anti-Jefferson, anti-Paine, anti-Masonic, anti-anything liberal. They stood for priestly tyranny, the encroachment of the church on the state. In addition to being tyrants and hypocrites, Presbyterian leaders were vulgar and abusive; their stories about Roman Catholics would make a heathen blush and almost convince a Jefferson of human depravity. Presbyterians did not understand logic. It was just as sensible to call the Hindoos orthodox Presbyterians in disguise because they worship a trinity, as to say the Universalists were “deists in disguise” because they worshipped one God.\(^{54}\) Finally, they were superstitious. Mrs. Trollope’s derisive picture of the Presbyterian “anxious seat” typified, according to the *Sentinel*, the scare-them-into-virtue technique. The editors, moreover, had no patience with ministers who used natural disasters like cholera to gain converts and intimidate their listeners by a kind of frightful eloquence.

At a time when any deviation from Christian orthodoxy might mean social ostracism, the Universalists stoutly opposed superstition and cant and at least gave a hearing to unpopular views. “We plead, with Mr. Owen,” declared the *Sentinel*, “for untrammelled investigation—freedom of thoughts and expression: and that which will not stand the test of reason and common sense, we say ought to be discarded.”\(^{55}\) This rationalist point of view toward secular matters as well as liberal theology probably explains the ill-repute of the Universalists among the more orthodox sects.

Without drawing upon further illustrations, it can now be seen that religious denominations in Cincinnati were divided on broadly social as well as doctrinal grounds. Sectarian controversies, to be sure, did arise over issues having no relevance to politics or economics. Personal rivalries and jealousies

---

55. Ibid., III (1836): 135.
may have prompted inter-denominational warfare; ministers, scrupulously observant of religious niceties, were easily offended. But many of the disputes must be explained as simply contests for power and survival.

Consider, for a moment, the squabble over Sunday schools. Since 1817, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians had cooperatively managed what they claimed to be a non-sectarian Sunday school system. In 1829 the American Sunday School Union established a depository of books and magazines in Cincinnati, and the Western Board of Agency, composed of two persons from each of the trinitarian denominations and affiliated with the Cincinnati Sunday School Union, managed the depository for the parent board at Philadelphia.56

Since Quakers, Universalists, Unitarians, Catholics, and Swedenborgians had been and continued to be excluded from the Sunday School Union, they refused, with some justification, to admit its non-sectarian character. The Telegraph and the Sentinel, suspicious of any enterprise in which the Presbyterians played a part, stopped taking potshots at each other and joined forces. The Telegraph maintained that this so-called non-sectarian Sunday School Union was only a smokescreen for managers anxious to sell their books and tracts. In fact, it likened the SSU to a vast money-making organization, drawing large quantities of capital from the duped people and paying it back to missionaries, clerks, agents, papermakers, and bookbinders who cashed in on western piety. The zeal of these “modern, money-making, Sunday School Apostles,” the Telegraph charged, “... all predestinated and encased in Grace,” could be measured in ratio to their salary raises.57 Equally harsh, the Sentinel for once corroborated the Telegraph. The Presbyterians were advised to educate the children of their own communicants and leave the others alone. The Cincinnati Journal indignantly denied that these Sunday schools were “gull traps for the ignorant and unsuspecting” and attributed the spleen of “all the Popish, Infidel, Atheistic, Universalist and Socinian papers published in the United States” to a fear of exposure through scriptural study.58

Actually, the sharp Catholic antipathy to the Presbyterian-organized Sunday school campaign indicated a fear of Protestant inroads among the “docile” Germans, two-thirds of whom were Catholics. The Universalists and other minority sects naturally distrusted Presbyterian leadership in inter-denominational religious projects.

56. CCLG, Apr. 4, 1829.
57. CT 1 (1832): 220, 278.
If the Presbyterians did not plot deliberately to aggrandize their denomination at the expense of their rivals, we may assume that, as the largest and most influential group in the city, they expected to carry weight in inter-church councils. As it was, Presbyterian leaders in Cincinnati manipulated the strings of a vast number of Bible, tract, and missionary societies, some inter-denominational, some not, and helped to make Cincinnati a focal point for religious organizations radiating in all directions. Presbyterians dominated the Miami Bible Society, one of the oldest inter-church organizations in the city, as well as the Young Men’s Bible Society. They constituted the single most influential group in the Western Navigation Society, more truly inter-denominational than any other religious experiment undertaken in the city. Other denominations, of course, were not inactive in cooperative religious enterprises like Union Prayer Meetings or in joint efforts to correct “profane swearing, Sabbath breaking, and other immoralities,”59 but Presbyterian hegemony remained throughout this period.

It is difficult to determine how deeply the mass of people in the city were affected by the sectarian bitterness of their ministers or how closely they kept up with the battles in the denominational press. That large numbers of them followed the religious debates with intense interest is borne out by the immense crowds who heard Campbell, Owen, and Purcell. At the same time the citizens, as in most commercial communities, were not intolerant; few Cincinnati businessmen allowed religious scruples to interfere with their primary pursuits. Fraternal societies like the Masons and the Odd Fellows accepted men of all faiths and required only that applicants believe in God. The religious intolerance which did exist could probably be attributed to social and political rather than religious reasons. The presence of Jews and Swedenborgians, it is interesting to note, alarmed no one; Catholics and Mormons and Perfectionists, on the other hand, provoked considerable antagonism.

Thus we may conclude with some assurance that the majority of the people were not overly concerned with the external formalities of religion. Perhaps the women in the city, less insensitive to ministerial influence than the men, took their religious responsibilities more seriously,60 but probably the

59. See LHCG, June 8, 26, 1822; Feb. 11, 1823; Feb. 20, 1824.
average churchgoer had no great interest in heresy hunts and disputations on minute points of doctrine. The minister’s recognition, at least among the substantial classes, did not depend so much on his knowledge of theology, per se, as on his general cultivation, oratorical ability, and personal charm. The clergymen who impressed themselves most forcibly on the community were not necessarily the pious and conscientious men who slaved their lives away in dismal parsonages. Rather, the successful minister was he who presided at public meetings, delivered addresses to schools and societies, and advised the councils of the great. He rarely stepped beyond the bounds prescribed by convention, whether in social, political, or intellectual matters; he combated the heretical doctrines which might jeopardize the established social order.

Many distinguished clergymen, some of them men of national reputation, directed the religious activities in Cincinnati during the years from 1819 to 1838. Two in particular loom above the others, and it is with them that I wish to deal in the following section. Both were Presbyterians. Joshua Wilson, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, preached the “old school” divinity and stood as the symbol of inflexible orthodoxy. Lyman Beecher, imported from Boston’s Park Street Church (“Brimstone Corner”), purveyed the laxer “New Haven” theology. Between them, they represented the conservative and liberal religious tendencies of the Queen City. A more detailed account of their activities will reveal the function and message of religion in this western community.

“Do you see, in the front pew, a tall, grave-looking man, of strong and rather harsh features, very pale, with a severe seriousness of face, and with great formality and precision in every turn and motion?” wrote Harriet Beecher to a friend in 1834. “Well, if you see him, that man is Dr. Wilson. His great ivory-headed cane leans on the side of the pew by him, and in his hands he holds the Confession of Faith.”61 So the daughter of Wilson’s most persistent opponent, Lyman Beecher, described the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, the hardworking, unyielding, almost tragic defender of the faith, and so Wilson appeared to the awed citizens of his native city. But when one enters into the private world of his letters and journals, the flinty mask of the “public” Dr. Wilson is removed, and the real man emerges: harried,

querulous, pathetic, and yet distinguished by a real strength and dignity. Writing for posterity in 1832, he confided:

I have never attempted to keep a regular journal of my life. When 5 to 600 communicants with all their family connexions are expecting me to visit them—when in addition to preaching 4, 5, and sometimes 6 sermons and lectures pr. week—I am expected to write every week for the Standard and keep up a correspondence with Ministers and laymen through the whole bounds of the Pres. Ch. and when many expectations that are indulged for 200 miles of my attending 4 days meetings and complaints of the disappointed reach me from every quarter. I have occasionally for a few days at a time noted down some of my labours—not private but chiefly public— not extraordinary but not common—that those who come after me and think worthwhile to review any part of my history may in some measure disabuse my character from the imputations which have been heaped upon me—of sloth, living at ease on a large salary, neglecting pastoral duties and being unkind and difficult of access, etc. etc.—I have all my life been a drudge. I was the devil’s packhorse for 22 years—I was a student for about 6 years—I have been in the ministry about 30 years—24 in this city 1st. Pres. Ch. not settled as a Pastor but a stated supply not knowing at what moment I might be dismissed—I have seen and felt almost unprecedented troubles in my family which I could not for the world undertake to describe. I am at this moment suffering under a complication of domestick trials, some of which must be nameless. Yet I am happy. I labour cheerfully for the Lord night and day. I know myself to be among the chief Sinners. I feel that I deserve the sufferings of the present life and the damnation of hell forever—But—

“Christ is my life my joy my hope
Nor can I sink with such a prop.”62

Wilson lived a full but bitter life. Overworked and underpaid, constantly in debt and periodically forced to beg for his salary in humiliating letters to the elders and trustees of his church, it is not surprising that he occasionally lost his temper and engaged in vitriolic squabbles unbecoming to a minister of the Lord. The family troubles he guardedly refers to in his diary made his private life one long horror. For continuous periods, melancholia troubled his spirits, “petrified” and “chilled his heart to the very centre.” His journal seems to be a perpetual lament. He confesses in one typical self-recrimination:

My mind recurs to past scenes. I run over the history of my life, especially the part I have spent in the character of a Father, and the retrospect makes me tremble. Such defects in family instruction! Such blunders in family government! Such improprieties in example! No wonder that I am left to witness some of the dreadful results of my own mismanagement.63

Self-reproaches, soul-searching, and family broils—domestic griefs he hid from the outside world—overshadowed his public triumphs and help to explain his dour personality.

In addition to these burdens, financial worries continually embarrassed him. Even after nine years of service, he depended upon occasional subscriptions for his salary. Yet a prominent elder and trustee threatened to dismiss him if he complained to the General Assembly! Many people failed to pay their subscriptions or delayed so long that Wilson was usually in debt. Writing to a friend in 1822, he apologized for his inability to repay a loan and attributed his poverty to the death of several of his good friends and the removal of others. He had been living in poverty, he explained, for seventeen months, while he tried to support his family of eleven on $750. Two years later, in a pardonably self-righteous mood, he speculated on the future of his flock:

But what will become of the ungrateful people for whom I labour night and day? O Lord, lay not this sin to their charge—that they profess to love and esteem me as a minister and yet suffer me to struggle with poverty in one of the wealthiest churches in the western country.64

Luckily, God occasionally provided when the parishioners did not. “God is kind,” reads a typical entry in his diary:

This morning I was without money. I looked round and could not see where I was to obtain a dollar to go to market with. By the wedding Providence had thrown into my hands five dollars without any contrivance or expectation on my part. The Silver and Gold are His. He had promised to supply the needs of his people. Lord increase my faith and accept my gratitude and keep me from evil.65

63. Ibid., III, 373.
64. Ibid., II, 1920; III, 294; XI, 1598–99.
65. Ibid., XI, 1625.
Deeply pious himself, Wilson deplored the worldliness of his congregation, whose pride and carnality he sadly contrasted with the purity and simplicity of the apostles. Although he conscientiously followed the Bible ordinance to visit the sick and comfort the afflicted, his unsolicited visits were not always appreciated. "When I go to see a sick person without an invitation," he complained, "I am always embarrassed. I feel like an intruder. Yet my wife and others cry go go. Well I go and what is the result? Neglect, insult, mortification, waste of time." The materialism of his parishioners continually offended him; it profaned the most solemn occasions. But then, he asked himself, "why should I be surprised. He that is of the earth speaketh of the things of the earth—Lord open the blind eyes that they may see."

In spite of the aberrations of his flock, Wilson never slackened his religious zeal and sought, in a thousand ways, to serve, improve, and edify his community. Marriages, funerals, prayer meetings, and visits monopolized his time. He taught moral philosophy and logic in Cincinnati College for a while (with no remuneration), addressed innumerable prayer meetings and Bible societies, and traveled extensively throughout and beyond the state. Wilson served as director in many religious and social organizations. He sponsored lyceums, reading rooms, and educational experiments.

Although not a profound or erudite man, his commonplace book shows the other interests he so desperately tried to bring into his rushed and crowded life. Had he enjoyed any leisure, he might have become less narrow, more tolerant of the secular. But his own sincerity and the demands of his parishioners made systematic study almost impossible.

Much absence from home [he recorded, 1826], and hurry, hurry, hurry—come here and go there and run yonder—scarcely can I be seated in my study for five or ten minutes without interruption—Pa, there is a gentleman in the house wants to see you—there is a Lady wishes to speak to you[,] there is a boy has a note for you—thus my days and weeks and months and years are frittered into thousands of unconnected fragments and my labours seem as suddenly imperceptible as diagrams on the surface of a stream.

Pushed and harassed as he was, Wilson still managed to write and publish his sermons (he composed with difficulty, we learn from his wife) and to take

66. Ibid., XI, 1584.
67. Ibid., XI, 1616.
on the tremendous responsibility of running a religious newspaper. With the Pandect (1828–29), which later became the Cincinnati Journal, the Presbyterians hoped to arrest the progress of infidelity and prepare for the day when “the Beast and false Prophet and Satan will all go into Perdition and these fine Cathedrals will be cleansed of their idols and be converted into evangelical sanctuaries.”68 As editor and Presbyterian spokesman, Wilson was usually challenging and fierce, exposing heresies within the church and attacking the disciples of the devil without.

He rarely followed the advice of his faithful wife when conducting editorial warfare. “I hope my Deare,” she had once written him, “that in contending for the truth you will not only do it carelessly but meekly excuse my freedom.” But Wilson was not a meek man. Universalism, Unitarianism, and Catholicism represented the ultimate perversion of truth, and he refused to soften his savage appraisals of what he considered to be false doctrine. Liberals like Timothy Flint contended that “in this free land I have as much right to my opinions, as you have to yours; & that a sincere conviction, which I could as easily create a world, as change is not ‘Apostacy.’”69 However, such sentiments, in Wilson’s opinion, indicated only an indifference to truth. Unitarians in Cincinnati frankly admitted they had no monopoly on Christian truth. “There is probably not a Christian sect,” one of them wrote in 1838, “but is in some point more clearly right than ourselves.”70 Wilson experienced no such doubts. The Presbyterians, he felt, did have a monopoly on Christian truth. Hence he bristled at the pretensions of the upstart sects and deplored the Arminianism of the “Cumberlands.” Hence his fear, too, of the corrupt eastern Presbyterian divinity of Lyman Beecher.71

Beecher, the famous father of famous children, stood in startling contrast to the somber, humorless Wilson. When Beecher came to Cincinnati in 1832, Wilson was completing his twenty-fourth year as a minister. Slowly and painfully he had obtained some eminence and a host of enemies. It

68. Ibid., IV, 449.
69. Ibid., II, 173; IV, 456.
71. Wilson’s opinion of Beecher is illustrated in the following extract from his diary, Sept. 18, 1838:

Total eclipse of the sun—a meeting of the pelagian Presbytery in Dr. Beecher’s Church (2nd Church, misnamed presbyterian) and the public masquerade make this day memorable in Cincinnati. The Lord sent the first & the last & the Anti-presbyterian party the second. The 1st was glorious—the second deceptions—the 3rd infernal. (Wilson MSS, IX, 1269.)
pained him when this famous but by no means irreproachable newcomer immediately received an offer from Cincinnati's wealthiest congregation and quickly became the most celebrated divine in the city.

As head of Lane Seminary Beecher could only give the Second Presbyterian Church his spare time, yet he ran it like an autocrat. He practically extorted money from his rich parishioners to pay the church debts. While Wilson preached the old orthodoxy old style, Beecher preached the New School Doctrines in the new style. He had less reverence for the Westminster Confession, and he leavened conventional theology, as Wilson brought out in the famous heresy trials, with attractive and hopeful doctrines which smacked of Arminianism and Perfectionism. Technically a Calvinist, Beecher, perhaps for purely pragmatic reasons, toned down man's inability and preached a doctrine more calculated to suit the prevailing buoyancy of the age. Infant damnation, repulsive to so many, and particularly to the Unitarians (who could be counted upon to emphasize its paralyzing implications), Beecher conveniently ignored. In turn, he liked to dwell upon the icy coldness of the Unitarian faith and to dress up Presbyterianism in the warmest and most appealing way; "Give me the facts," he is reported to have said, "and I will set them on fire."  

This was the man called to head Lane Seminary, the nursery for western ministers, the man who planned to reanimate the sluggish atmosphere of a worldly town. He came at a propitious time. Before his arrival, he wrote to a friend, the young and intelligent citizens, "disgusted alike with old Calvinism and Methodism, were going to the Unitarian Church or nowhere." That he made a deep impression upon some of the citizens is shown in the following descriptions:

Beecher is below the middle stature, spare and rigid, with the bones of brass and nerves of steel like elasticity. . . . Beecher's forehead is low and somewhat narrow—yet thought, deep intensity or agony of thought, has graven characters upon it as with a pen of iron. Look upon these lines, ye fair, smooth-faced theologians, and shudder to think what it costs to be the pioneer of the mind; delving down in advance into the mines when truth is dug up for the use of the centuries to come.

Beecher quickly entered into the vortex of Cincinnati society, lecturing, preaching, and exhorting, and was well pleased with what his daughter called

72. W. H. Neff, Reminiscences of the Second Presbyterian Church (Cincinnati, 1878), 7, 8.
74. CCLG, Dec. 14, 1833.
these “intelligent New England sort of folks.” He hobnobbed with prominent members of his congregation, Nathaniel Wright, Henry Starr, Jacob Burnet, Timothy Goodman, and others, and found them “able men in all respects, property, intelligence, and influence.”75 Under his “magnetic” preaching, the Second Presbyterian Church “felt the power” and sixty new members joined in less than two years.

Until the coming of Beecher, good preaching had been rare in Cincinnati. “The great mass of the population,” a theology student wrote to a famous revivalist shortly before Beecher’s arrival, “are not gospel hardened. They have never been pressed with truth. . . . They have never heard any preaching like yours. The best Presbyterian Revival Preachers here preached nothing but the loose disconnected rhapsodies of Methodists in the main. Their preaching is exhortation and appeal, dwelling upon the love of Christ, etc., and all addressed to mere sympathy. They reason little and investigate less.”76 Although not everybody agreed on Beecher’s merits as a pulpit orator, he succeeded in mingling feeling with sense; most important of all, he preached a congenial doctrine.

Presbyterian ministers, according to their critics, had apparently alternated between boring and terrifying their congregations. After listening to hell-fire sermons and disquisitions on abstract theological questions, many, not surprisingly, turned with relief to Beecher’s heartening discourses. He had no desire, he professed, to revive sectarian bickerings or to provoke new heresy hunts, tactical errors which had already damaged Presbyterian prestige. No one deplored the harsh gospel of the hyper-Calvinists more than Beecher. “It is my deliberate opinion,” he said once, “that the false philosophy which has been employed for the exposition of the Calvinist system has done more to obstruct the march of Christianity, and to paralyze the saving power of the Gospel, and to raise up and organize around the Church the unnumbered multitude to behold, and wonder, and despise, and perish, than all other causes beside.”77 Significantly enough, his first public declarations did not deal with purely theological questions.

Beecher had delivered a series of lectures on atheism at the Park Street Church in 1829; four years later he repeated these non-sectarian talks (later published as Lectures on Political Atheism) and dedicated to the American

working classes),\textsuperscript{78} for the edification of those Cincinnatians who wished to be instructed in this "deeply important subject." Dr. Beecher, the press announced before the Sunday night discussion began, would explain the cause of skepticism, the implications of political atheism on American institutions, and the principles of revealed theology; he would also prove "the imperative and republican tendency of the Bible" and reconcile Protestantism "with civil and religious liberty and the ultimate emancipation of the world."\textsuperscript{79}

Like many of his contemporaries, Beecher recognized that false religion might lead to false economics. He saw how a skepticism or disbelief in religious absolutes, call it rationalism, materialism, or what you will, could become objectified in overt political heresy. The religious radical ultimately came to question all the fundamental precepts of the good society. Equally dangerous, in Beecher's estimation, were the religious bigots, that is, the Catholic hierarchy, who planned to abolish religious liberty and set up their own tyrannical faith. The activities of the Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians, in short, any of the Trinitarian denominations, did not alarm him. Even the Unitarians, against whom he had been contending since 1817, hardly constituted a menace in Cincinnati; they were polite, influential, and conservative. Only infidelity and Catholicism, Beecher felt, stood as the chief obstacles to the success of the American millennium. This realization, he wrote to his daughter Catharine in 1830,

\begin{quote}

is not with me a transient flash of feeling, but a feeling as if the great battle is to be fought in the Valley of the Mississippi, and as if it may be the will of God that I shall be employed to arouse and help to marshall the host for the conflict; and if duty can be made plain, I am ready.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

As titular head of Lane Seminary, which stood as the citadel of truth to withstand the shock of infidelity and popery in the western country, Beecher proclaimed the message of the church to the citizens of the Queen City. He urged his fellow ministers and all good orthodox Christians to forget their trivial disputes and to unite against the real foes of religion and society. Hence he equated false political doctrines with atheism and dedicated his pronouncements to the class of Americans most in need of spiritual and political guidance: "the working men of America."

What grounds, if any, existed for this fear of mass corruption by the

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., II, 212.
\textsuperscript{79} CCLG, May 11, 1833.
\textsuperscript{80} Beecher, Autobiography, II, 224.
legions of Satan is hard to determine. We are told that the western country provided fertile soil for the seeds of Owenism, Fanny Wrightism, Tom Paine-ism, and other heretical notions, and that deism traveled with the expanding frontier. Certainly Cincinnati had her share of blasphemers and freethinkers, although they seem to have had no sinister designs on the body politic.

Perhaps Beecher was thinking of societies like the Rational Brethren of the West when he darkly hinted about the coming struggle in the Mississippi Valley. In 1819 this group of deists published a manifesto in which they attacked political and ecclesiastical tyranny. A designing priestcraft, they maintained, poisoning the minds of the people against men like Jefferson and Paine, had joined with monopolists who controlled the country's wealth. The doctrine of human depravity provided the sanction for religious and political slavery and kept the people ignorant of the laws of nature. To meet this challenge the Brethren proposed to form a communal society in which each member might be free to work for his own and his brother's good.

Hence, we, the Rational Brethren, do abjure all speculation and monopoly, where the mutual good of our fellow beings is not the object of our actions. Hence, our object and desire is, to obtain knowledge and wealth by the certain means of industry, prudence, economy and temperance.81

Obviously, projects of this kind had no chance of success in Cincinnati. The plan of the Rational Brethren got no further than the preliminary resolutions. Few citizens cared to desert the true faith "for the drunken death-bed of a Paine, or a delirious war-whoop of surviving friends, who would erect his altar on the ruins of society."82 Yet, if we are to believe the son of Mrs. Trollope, milder forms of freethinking were occasionally tolerated. He tells of the popular and respected Cincinnatian, Dr. Price, "a jovial, florid, rotund little man," and an admitted atheist, who did not object to having his wife and daughters go to church but never went himself.

La! the Doctor don't think anything more of the Bible than of an old newspaper! Mrs. Price would say; "but them doctors, you know, they have their own opinions!" And the girls used to say, "Papa is an Atheist," just as they would have said of the multiform persuasions of their acquaintances, "Mr. This is a Baptist," and "Mrs. That is a Methodist."83

81. The Belief of the Rational Brethren of the West (Cincinnati, 1819).
82. LHCG, Feb. 1, 1820.
The jolly doctor, incidentally, also approved heartily of Fanny Wright, gave frequent dances, and sponsored private theatricals, all of which must have shocked Queen City clergymen.

Further confirmations of western depravity could be discovered in the occasional blasphemous attacks against Christianity published or circulated in Cincinnati. The editors of the Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette, for instance, reported a communication called the "Orb of Truth—or, Truths from Obscurity" which they had received from some crackpot in Indiana. This writer estimated the age of the world to be more than sixteen thousand years and explained Satan as an invention of the Jewish priesthood. Joshua's so-called miracle of stopping the sun and moon meant nothing more than a reference to the symbols carried by the army.\textsuperscript{84}

This kind of pamphlet was wicked enough, but an article in the Cincinnati scandal sheet True Blue and Castigator made the Paine-esque speculations of the Indianan seem pale. A correspondent, in a letter to "Mr. Wildfire," the editor, expressed his theories about the virgin birth with a freedom and coarseness which contrasts strangely with the usual religiosity of the period. Why did Jesus flee from Herod? he asked. It seems strange that the son of God should run from a mere man, "or did the Virgin Mary his mother, have her own private opinion upon the question of his divine origin?" Joseph, in this writer's view, showed more amiability than sense, or "he could not have been cajoled into a marriage with a woman who gave the most unequivocal of all evidences, that she had parted with her honor." The credulous Joseph turned Jesus over to the gypsies in Egypt, among whom the young imposter learned all his tricks. He then set himself up as a god. The correspondent concluded:

Now I think the least that can be said of it is, that the Lord set us a very strange example when he became the cause of an innocent woman's pregnancy and that too without conforming to the holy matrimonial law and usances existing and being a practice then, as it is, the libertin, and the "over-fond maiden" and both urge the president [precentor] when measured for indiscreet indulgence. Indeed, Mr. Wildfire, this religion does seem so preposterous that at present I cannot dwell longer upon the theme.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{84} LHCG, Aug. 5, 1825.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., June 4, 1832. Less crude but equally sacrilegious was the conduct of a Cincinnati auctioneer as reported by a horrified Presbyterian. Holding up a toy which represented Joseph, Mary, and Jesus with a dove hovering over their heads, he called: "Here I offer you the holy
Showing a similar disrespect for the ministerial class were the anti-ecclesiastical articles that appeared in James Gazlay's *Western Tiller*. Gazlay had no compunctions about printing such a poem as "Alexander, the Copper-Smith's" hymn of the priestcraft, "Watts Restored to Reason."

Come holy Mammon, gold wing'd dove
  With all thy quickening pow'rs:
Come shed thy sweetly jingling love
  On these black bags of ours.

See how we lord it here below,
  When strengthened with thy aid,
But take it hence, and we must go
  To some disgraceful trade!

In vain we look sublimely blank,
  In vain we strut and scowl.
Unless thy fear-besterring spell
  Shall hush the labourer's growl.

Come, come, those beggar-making dove,
  With all thy quickening powers;
Upset a cart-load of thy love
  In these black bags of ours!

The *Tiller* opened its columns to any citizen who wished to criticize the aristocratic church polity of the Methodists, gloat over schisms in the Baptist church, or assail the hireling priests. Known as an "infidel paper," it preached a mild deism which both offended many of its original subscribers and attracted new ones. Hundreds of people had been waiting for this kind of paper, one enthusiast declared, and they would sustain the *Tiller*’s circulation in spite of church opposition. Gazlay himself refused to be intimidated by his critics. "The easiest and most commendable religion," he wrote, "consists in putting on a long and sanctimonious face, attending some sort of gathering or meeting, praising the preachers, singing psalms, railing against infidels, abusing the *Tiller*, lamenting the depravity of the age." With this false front a man can drink, slander, and cheat, and still "pass for a very sober honest good citizen." Like other radical publications of the day, the *Tiller* linked the

---

*family*—how much have I for it? . . . Twenty-five cents! twenty-five cents for the holy family! and the *Holy Ghost* into the bargain! . . . Don't some of you want the *Holy Ghost*! (you look, some of you, as though you needed him)—say, how much?" (*Ct* [1833], 206).
slavery of superstition and priestcraft with political ignorance and tried to indoctrinate its readers with the principles of reason.  

In order to drown out the "infidel trumpet-call to all the envious and vicious poor," Dr. Beecher delivered his *Lectures on Scepticism* (1835) as part of a campaign to instill "correct principles" in the minds of city workers. This effort prompted one of his many enemies to accuse "The Right Reverend and Awful Lyman Beecher, D.D.—The wily political priest," of creating a "bug-bear, that he calls political atheism," and of seeking "to destroy the liberties of the United States and establish a religious despotism."  

Beecher's message, boiled down to its essentials, simply rehashed the old story of the "Illuminati." A gigantic infidel plot was under way. Its leaders, by false and seductive arguments, were trying to persuade the people to overthrow the old safeguards—marriage, religion, and private property. Beecher luridly described their technique:  

Here these Catilines harangue their troops, in the 500,000 grog shops of the nation—the temples and inspiration of atheistic worship: "Comrades, patriots, friends,—The time has come. Long have you suffered, and deeply, and in all sorts of ways . . . you snatch the crumbs from your table and they call it stealing . . . you are so miserable, and you are oppressed, but you hold in your own hands the power of redress. . . . Rise, freemen—rise—to the polls—to the polls—and all is yours.  

Warming up to his subject, he advised his listeners not to underestimate the skill and power of an organized minority. "If you possessed indubitable evidence of a conspiracy formed to burn the good city of Cincinnati, composed only of visionaries, fools, and madmen, would you sell your engines and disband your fire-companies, and go to sleep because there were no honest and sober men among them? Who is better qualified than visionaries and madmen to scatter firebrands, arrows, and death?" Invading armies might be repulsed but "small organized bodies acting systematically and perseveringly upon improvident and unorganized masses" could do immeasurable harm. Beecher painted a ghastly picture of social disintegration:  

Let the adaptation of the means to the end be well considered. Tracts, and lectures, and paragraphs, and treatises addressed to all the principles of  

human discontent and insubordination, which have rendered it difficult
to protect life and property, and maintain the peace and order of society. Re-
cognizing their misery—sympathizing with them in their wrongs, and in-
flaming by agreement and by ridicule their envy and pride and rage. Tracts
filled with specious cavils, and popular sophistry, and undermining scepti-
cism, eradicating conscience and principle, and inspiring ridicule and
blasphemy, and the most unlimited licentiousness, directed especially to
the uninformed, and unevangelized portion of our population in city and
country, in the farm and in the work-shop and manufactory. Swarming, like
the frogs of Egypt, from the center to the circumference of our land. De-
signed and eminently calculated to divide society against itself, by fostering
invidious distinctions between the laboring and intellectual classes, and
the relatively poor and the rich—exhibiting industry, and separate prop-erty,
and virtue, as offences against society, and poverty and vice as the result
only of religion, and laws, and persecution, till the physical power, mis-
directed and infuriated, shall turn that impatient energy against the in-
stitutions of liberty, which in Europe was turned against the feudal system,
and thrones, and despotism.90

Logic and persuasion rather than laws and penalties, said Beecher, would
turn back the tide of infidelity. It took no great learning to recognize the fol-
lies and falsehoods of atheism. Man, who by his very nature needed the sup-
port of a supreme and benevolent intelligence, had evidence of such a Being
in the manifestation of His design. This conclusion appeared to be inevi-
table; otherwise one was forced into the absurd dilemma of "supposing
effects without a cause." Beginning with this fundamental assumption,
Beecher moved inexorably toward his final refutation of political atheism,
which taught "that effects may exist without a cause, and universal design
without a designer."91

Whether or not the lectures of Beecher checked the progress of infidelism in
his own community and the western country in general is hard to determine.
The Presbyterian press, of course, devoted much space to his warnings, but
other people were just as apt to dismiss the lectures as the disingenuous rav-
ings of a "wily political priest."92 It seems likely, however, that many of the
people who did not literally believe Beecher's exaggerations recognized that

90. Ibid., 84, 94, 89.
91. Ibid., 64–65, 66–67, 127.
92. CCLG, Aug. 3, 1833.
anti-clericalism and skepticism might result ultimately in radicalism and license. Religion and law and private property tended, as Beecher said, to control “naked, ferocious human nature,” to purge it of its “infuriated depravity.” Ministers were expected to rebuke any form of “mental dissipation” dangerous to the social order. *Lectures on Scepticism*, therefore, may have struck some listeners as another example of Presbyterian effrontery, but the ideas implicit in Beecher’s message were commonly entertained.

No minister in Cincinnati, even Beecher, would have successfully opposed the “public truths” of the community or destroyed its mores. Like other social institutions, religion had its assigned place and purpose. In Beecher’s words, the church was “a chartered community, formed for the special purpose of giving efficacy and perpetuity to the revealed laws of the divine government.” It served to reconcile the message of Christianity with the exigencies of the everyday world; it sought to administer the literal code of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. According to H. R. Niebuhr, religious leaders like Beecher assumed that all divine truths had been declared in God’s constitution, the Bible, and that the church had only to preserve these truths unsullied.

Not that the church simply functioned as a check against disorderly human propensities. The universe still seemed mysterious to a people harassed by flood and epidemics and constantly preoccupied with the state of their health. The church, however institutionalized and cold, reassured them. With fundamental religious truths sure and settled, they would turn confidently to the important activities of life with no doubts of its ultimate meaning and value.

Nevertheless, although the church looked kindly upon what has been called “intra-worldly asceticism” and rejoiced in the grand march of progress, it would not be fair to dismiss religion as simply “a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life.” It cautioned the people that wisdom and learning were not the sole requisites for virtue or the cures for all human ills. Carried away by visions of the future, Cincinnati orators had thrilled their Lyceum audiences with prospects of the coming Eden, when all men would be enlightened. Timothy Flint had cited the steam engine as symbolizing the power of the intellect. James Hall had pictured the world as “advancing through mighty revolutions to an exalted destiny.” It was the role of the church to point out that virtue and knowledge were not synonymous.

History proved that freedom rested not so much upon knowledge as upon a sound moral structure. True, said one Cincinnati correspondent, the benefits of machinery, of science, of knowledge had been immense, yet "in the production of individual happiness, or social millennium, learning has no direct agency whatever, for these are the appropriate objects of religion."95

This then was the message of the church. If it served as a bolster to the status quo and taught the impressionable working classes "correct principles," it also tended to remind materialistic and utilitarian businessmen that the way to heaven was as important as the way to wealth.

95. CCLG, May 28, 1831. The interests of science and religion, of course, were considered complementary rather than mutually exclusive. As Alexander Kinmont pointed out:

The province of each is extremely well marked, and cannot any longer be easily mistaken. Science takes a true and just copy of nature according to the relations and order of the facts and phenomena, as they really exist; theology reads this copy with a view to illustrate and enforce the truths drawn for herself; . . . science, reflects the true image of nature, but since that might lead the mind to idolatry, theology brings back upon that image the reflection of Deity; or, in other words, science is the scribe, but theology the interpreter. (Twelve Lectures on the Natural History of Man [Cincinnati, 1839], 150)