Chapter III

THE IDEA OF "AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM" AND BRITISH NONCONFORMITY, 1829-1840

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In June, 1829 Ralph Wardlaw, Scotland's leading Congregationalist, wrote to his American friend, Leonard Woods of Andover, explaining the current fascination of America for British Dissenters. "An important experiment is going on there . . .," he noted, "of what Christianity when fairly excited can effect by her own native energies in the support and propagation of her cause, independently of the aids of civil power. I look to it . . . with high expectation, as I think it of vast consequence that a new practical manifestation of this should be given to the world." Wardlaw was writing at the beginning of the Jacksonian era in America, a period when Nonconformists inspected American religion with a concentration never again quite equalled. For this scrutiny there were reasons beyond the general fascination with republican novelties. The emergence of a more vital and politically assertive Nonconformity, the eruption of voluntaristic controversy in both England and Scotland, the excitement of the Reform Age, and the perennial anticipation of revivals at home on the scale of the American awakenings all played roles in directing British attention overseas. And as Wardlaw indicated, the element of "American Protestantism" which most intrigued British evangelicals was the apparent vindication of the voluntary system, which with the accompanying phenomenon of revivals raised the prospect of a free spiritual and vital Christianity, indeed a new age in Christian history.

Though it has received only scant attention from historians, this examination of the American voluntary church had important influence on both English and American political and religious history. In Britain the American example "confirmed" the voluntary principle for Dissenters, encouraged a new self-assurance and growing militancy, and prepared for the disestablishment campaigns of the later Victorian era. Concomitantly, from their study of "republican religion"
British Protestants became familiar with American revival culture; they learned not only of spiritual harvests overseas but also of their attendant controversies and theological debates. Finney in the 1850's and Moody in the 1870's found a British public well prepared. Ironically, this same scrutiny also revealed the dark side of the American churches, their accommodations to slavery. Consequently, after the 1830's "American Protestantism" and its claims to a broader historical mission encountered increasing scepticism in Britain. In the United States the British debate had less significance but did play some role in shaping religious apologetic. Earlier exposition of "republican religion" by Continental travellers or American patriotic clerics was unsuited to British readers who knew a common Protestant heritage and focused more critically on American differences in religious practice and their possible application to themselves. Consequently, American champions were obliged to attempt a more documented justification of their "religious economy," a trend which led first to Calvin Colton's works and ultimately to Robert Baird's classic Religion in America (1844). Finally, the assumptions apparent in this transatlantic discussion even today work some change in our perspective on nineteenth-century religion, emphasizing the integrity and maturity of British Dissent's alternative ecclesiastical system and qualifying the alleged uniqueness of the New World churches. For to Nonconformists many of the marks of "the American church" were quite familiar at home. In their defense of the voluntary principle, openness to revivals, enthusiasm for benevolent reforms, exploitation of voluntary societies, comprehension of denominational pluralism, and assurance of a national millennial mission British Dissenters paralleled the American achievement. What fascinated British evangelicals were American advances on this tradition, especially the constitutionally established separation of church and state and the bolder (and questionable) exploitation of revivals through theological appeals and manipulative techniques. Yet participants in the discussion--British and
American--assumed a single Atlantic religious culture, varied in detail but
united in religious and moral destiny, and debated whether "American Protestantism"
were indeed the proper direction for all Anglo-Saxon Christendom to pursue.

Several earlier developments were essential preliminaries to this discussion
of the 1830's. First, through political and ecclesiastical comment the press had
already interested the British public in the American religious experiment and
in its potential for good or ill. From the beginning of the century British
periodicals, political tracts, pamphlets, and travel narratives had commented
on "republican society," its lack of public confessional commitment and the
sensational phenomenon of revivals. Reports were usually one-sided. Reform
journals like the Edinburgh Review and the Westminster Review stressed the
civility of American life despite the absence of state provision for religion,
while the conservative Quarterly Review lamented moral depravity and spiritual
destitution. Closer familiarity with the evidence did not alter these judgments.
Such visitors as William Cobbett and Morris Birkbeck rejoiced in freedom from
lord bishops, Tory parsons, and tithes, while Captain Basil Hall and Mrs. Trollope
attributed American instability and social disorder to a prevailing religious
anarchy.

For religious readers, both British and American, the most important of
these observations were delivered by evangelical Churchmen, and these tended to
be critical. Most Anglican evangelicals, respected on both sides of the Atlantic
for piety, philanthropy, and promotion of moral reforms, viewed church-state
separation as part of the assault on religion launched by the infidel nineteenth
century. Typical of this attitude was S. C. Wilks, editor of the influential
Christian Observer after 1816, who wrote a treatise on cautionary lessons to be
learned from American religious history. Similar appraisals came from Scotland
where defenders of the national church of both Moderate and Evangelical parties
condemned the voluntary philosophy. Thomas Chalmers, the Scottish religious
leader most revered by Americans, was convinced that an Establishment could
christianize the total society, and when he surveyed American evidence he in-
evitably emphasized New England's moral and religious superiority—a superiority
which lingered even after the tragic collapse of the Standing Order. "In other
places of the Union . . ." he taught, there was but "feeble demand for the
lessons of Christianity," and people were "scarcely above a state of practical
heathenism." To be sure, not all religious comment was pessimistic. Adam
Hodgson, a United States resident between 1819 and 1821, wrote favorable impres-
sions of religious vitality, and John Bristed answered Wilks' disparagement.
But before the emergence of articulate Dissenting support in the second quarter
of the century, leading evangelical opinion tended to be censorious.

Equally important as prelude to the British debate was the change which
passed over Dissent in the years between Waterloo and the passage of the great
Reform Act in 1832. Despite links between the Old Dissent and the reform impulse
of the 1780's, English Dissenting leaders of the early nineteenth century had
become political moderates, unwilling to challenge the constitutional position of
the Church of England and stressing cooperation with Anglicans in all good enter-
prises. More conservative still, the Wesleyans, yet unwilling to be called the
"New Dissent," regarded the Church with filial respect and disestablishment with
distaste. Yet Nonconformity grew in these years in numbers, vitality, and poli-
tical activism, and accompanying this expansion was a shift in its own conception
of identity and mission. The earlier voluntaryism, preserved in the exclusive
chapel tradition, was now erected by some into a national program appropriate
to all Christian bodies. Defended apologetically as scriptural and evangelical,
it was at the same time a facet of the gathering Victorian liberalism.
In Scotland a similar transformation was taking place in Presbyterian Dissent. Eighteenth-century secessions, while protesting patronage as worldly ursurpation of Christ's kingship in the church, had not questioned Covenanters assumptions about the magistrate's obligations to true religion. But about 1800 both synods of the Old Secession were affected by "New Licht" movements which denied any confessional role to the civil ruler and insisted on the entire freedom of religion from all coercion. In 1820 the two "New Licht" synods merged in the United Secession Church which under its great preachers, James Peden and Hugh Heugh, demanded the voluntary principle for all Scottish Protestantism. To these opponents of the Establishment were joined the small but growing Congregational and Baptist followings in Scotland, now revitalized by the evangelism of the Haldanes. Thus in both England and Scotland voluntary movements were beginning to form, drawing partisans' attention to the United States as a laboratory of religious experiment.

Finally, American religious identity itself became more positive only in the same era. Since the Revolution Congregational and Presbyterian orators had tried to evoke "the American church," identified broadly with true religion and civil and religious freedom, but only by the 1830's did this concept gain definition as a result of the Second Awakening and the completion of church disestablishments. Somewhat cautiously conservative Protestants accepted revivalism as a genuine religious achievement and prepared to defend it, with proper qualifications, as a distinction of the American church. A more difficult evolution led them to voluntaryism, since patriotic clergy continued to cherish the ideal of benevolent magistracy in a Christian nation. Yet after the fall of the Connecticut Establishment in 1818 spokesmen for the older dominant denominations began to employ more positive language in relating to the American religious situation.
Influenced by the era's strident nationalism, they now defined based on a common American Protestantism religious liberty, mutual denominational recognition, and united labors for a holy nation, while the practical apparatus for this program was revealed in the success of revivals, benevolent societies, and reform crusades. Lyman Beecher's sermons were particularly rich in allusions to America's religious mission, but even Bishop Hobart lectured Anglican brethren on the superior integrity of the American church, uncontaminated by state connection. Indeed, the time had now come when American Protestants were prepared to claim the attention of British evangelicals for their accomplishment. "I love my country," declared an American orator in London in 1832, "not because it is the land of my birth, ... but ... because God is there carrying on such an experiment as the world has never seen since the days of Constantine:—an experiment whether the church of Christ has virtue, and purity, and energy enough to sustain itself, unsupported by the arm of the civil power."  

Thus by the end of the 1820's these several preparatory trends had coalesced to set the stage for the ensuing decade of preoccupation with American religion. The first evidence of the coming debate was Nonconformity's intense new interest in America's ecclesiastical system as a practical model for Britain. As repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828) brought Dissenters their long-sought "emancipation" and parliamentary reform promised to increase their influence, a new vigor in preaching, chapel building, and denominational reorganization ministered to their political assertiveness. Soon newly formed Voluntary Church Associations were utilizing American evidence. Among the first acts of the Dissenters' Society for Promoting Ecclesiastical Knowledge, organized in 1829, an announcement of a new series of sixpence tracts was on such topics as "Establishments of Religion" and "The History of Christianity in North America." The American theme was also
more pronounced in Nonconformist periodicals. Older journals, led by the *Evangelical Magazine*, the *Eclectic Review*, and the *Baptist Magazine*, increased attention to America's religious history and literature, while two newer publications, the *Congregational Magazine* (1818) and the *Patriot* (1832), stressed the republic's church-state separation. The former periodical began a comprehensive "American Monthly Record" in 1829; in the following year on "The Importance of Religious Emancipation" boldly put the question—why should not England follow seeing that "no favourite system of religion" corrupted an equal freedom for all? the American example in By 1832, according to an unfriendly observer, Dissenters were citing the American example "in every speech and pamphlet."

The new interest quickly led to demands for stronger links with the American churches. While Baptists, Methodists, Scottish Presbyterians, and the Secession churches maintained traditional fraternal communion with overseas brethren, English Congregationalists showed a broader concern for the functioning of the American religious system and initiated new official ties with both American Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Between 1830 and 1832 the Congregational Union of England and Wales was forming; its plan of union was adopted only after consultation with the Massachusetts Association. In 1829 too the London Congregational Board opened correspondence with the Presbyterian General Assembly, the first transatlantic exchange including discussion of both revivals and the voluntary system. "The question seems to us to be thoroughly settled, by the experience of this country," the Americans assured their British brethren, "that the Church of Christ flourishes more, without any connexion with the state, than it could do, if it were made a part of our civil polity."

In this eagerness for stronger American ties three Nonconformist leaders seemed to assume special prominence. John Angell James, minister at Carr's
Lane, Birmingham, was the dominant Congregational statesman from the 1820's until his death in 1859. A founder of the Congregational Union, James throughout his long career pressed for solidarity with American Protestants; by his influence the Evangelical Alliance took shape as a predominantly Anglo-American enterprise in the 1840's. Even in the 1830's James was widely known in the United States through American editions of his writings, his articles in such New York papers as the Observer and the Evangelist, his broad correspondence, and his personal friendships, especially with the New York Presbyterians, William Patton and William B. Sprague. Only slightly less important in promoting America among Non-conformists was the Baptist John Howard Hinton, destined to become his denomination's most celebrated preacher, theologian, and reformer in the next decade. An American orientation was traditional in the family. Hinton's father, James, held a Master's Degree from "Mansau Hall," and his brother, Isaac, emigrated to serve as a Baptist preacher in Virginia, St. Louis, and New Orleans. Hinton's own fascination with the American republic was evident in his encyclopedic two-volume History and Topography of the United States (1830-32) which contained appreciative descriptions of religious freedom and vitality. Though banned in Charleston for its strictures on slavery, the book was popular in America as a generous and accurate assessment of republican achievement. Finally, in Scotland, while many evangelical leaders maintained ties of correspondence and friendship with Americans, promotion of American voluntaryism as a model for Britain was most prominently the work of the eminent "Dr. Wardlaw of Glasgow." Dominant in Scottish Congregationalism and a power in all major reform movements, Wardlaw had already won an admiring American audience. His doctrinal and controversial works were republished in America, Yale sent him a D.D. in 1818, and Andover desired him as a professor.
While these men may have been the most notable in pursuing an American connection, many Nonconformists had overseas correspondents and friends after 1828. The moment was pivotal. Improved communications, easier transatlantic travel, a shared evangelical and missionary literature, and the flowering of a common Anglo-American reform culture all strengthened Dissenters' familiarity with America. And almost immediately this new interest was accompanied by the outbreak of controversy.

The battle opened in Scotland in 1829 with campaigns launched by preachers of the Secession. In contradiction to Chalmers' view that outside New England people were "almost utter strangers to the habits or the decencies of a Christian land," the Voluntary Church Associations, supported by Secession, Congregational, and Baptist churches, now claimed emphatic success for the American religious system. "In spite of the attempts to deprive us of this example," declared the Perthshire Society in June, 1833, "we triumphantly point to America as a proof of the efficiency of the principle. ... There the Church is happily free from the patronage and the pay of the State; and there ... Christianity is ... flourishing more than in any other part of the world." The argument became commonplace, and the Societies, as one exasperated defender of the state church complained, routinely transformed the United States with its "inchristian Constitution, and semibarbarous Institutions" into "another Eden, where streams of gladness ever flow, and fruits, and flowers, and bloom and beauty, ever appear."

In the Church of Scotland Magazine, the Voluntary Church Magazine, and numerous elaborate debates partisans on both sides scrutinized American evidence. Wardlaw, the voluntaries' most effective orator, wrote urgently to New England for material on "how ... the voluntary principle succeeds with you; what may be ... the annual amount of contribution for the support and spread of the gospel in the United States; with any other information which you may consider as of importance." The Establishment's defenders were equally avid for American evidence. Chalmers
routinely interrogated his many American visitors. Thomas Guthrie claimed victory in an Arbroath debate in 1834 by means of ammunition unexpectedly provided by the American Church Almanac of New York. Surprisingly, Guthrie was able to borrow this "precious treasure" from a local farmer who had come to tea! Sometimes a visiting American was produced to corroborate argument, as when voluntary champions made use of "Mr. McIlwaine of Ohio" in the great Belfast disputation of 1836. Throughout this agitation the spirit of the Scottish voluntaries was that expressed by James Peddie to Samuel Hanson Cox of New York at a Glasgow meeting for three hundred voluntary clergy: "We are endeavouring to do for Scotland what has been done long ago for happier America. . . . But we want facts, and you can give them to us."  

The detail in which American evidence was studied is illustrated by the hostile but forceful book written by J.G. Lorimer for the Glasgow Association for Promoting the Interests of the Church of Scotland. The Past and Present Condition of Religion and Morality in the United States of America—An Argument Not for Voluntary but for Established Churches demonstrated the American "failure" with a wealth of exact detail. Lorimer pointed to the small number of churches relative to the size of population and to the still smaller number of ministers to serve them. Pulpits were vacant, ministers were ignorant, communicants were few. What passed for religious vitality was a florescent heterodoxy—Quakers, Baptists, Unitarians, and Jews abounded. Baltimore, it is true, had two splendid churches, but one was Roman Catholic and the other "Socinian." Once orthodox Boston was now the most heretical of cities, while Arminianism generally prevailed in Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian denominations. Lorimer conceded that religious newspapers flourished, but added that many were heretical and the phenomenon itself was in large part due to America's rejection of voluntarism in education; "the state
establishment of schools" made for a general literacy. America's moral failings were particularly horrifying—intemperance, prostitution, gambling, contempt of Sabbath, and slavery were all badges of republican society. And the entire indictment was documented extensively with sermons, tracts, narratives of reform societies, home missions reports, pleas for the West, and colorful accounts of the desecration of the Sabbath in New York City—all written by eminent American clerics.¹⁴

Opponents of Lorimer and his party were equally zealous in marshalling American support, but their argument tended to center on the lesson of New England's recent conversion to voluntaryism. The older generation of apologists, led by Timothy Dwight, was set aside as obsolete, and more modern authorities, such as "Dr. Joel Hawes of Hartford, in Connecticut, who lately visited this country," were cited as testifying that the late Establishment was "decidedly unfavourable to religion and . . . its removal has been followed by the best effects." Similarly, James Matheson, after his return from the United States in 1834, told a Glasgow audience that American friends convinced him that their Standing Orders, "the best the world ever saw," had nonetheless nurtured Unitarianism and that disestablishment itself had produced a new impulse to truth and check to error.¹⁵

By the middle 1830's, then, arguments were becoming conventional, but the literature of the controversy continued to burgeon. Samuel Hanson Cox's comment in 1840 was true of the entire decade: "AMERICA becomes a mighty argument between the combatants . . . advocated and traduced, loved and feared, panegyrized and misrepresented, alternately by the opposing sides." Yet in all this agitation an anomaly was present: Americans themselves, though often appealed to, seldom appeared to be comfortable in the contest and generally sought to avoid identification with Scottish voluntaries. For this hesitancy there was sufficient reason. For the history and traditions of the Church of Scotland American churchmen had
large respect. Furthermore, individual champions of the Scottish Establishment were deeply admired in America for learning and piety. Americans too were sometimes shocked at the "ultra opinions" of Scottish voluntaries. "They will not allow the government," complained President Humphrey of Amherst College, "to legislate at all in religious matters—not even to recognize the Christian Sabbath as a divine institution." Consequently, Scottish controversialists wrestled with the "lessons" of "American Protestantism" with the aid of only an indirect and limited American contribution. But in England the situation was otherwise.

The excitement of English voluntary controversy was directly linked with the apologetic writings of the American minister, Calvin Colton. Between 1832 and 1835 Colton published four books, much read on both sides of the Atlantic, which trenchantly defended American religion and demonstrated its superiority to the "political Christianity" of Britain.

Colton was a New York Presbyterian who resided in London from 1831 to 1835 and supplied occasional articles to the New York Observer. A graduate of Yale and Andover who had served churches in western New York, Colton was a facile writer well qualified to provide popular, informed, and persuasive vindications of American religion. In 1832 his History and Character of American Revivals had attracted wide attention, and in the following year he published The Americans, an attack chiefly on Basil Hall's American impressions. Then in 1833 the Bishop of London, Charles James Blomfield, made a conventionally critical reference to American irreligion, and Colton seized the opportunity to publish an elaborate extracts of reply. Church and State in America, which also appeared serially in the Observer, was probably the first full-length analytical study of the subject.

Colton's book arrived at a pregnant moment for English Dissent. Claims for the voluntary church, previously based on scripture and primitive ecclesiastical polity, were turning practical and political in the prevailing climate of reform.
A few months before Colton's book was issued even the staid and tradition-bound Dissenting Deputies formally called for petitions against the union of church and state. Dissenters, moreover, were manifestly dissatisfied with unfriendly descriptions of American religion based on pulpit jeremiad and frontier conditions. Congregationalists, the most politically active and articulate of their number, were already reading more optimistic assessments of the result of disestablishment on New England's religious health in the Congregational Magazine and the Evangelical Magazine.

Colton's defense of American voluntarism met this trend of public interest in several respects. Ignoring exegetical and theological argument, his approach was contemporary, factual, and pragmatic. While he considered the West in his survey, he also gave attention to the northeast, demonstrating that even this mature and traditional culture had experienced no enfeeblement of religion by lack of state support. With considerable statistical detail the hostile arguments were refuted: America was not a "spiritual desolation," its pulpits were adequately supplied with educated clergy, heresy and Unitarianism were not due to disestablishment, the United States was still a religious nation with Christianity part of the law of the land. Lastly, Colton undoubtedly wrote with an eye to contemporary British controversy. By 1834 his personal associations with Dissent were well established, and his book made passing reference to the irreligion of London, the dearth of persons, and the need for reforms to redress "the enormities of the English Establishment." Indeed, an Anglican reviewer insisted that Nonconformists themselves supplied some of Colton's arguments and that "the Dissenting Board" had sent Church and State in America to every member of parliament.

The work both intensified the voluntary debate and for a time gave it a
specifically American focus. Among Dissenters the "proof" from overseas created a sensation. In Glasgow Wardlaw obtained a copy and, pronouncing it "exceedingly gratifying and satisfactory," hurriedly wrote to Woods at Andover for more confirmation. The *Baptist Magazine* found Colton's statistics unanswerable and concluded that the voluntary question must at last be regarded as settled. Other reviews in the *Eclectic*, the *Evangelical*, and the *Congregational Magazine* were laudatory. Colton himself supplied more fuel to the controversy, publishing letters replying to his critics. In May, 1834, he delivered an oration before the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty replete with allusions to Pilgrim tradition and quotations from Daniel Webster. On the other side of the question, reviewers adopted a perspective both parochial and sophisticated. They saw Colton's book chiefly as part of a coordinated Nonconformist attack on the Church, but they also took care to base their rebuttals on substantial research in American sources. Probably the most detailed response appeared in *Frasé's Magazine* as part of a long attack on Dissenter agitation respecting church rates, marriage law, and university reform. "We have here nothing less than the Case of the Dissenters, as it regards America," was the reviewer's judgment on Colton's work. And for a dozen pages he carefully challenged Colton's conclusions and evidence, drawing on American sermons, almanacs, reform society reports, and Timothy Flint's account of spiritual destitution in the West in his *History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley*.

In 1835 Colton returned to New York, publishing as a parting shot *Four Years in Great Britain* with more criticisms of the Church of England as corrupt, venal, and destructive of pure religion. With this contribution his usefulness to Nonconformity ended. In 1836 he became an Episcopalian, and in 1839 he re-entered the controversy as an opponent of American voluntaryism in *A Voice from America to England*. But despite this apostasy, there can be no doubt of Colton's stimulat-
ing effect on Nonconformist self-assurance in the decade. Even Wesleyans were influenced, some of them joining Voluntary Church Societies despite the Connexion's ban. Lancashire Methodism, where Joseph Rayner Stephens, later Chartist and social reformer, was active in meetings and petitions, was especially leavened. And in this agitation the presence of Colton's vision of America's "true scriptural religion" was specifically noted. Yet even while the interest in Colton was at its height, the debate on American religion had found another vehicle—the transatlantic embassies sent by the principal Dissenting bodies to the American churches.

These official deputations of 1834-35 came as climax to the rapidly growing sense of unity with American Protestants. Proposals for such visits had first been broached in transatlantic denominational greetings in 1829, and in 1833 the Congregational Union had at last authorized a delegation to establish closest fraternal relations with American churches and report on the state of religion in the new republic. Though named as delegate, James was unable to go, and the Union eventually commissioned Andrew Reed of Wycliff Chapel, London and James Matheson of Durham. In the following year the Baptist Union followed suit, sending out Francis Augustus Cox and James Hoby, while American Presbyterians and Congregationalists dispatched three delegates on a return visit to England and Scotland. Though all of the embassies encountered the "voluntary question," that of Reed and Matheson played the most important role in the British disputes.

Even before they sailed for New York both men had won attention as Dissenter critics of the Establishment. On the eve of his departure Reed had published The Case of the Dissenters expressing the conviction that America was "better supplied with the means of religion than any other land under heaven," while Matheson had contributed an even more forthright brief for voluntaryism, Religious Reform in the Episcopal Communion Impracticable While it Remains United with the State. This reputation and background were made known to Americans. In the summer of
Princeton's Biblical Repertory summarized recent Dissenter history and its current struggle against the Church of England, quoting extensively from Reed's and Matheson's tracts.

It is not surprising, then, that during their tour both men professed themselves to be convinced of the success of the American experiment. Reed and careful Matheson were credible because they were and not uncritical observers. They drew on history and statistics as well as their own travel impressions, and while they primarily studied the northeastern states, they also proceeded as far south and west as Virginia and Cincinnati. They admitted differences; support for religion and moral influences were not so gratifying in the slave states and on the frontier as in New England. But they also insisted that New England churches had actually prospered since disestablishment and that if the West's "present means are fewer than those of New England, they are decidedly more than those of Scotland." Reed, present on Independence Day in Lyman Beecher's church, also sensed the limits of American church-state separation; "startled at the extraordinary mixture of the secular and the spiritual," he questioned "whether the tendency was not to make religion worldly, rather than the worldly religious." Nonetheless, their judgments repeatedly stressed the expanding number of churches, ministers, and communicants and the vitality of mission effort, reform societies, and colleges. "While such evidence is developing itself in favor of the voluntary principle ... should not the Dissenter be ... disposed to rest his cause on it with confidence and quiet?" they asked. The Scottish United Secession Magazine was correct in regarding the delegation's detailed two-volume report as a "testimony to the power and efficiency of the Voluntary principle."

Although Reed and Matheson had written occasional letters to their congregations while overseas, their official report was not printed until 1835. Even by this time sufficient adverse interest had been aroused for the delegates to express alarm in their preface that "their mission has been open to misrepresentation,
and their motives to misconstruction." But the disclaimer that "they had no political or party purposes to accomplish" did little to prevent yet another round of dispute in pulpit and press over American voluntaryism.  

The chief complaint of Anglicans against Reed and Matheson was expressed by an evangelical Churchman to a visiting American: the delegates "had been sent out to America by a political faction, to collect information to aid them in their efforts to destroy the British Constitution, by effecting a dissolution between the church and state." This conspiracy theory was repeated with few variations in the conservative reviews, one journal even announcing that the Nonconformist press—specifically the Evangelical Magazine, the Eclectic Review, the Congregational Magazine, and the Patriot—were the delegates' paymasters. Anglican religious journals such as the Christian Examiner and the Christian Guardian contributed to the offensive, but as in the campaign against Colton, one of the most detailed rebuttals to Reed and Matheson appeared in two lengthy articles in Fraser's Magazine. While the reviewer was scurrilous enough, characterizing the authors as vulgar, immoral, and dishonest, the critique itself drew extensively on American religious literature. To all this "blustering impi- dence, malicious falsehood, and vulgar abuse" Nonconformists and Voluntary Church Societies made polemical answer while exploiting the report for propaganda use. The denominational response came from John Blackburn, editor of the Congregational Magazine, in a long statement, "On the Real Object of the Recent Deputation to America."  

Yet the controversy continued and engulfed the official delegation of American Presbyterians and Congregationalists who visited Britain in the summer of 1835. Everywhere they found Dissenters pleading the American example, while they themselves had to defend voluntaryism against suspicious Churchmen, however evangelical. One of the delegates, Gardiner Spring of New York, orated on the American religious achievement at the Religious Liberty Society, sharing the platform with the Irish
"Liberator," Daniel O'Connell, and the Scottish liberal peer, Lord Brougham. When the Americans journeyed to Scotland they found that excitement over the American religious system was at an even higher pitch. By this time contention over the transatlantic religious embassies had expanded to Scotland and Ireland, merging with the earlier strife. Matheson lectured on America in Wardlaw's Glasgow chapel, and in Belfast the Presbyterian chieftan, Henry Cooke, reacting against Dissenter praise of America, unleashed his famous invective against that "ecclesiastical gourmanderie which rejects State endowments as abhorrently as tartar emetic, yet can swallow and digest the ... liberties and souls of slaves."

By 1836, however, when these words were spoken, the intensity of interest in "American Protestantism" as a model for British churches had slowly begun to slacken. Perhaps the change was signalled in the response to the narrative of the Baptist embassy to the United States published in that year. Cox and Hoby had gathered good impressions of "republican religion" and had even been entertained by President Jackson with discourse on the evils of the British state church system. But their report produced no new stimulus to the voluntary debate comparable to that generated by the visit of Reed and Matheson (though the Baptists did become embroiled in another and even more passionate controversy, the crusade against American slavery). In the later 1830's other accounts of American religion continued to be published and reviewed in Britain. Even rather casual reports of the beneficial effects of terminating the Standing Orders, as in Jacob Abbott's New England and Her Institutions (1835), were carefully noted in the Dissenter press. Far more elaborately Robert Baird two years later anonymously authored an historical series in the Congregational Magazine, tracing
the baleful consequences of the Puritan Fathers' error in setting up a state
religion and again describing the happy improvements which followed disestablish-
ment. But to these contributions there was little response. Indeed, after the
late 1830's British voluntaryism tended to evolve in increasing independence of
the American example. Hinton in 1838 and Wardlaw in 1839 published lectures on
the voluntary church which made no use of the American experience. At the great
British Anti-State Church Conference held in London in 1844 none of the presenta-
tions dealt with religion in the United States. Baird's *Religion in America*, pub-
lished in Glasgow in the same year, received polite notice but created no stir.

What explanation can be found for this relaxing interest in American voluntaryism? Part of the answer doubtless lies in the migration of general public
interest to other radicalisms--to Chartist, anti-Corn Law, and trade union agita-
tion. Similarly, questions of religious policy for Dissenter and Anglican alike
tended in the future to center more specifically on British conditions and on
practical measures rather than theoretical argument. But there were other
significant reasons for the change as well.

By the end of the 1830's the successful adoption of the voluntary system on
the model of the American Republic no longer appeared to be a simple option for
Nonconformity. Instead, the issue had become complicated and confused by new
developments in British political and religious history which had no parallel
in the American experience. First, in Scotland the controversy between defenders
and opponents of the Establishment was rapidly being eclipsed by another conflict,
the struggle of Evangelicals in the Church to end patronage and escape Erastian
controls. By 1840 it was clear that Chalmers and other leaders in the General
Assembly were moving toward a crisis which would probably necessitate their
withdrawal from the Establishment. The situation not only won them wide national
sympathy; it also suggested that the Evangelical party might soon join Scottish Nonconformity, despite its continuing respect for the ideal of an Establishment. Inevitably, much of the acerbity went out of the contest between Church and Dissent, while Evangelical statesmen also began some adjustment in outlook in response to an impending free church status. In Ireland the 1830’s produced other complications. Catholic Emancipation (1829) began a decade of political advance for Irish nationalists under O’Connell. In the context of this Catholic resurgence the current proposals for the reform and even disestablishment of the Church of Ireland raised the prospect of the collapse of Protestant status and influence in Ireland. Many Dissenters as well as Anglicans viewed this contingency with profound alarm. But it was probably English religious history that supplied the greatest incentive to Nonconformists to weigh the ramifications of an anti-state-church campaign. The 1830’s produced the Oxford Movement and the apparent revitalization of Catholicism, English and Roman, in British political and religious life. The resultant anxiety among many evangelical Protestants, Churchmen and Dissenters, overshadowed all other considerations. By the end of the decade Congregational statesmen like Reed and James were working to form a great evangelical coalition of denominations. The trend led to the London Anti-Maynooth Conference in 1845 and ultimately to the Evangelical Alliance in 1846. In this new emergency advocacy of the voluntary church often tended to be muted in the interest of Protestant solidarity. For the strategy of Dissent in these several settings—Scottish, Irish, and English—the history of American Protestantism gave little guidance.

Indeed, Dissent itself did not pass through the decade unscarred by its enlisting the American example. By mid-decade an increasingly bitter schism divided Nonconformists on the issue of how the voluntary principle was to be promoted.
Radicals, pursuing the American constitutional solution of separating church and state, demanded immediate parliamentary action. Dominating the Dissenters' Parliamentary Committee and the Religious Freedom Society and supported by the Patriot and the even more aggressive Nonconformist (founded 1841), these militants were to reorganize Nonconformist politics in the 1840's. But most Dissenter leaders were still moderates. They perceived voluntaryism as a religious and not a political principle, advocated a strategy of Christian persuasion rather than legislation, and expected disestablishment in a distant future. From a practical standpoint they argued that persuading the nation was the only realistic policy for a limited minority. Speaking for these moderates, the Congregational Magazine as early as 1834 denounced those who would "immediately petition for the dissolution between Church and State." The division became exacerbated when the radicals launched an eventually successful assault on the Regium Donum, the government grant to impoverished ministers in the Nonconformist denominations.

Important though they were, these explanations of the waning enthusiasm for the American religious model do not touch the principal matter. For ironically, a close inspection of the "religion of the republic" also gave rise to new critical and sceptical reservations on the part of some Dissenters. "American Protestantism" had always meant more than merely the voluntary church. Equally prominent were the spectacular revivals which since the Great Awakening many Nonconformists during believed might be duplicated in Britain. Yet the decade voices began to be raised warning against any introduction into Britain of American revivalism with its excesses, "new measures," and "self-conversionist" theology. These reservations became stronger after the London publication of Charles G. Finney's Lectures on Revivals in 1839; four years later Wardlaw had to expel from his theological college eleven students who had fallen under "American" influence.
But most significant of all in discrediting "American Protestantism" was Dissent's sweeping commitment to the new crusade of "immediate emancipation" and its subsequent shock at the American churches' "unwillingness" to repent and reform. Curiously, the leading advocates of religious solidarity with America were also the dominant voices of evangelical antislavery—Wardlaw, a founder of the powerful Glasgow Emancipation Society, James an organizer of the London World Anti-Slavery Conference of 1840, and Hinton the first editor of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. About mid-decade there was a turning-point in the American churches' reputation as caution and scepticism began to surface. How much the climate was changing was evident at the Congregational Union in 1840 when an old friend of America could contain himself no longer. "I love revivals," exclaimed the venerable William Jay, "[but] I am not so fond of bellows-blowing, and systems of mechanical apparatus." And then the heart of the matter:

I deeply deplore the state of America; ... pastors selling their members, members selling one another; ... and persons frequently pay their Bible and Missionary subscriptions with men and women ... . Let us pity them; let us pray for them; and let us endeavour to amend them. But we need not enlist ourselves under their colours when they are stained; we need not go abroad for divinity ... nor recommend books among our people, that have little indeed to recommend them but conceit, and pretension, and violence, and calumny."
1 William Lindsay Alexander, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Ralph Wardlaw*, D.D. (Glasgow, 1856), pp. 273-274. The present essay concentrates on the issue of American religion and "evangelical Nonconformists," primarily Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and Scottish Dissenters, though the histories of Unitarians and Quakers were also affected by ties with the United States.


5 For the awakening of English Dissent, see William George Addison, *Religious Equality in Modern England 1714-1914* (London, 1944), pp. 38-93, Raymond


7 Quoted in Fraser's Magazine, IX (1834), 388.

8 Congregational Magazine, N.S., V (1829), 619-621, 55-59; N.S., VI (1830), 471.

The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine was an exception to the usual approval of the American experiment by Dissenters since under Jabez Bunting the leadership was
unfriendly to disestablishment proposals. The Magazine was attentive to American Methodism, however. For a Methodist traveller's unfavorable comment on church-state separation in America, see letter of Robert Alder in ibid., Third Series, XIV (1835), 282.

Accounts of the formation of the Union appear in Tudur Jones, Congregationalism, pp. 242 ff. and in greater detail in Albert Peel, These Hundred Years: A History of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1831-1931 (London, 1931), pp. 31-78. Congregational Magazine, N.S., V (1829), 505-510 published the official texts of the exchanges with America.


Evidence of Chalmers' interrogation of visiting Americans is abundant. Note, for example, John Seely Stone, A Memoir of the
Life of James Milnor (New York, 1848), p. 435; John Codman, A Narrative of a Visit to England (Boston, 1836), pp. 211-212; William Buell Sprague, Visits to European Celebrities (Boston, 1855), pp. 251-254; Samuel Hanson Cox, Interviews; Memorable and Useful (London, 1853), pp. 52-64.

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14

15
[David King], Examination of the Equity and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Establishments (Edinburgh, 1832), pp. 34-38. James Matheson, The Voluntary Exercise of Christian Principle the Only Method by which Great Britain and Ireland Can be Evangelized (Glasgow, 1835), pp. 13-29.

16

Evidence for contemporary surveillance of New England by the Congregational Journals is plentiful. Note, for instance, *Congregational Magazine*, N.S., IX (1833), 495-497 and *Evangelical Magazine*, N.S., XII (1834), 554-555. The *American Quarterly Register*’s detailed and current ecclesiastical statistics were published in the *Congregational Magazine*, N.S., X (1834), 784-790.

Colton, *Church and State*, passim and especially section 9, a "Comparative View" of the English and American churches. *Fraser’s Magazine*, IX (1834), 388-398.


Fraser’s *Magazine*, IX (1834), 388-398. From Scotland Lorimer entered the controversy with *Church Establishments Defended; or "Church and State in America" Exposed and Answered* (London, 1835).

status of an Establishment by virtue of their sway "over the public mind, to
dictate belief, and to give advice to 'the powers that be'" (pp. 62, 170-200, and
630-647.

23
Tension within Methodism between the Tory leadership and religious and political
protest was intense, generating several secessions. For background, see Maldwyn
Edwards, After Wesley; A Study of the Social and Political Influence of Methodism
in the Middle Period (1791-1849) (London, 1935); E.R. Taylor, Methodism and Politics,
1791-1851 (Cambridge, 1935); Robert Featherstone Wearmouth, Methodism and the
Side-Lights on the Conflicts of Methodism, 1827-52 (London, 1898) preserves many
details of controversy not otherwise available. For contemporary news accounts
of turmoil created in Methodist meetings by American voluntaryism, see Patriot,
April 16, 1834, Nov. 17, 1836. Extracts from Colton's Church and State were
read at meetings.

24
The semi-official reports of the British delegations were Andrew Reed and James
Matheson, A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches by the Deputation
from the Congregational Union of England and Wales (2 vols.; London, 1835) and:
F.A. Cox and J. Hoby, The Baptists in America; A Narrative of the Deputation
from the Baptist Union in England to the United States and Canada (New York, 1836).
The American mission did not issue reports of comparable scope, but delegates'
impressions may be viewed in Humphrey, Great Britain, France, and Belgium and
Codman, Narrative of a Visit. Much additional reporting on the visits may be
found in the Congregational Magazine, the Baptist Magazine, and American religious
papers.

25
[Andrew Reed], The Case of the Dissenters in a Letter Addressed to the Lord
Chancellor (London, 1833), pp. 53-54. Matheson's tract (London, 1834) was by N.S., VI "Mathetes," Biblical Repertory (1834), 283-320, 523-546. Americans were deeply interested in the British disputes and knowledgeable about the literature they generated. Matheson was questioned in New Hampshire about the Scottish controversy (Matheson, Voluntary Exercise, pp. 21-22).


Reed and Matheson, Narrative, I, viii.

Codman, Narrative of a Visit, pp. 209-210. The Times, Nov. 18, 1835 made the same allegations of conspiracy as Fraser's Magazine, XII (1835), 464-474. The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine also published objections to Reed and Matheson, charging that Reed had made American Methodists appear "vulgar" and "ignorant" (Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, Third Series, XV [1836], 20-23).

Note comment in second edition of Reed and Matheson, Narrative (London, 1836), p. xviii. For Patriot's answer to Fraser's Magazine and The Times, see issue of Nov. 25, 1835. Matheson's own defense in a letter to The Sun (which the editor refused to print) was published in the Patriot, Dec. 9, 1835. Blackburn's statement in Congregational Magazine, N.S., XI (1835), 604-614. The same journal's review and historical account of the controversy appeared in ibid., N.S., XII (1836), 41-57, 113-132. For other reports of the continuing dispute, see ibid, N.S., XI (1835), 345, N.S., XII (1836), 31-36, 99-101.

Codman, Narrative of a Visit, pp. 120-121, 179-181. Patriot, May 20, 1835.

XIV (1836), 626-627.


33

|Second Series|


35 The Anti-State Church Conference was boycotted by moderates. See unfriendly [Second Series], comment in *Congregational Magazine*, VIII (1844), 392-3944, 472-474.

The shift was evident in Lang, Religion and Education, pp. iii-vi, 8, and passim. Lang was a partisan of the Scottish Evangelical party who was impressed with the apparent success of separation in the United States. He wished to persuade Churchmen in Scotland that divorce from the state was a "safe course." However, George Lewis, a member of an official Free Church of Scotland delegation in 1844, was still critical of what he found in America. [George Lewis], Impressions of America and the American Churches: from Journal of the Rev. G. Lewis, One of the Deputation of the Free Church of Scotland to the United States (Edinburgh, 1845), pp. 39-40, 54-57, 125-126, and passim.

To attract Low Churchmen the Evangelical Voluntary Church Association was founded in December, 1839, committed to educational and strictly non-political activity. See account of its formation in Congregational Magazine, [Second Series], IV (1840), 71-72. Sir Culling Eardley Smith, a Church of England evangelical, presided over this session as well as over the later Anti-Maynooth Conference and the Evangelical Alliance. Minutes of the Anti-Maynooth Conference have been published in Algernon S. Thelwall (ed.), Proceedings of the Anti-Maynooth Conference of 1845 (London, 1845). No adequate modern accounts of the Evangelical Alliance exist, but see Edward Bickersteth, A Brief Practical View of the Evangelical Alliance (London, 1846) and James William Massie, The Evangelical Alliance; Its Origin and Development (London, 1847). Though Reed and James were active in these events, neither man saw the Alliance as simply an anti-Catholic coalition.

The quotation appeared in the *Congregational Magazine*, N.S., X (1834), 63. On the Regium Donum, see Chadwick, *Victorian Church*, I, 409-412.


*Congregational Magazine*, [Second Series], IV (1840), 888-889 n.