Abolitionism as Treason:
The Unitarian Elite Defends
Law, Order, and the Union

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No members of America's elite were more disturbed by the
abolitionist agitation in ante-bellum United States than
were the Unitarian conservatives. Their denominational
headquarters were found in the maelstrom of abolitionist
perdition, Boston, and they desperately opposed — or tried to ignore
— the abolitionists as ultralists of disorder. What were the fears of
this very important group of people? Why did the abolitionist move-
ment evoke so little sympathy from them? This essay attempts to
illustrate the pattern of their concerns.

A. A Society of Order

Unitarian conservatives shared an adoration of order and authority
and feared the impulses toward a true social democracy that disturbed
the status quo. “Order!” exclaimed Ezra Stiles Gannett (1801–1871),
“at once the child and the guardian of freedom, the fruit and the
shelter of peace.”2 A society of order was predicated on respect for
the law, and scrupulous obedience to every jot and tittle of national
legislation that flowed from the blessed cornucopia, the Federal Con-
stitution, and to the state law that evolved in God's holy common-

2 Ezra Stiles Gannett, Our Help is in God: A Discourse Delivered in the Federal
Street Meeting-House, In Boston, on Sunday, February 24, 1850 (Boston: Win.
Crabtree and H. P. Nichols, 1850), pp. 16–17.

The following abbreviations are used in footnotes of this article:
CH: Christian Register
MH: Houghton Library, Harvard University
MoSW: William G. Eliot Collection, University Archives and Research Collection,
Olin Library, Washington University
MRM: Monthly Religious Magazines
UK: Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine
WM: Western Messenger

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wealth of Massachusetts and was carried throughout the country by sons of New England. After all, "our own system of government and laws," taught Stephen G. Bultinck (1809-1870), "is the most perfect on the face of the earth." He worried over Americans undervaluing "this glorious system." 2 The immeasurable benefits of the Constitution demanded acceptance of its compromises, including slavery. "We submit to [slavery]," wrote Orville Dewey (1794-1882), "in accordance with a compact made by our ancestors, and which we do not feel at liberty to violate." 3 A distrust of law seemed to be sweeping the land and reached at times the embodiment of an "utter contempt of all law." To a conservative like Nathaniel L. Frothingham (1793-1870) this "impatience" with the restraints of law in America boded ill for the nation: "Let us revere the sanctity of legislation. . . . Let us never throw down those principles of a righteous subordination, which are all that is up between us and anarchy. 'Honor the King!'" Thus, the "supremacy of the law" was the nation's "true protector." Law was "a perpetual dictator," and a citizen's obedience to the dictator was "of an all but absolute nature." Obedience to law was in reality, preached Frothingham, "an echo of that great word 'Order,' the first commandment of God." 5

A society of order maintained rigid ideas regarding the structure of the family. Order in the home meant order in the community. The household was seen as "woman's true throne," but in truth it was not. 6 Man ruled that throne and woman merely reigned over the household while he was away. A society of order neither needed nor desired a social revolution that would upset the accepted relationships

2Stephen G. Bultinck, "A Plea for Law and Order. A Sermon preached in Washington city, on the Sabbath after intelligence had been received of the Anti-Abolition Riot in Philadelphia," YM, V (August 1858), 344.


5Nathaniel L. Frothingham, "The Duty of the Citizen to the Law," AM, I (August 1844), 261-263. The article was reprinted as The Duty of the Citizen to the Law: A Sermon (Boston: Leonard C. Bowles, 1844).

between husband and wife, parents and children, master and servant, native and immigrant, pastor and congregation. America’s great Revolution had occurred. All patriots remembered it fondly, but few desired any re-awakening of revolution to complete what was left undone—suffrage to woman, liberty to the Negro slave, and all the other social goals of fanatic reformers. Gannett believed the discussion of woman’s political and social rights did her more harm than good. 7 Our whole aim, said another Unitarian conservative, should be to demonstrate “the great influence which woman may exert in the civilization of the human race; woman, not as an orator or politician; but as a religious mother.” 8

Freedom for the black slave could create a second revolution, a bloody insurrection. A society of order needed to increase respect for the white citizens of the South and sympathy for the distress under which they lived and worked. Besides, the North fantasized too much over southern slavery. 9 The institution was not as bad as northerners imagined it to be. There were masters, “high-minded, humane and religious men,” who treated their slaves with uniform kindness and consideration. 10 The North should be considerate to these southern masters. 11 Orville Dewey reiterated this message over and over again. If northerners only knew the system at first hand, he wrote, and met the “thoughtful and Christian men” of “the most gracious hospitalities” and “gentlest affections” who directed it, they would not only see the positive evil of slavery, but its qualified good as well. Much injustice had been shown the South. Many planters were in a quandary when they saw freedom did “the colored man no good.” 12 Perhaps

8 Osgood (note 6 above), p. 17.
11 [Samuel K. Lothrop and George E. Ellis], “Position and Duties of the North with Regard to Slavery,” CR, XXII:19 (12 July 1843), 2.
the Negro would be better left in slavery. Domestic slavery could not be set down, believed Edward Everett (1794-1855), as an "immoral and irreligious institution." His observations of slavery in America assured him that the slaves were "better clothed and fed and less hardly worked" than the peasants of Europe. Visiting slave cabins in the South, Everett found them neat and clean. One slave cabin even contained a set of Liverpool china! 30 "I do not doubt," wrote William B. O. Peabody (1799-1847), a Unitarian minister in Springfield, Massachusetts, "that masters treat their slaves with kindness, nor that the slaves are happier than they could be if set free in this country." 31 What a fine school for "the working out of Christian virtues" slavery was! exclaimed the Reverend Simeon Doggett (1793-1852):

Where on earth, could a moral picture be filled with a richer array of human excellence, than the tenure of slavery is capable of exhibiting? Look at the richly cultivated plantation populated with as many intellectual beings, as the faithful Abraham possessed, and consider the master as king and priest of this numerous household. What a happy nursery for heaven this might be made! 32

A society of order was buttressed by wealth and business. "No man," exclaimed Henry W. Bellows (1814-1882), "occupies a more commanding moral position, displays a more useful character, or wins a more sincere and compulsory reverence, than the Christian Merchant!" Dr. Francis Parkman (1788-1852) ranked merchants with the "princes and ... honorable of the earth." 33 They paid for

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31 Peabody sympathized with the plight of the slaveholder: "I am not complaining of the owners of slaves, they cannot get rid of them, it would be as humane to throw them from the decks in the middle passage as to set them free in our country." See William B. O. Peabody, An Address, Delivered at Springfield, Before the Hampden Colonization Society, July 4th, 1828 (Springfield: S. Bowles, 1828), pp. 3, 9.

32 Simeon Doggett, Two Discourses on the Subject of Slavery (Boston: Minot Pratt, 1845), p. 10.

society's schools, they built new churches and supplied the bulk of their congregation's budgets, and their wealth supposedly filtered down through all levels of society. Fidelity to contracts and respect for property might be secured at times in the face of some human despair and loss, but such were the moral dangers of wealthy men. Unitarian men of wealth needed clerical leadership, and men like Nathaniel L. Frothingham, Francis Parkman, George Putnam (1807-1878), Ephraim Peabody (1807-1856), Henry Bellows, and other Unitarian conservative clergymen ministered to them. 17

Finally, a society of order required a constant vigil against crime, blasphemy, and immorality. Some conservatives were troubled over an apparent coddling of criminals in American society and the depredation of strong law enforcement. William Parsons Lunt (1805-1877), Unitarian minister at Quincy, Massachusetts, felt compelled to preach, in 1847, on the appropriate use of force in the government of the world. Religion contained more than an idea of a government of love, and "force is at the foundation of all society," as it always has been. "Society is based upon a compulsory, not a voluntary principle." Lunt supported a concept of the "divine right . . . of force," and maintained the lawfulness of Christianity in employing force to uphold social order and restrain crime. 18 Crime and its "heroes" were dangerously idolized, wrote Nathaniel L. Frothingham. Society seemed to prefer Barabbas to Christ. 19 There was an increasing "disposition to interfere with the strict march of justice, to arrest and prevent the infliction of deserved punishment. . . . No sooner is an atrocious offense detected, convicted, than an endeavour is made to protect the


offender." This "generous sensitiveness" towards criminals was growing "excessive" and Frothingham called on citizens to resist this dangerous trend. Capital punishment, the law's various penalties, were deterrents to wrong-doing. These penalties stood between law-abiding people and the "robber's violence and the assassin's knife." Let them not undermine the law by a "wasteful and waisy tide of a mistaken philanthropy," that was "injurious to the supremacy of the laws, to the safety of the commonwealth, and to public morals." Frothingham enlisted his humble plea against the current "diseased state of sentiment" that pampered criminals.20

Not surprisingly, conservative Unitarians saw Christian religious indoctrination as a deterrent to crime. Samuel K. Lothrop (1804-1886), a "paladin of conservatism," praised the decision against Abner Kent's blasphemy, in 1838, as "just and salutary," and called upon the civil government to sustain and uphold the recognition of God's existence. By restraining the atheist from doing his "dark and de-basing work," by refusing to yield to that "morbid sensibility" to sympathize with condemned criminals, society's "good, honest, industrious, and peaceable citizens" could sleep soundly, knowing their life and property were made safe and sure.21 George Putnam, in speaking before the Governor and General Court of Massachusetts, demanded that "heathenism, atheism, Islamism," and religious neutrality be kept out of the state's colleges, and that Christianity "be recognized and taught in them, distinctly, earnestly inculcated."22 It was manifest: a society of order was indispensably linked to a religion of order.

B. A Religion of Order

Most conservative Unitarians believed that a minister's particular role was to conduct worship on Sunday mornings. Sunday was to be "the peaceful Sabbath, giving rest and hope to a disordered world."

20 Nathaniel L. Frothingham, *The Russin Released. A Sermon, Preached to the First Church, on Sunday, 21st February, 1836* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1836), pp. 7-8, 10-11, 13, 15.
22 Putnam (note 1 above), pp. 23-24, 25.
Clergymen abandoned their calling if they descended from their pulpit into the “tumult and the dust of secular contention,” said Dr. Parkman. They could thereby destroy their power to influence individuals. For their ministry was of religious example; they were not trained nor experienced enough to change individuals nor alter society. Ephraim Peabody spoke for a great number of conservative Unitarian ministers when he confessed that he did not introduce controversial and secular topics in his Sunday worship because his parishioners had “other sources of information on such subjects—that this place should be kept apart from the strife of the hour [and] should be associated with thoughts and habits of worship.”

For Unitarian conservatives that old time religion was good enough. The faithful preaching of “the old principles and doctrines” was a minister’s main occupation, said William Greenleaf Eliot (1811–1887). William P. Lunt and Alexander Young (1800–1854) revered the ancient forms, and preferred, with Gannett, “constancy to change” in devotional exercises as well as society.


28 William Greenleaf Eliot, “[Diary] Notebook #1,” 18 November 1847, MoSW.

27 Nathaniel L. Frothingham, Memoir of William Parsons Lunt, Reprinted from the Massachusetts Historical Society’s Collections, [Boston, 1857], 4; George E. Baker, “John Quincy Adams as a Unitarian. Extracts from His Diary, 1811–1849,” UR, XVI (1881), 149; Ezra Stiles Gannett, A Discourse Delivered in the Meetinghouse on Church Green, Boston, on Monday, March 22, 1854, at the Funeral of the Late Rev. Alexander Young, D.D. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols & Co., 1854), p. 17; Gannett, A Sermon Preached in the Arlington-Street Church, On Sunday, July 3, 1864, At the Close of the Forty-First Year of his Ministry (Boston: John Wilson &
puffed with pride in recalling with his congregation his twenty-year ministry in which they had "loved to dwell within [themselves]," glorifying their Master, and insisting upon "the sacred decency of Christian order." 24 Francis Parkman pushed hard for the promotion of reverence for the constancy and separateness of the "institutions of our holy religion." 25 He made a fetish out of clerical propinquitv and formalities. 26 The minister should never forget he had been "separated" to the gospel ministry, and his religious society should function like a "well-ordered family." 27 The free church experiments—to say nothing of the theological views—of men like Theodore Parker (1810-1860) and James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888) with their free pews and lay participation were bêtes noires to clergymen like Parkman and Frothingham. If an angel came down from heaven to preach for him, said Parkman, and not be ordained, he would not let him into his pulpit. 28 Frothingham viewed Clarke's installation in Freeman Place Chapel (Church of the Disciples), in 1848, and later sardonically commented: "David's soul did not rejoice that day." 29

Son, 1854), p. 6; Gannett, "Personal and Social Reform," MRM, I (February 1844), 41.

24 Nathaniel L. Frothingham, A Sermon, Preached to the First Church, by its Minister ... on the Twentieth Anniversary of His Ordination, March 15, 1835 (Boston: Munroe & Francis, 1835), pp. 9-10. Neither abolitionists nor colonizationists were given a seat in "our holy places," said Frothingham. See ibid., pp. 10-12; the records of his parish, the First Church in Boston, do reveal that the church refused use of their building on three occasions to abolitionists and once to colonizationists. See Richard D. Pierce, ed., "The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868," Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, XL (Boston: Published by the Society, 1969), 723, 725, 748-749, 756.

25 Francis Parkman (note 24 above), p. 17; also his Enquiry of the Fathers, or Seeking Wisdom from the Past. Discourses Preached in the New North Church, on Lord's Day, December 9th, on the Completion of the 124th Year from the Establishment of the Church and of the 21st Year Since the Settlement of the Present Pastor (Boston: Samuel N. Dickinson, 1839), p. 16.

26 [Frederic Dan Huntington?], "Death of Rev. Francis Parkman, D.D." MRM, IX (1852), 570.

27 Francis Parkman, Discourse Delivered in the Church in Brattle Square, on Sunday, May 3, 1830, Occasioned by the Death of Rev. John T. Kirkland ... (Boston: John H. Eastburn, 1840), p. 13; also his Enquiry (note 26 above), p. 29.

28 James Freeman Clarke to William Channing Gannett, Jamaica Plain, 3 March 1874, James Freeman Clarke Papers, MFI.

An erudite homily once or twice a Sunday was the primary contribution a conservative congregation demanded from its minister. Some of the most highly respected and successful conservative clergymen—men like Dewey, Gannett, Ephraim Peabody, John Hopkins Morison (1808–1866), Putnam, Lunt—were either inadequate pastors or invalids or both. With but one exception (Gannett), these ministers did not seek to fulfill a pastoral role and the role was not demanded of them. Ministerial silence before the onrush of controversial social issues was entirely acceptable to conservative congregations. Moreover, interference with society and its problems would have brought the holy Christian ministry much too close to political involvement.

C. A Politics of Order

In the context of the antislavery crisis, the third member of the Unitarian trinity of order, the politics of order, gave the conservative Unitarians considerable apprehension. A politics of order required

84 Orville Dewey avoided visitations to the sick and bereaved of his congregation, and suffered from poor eyesight and bad health. See his Autobiography and Letters, Mary E. Dewey, ed. (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1881), pp. 104–107. Frail Ephraim Peabody suffered from consumption that impeded his pastoral care and took his life at forty-nine years of age. See his Sermons (note 25 above), p. 85; also Fiske, Annals (note 25 above), II, 560. Two short cases were the “life-companions” of Ezra Stiles Gannett, who suffered from bad health and paralysis. Yet, in Gannett’s case, the man was a tireless pastor. See William Channing Gannett, Ezra Stiles Gannett, Unitarian Minister of Boston, 1824–1871 (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1875), pp. 154–155, 206–207, 359. George Putnam enjoyed good health, but was a miserable pastor. See Rev. George Putnam, D.D., "UR, IX (1876), 565–566; Samuel A. Eliot, ed., Heraldis of a Liberal Faith, III (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1910), 310. For thirty years of his ministry, John Hopkins Morison was "a deliberate invalid," which drastically reduced the time he could devote to pastoral care. See George S. Morison, John Hopkins Morison: A Memoir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1897), pp. 65, 67. "Dr. Lunt was by nature fitted for the prophetic more than the pastoral duties of his office. The gift of demonstrative sympathy he did not possess. He could never overcome an instinctive self-distrust in dealing with people." See Eliot, Heraldis (supra), III, 234–235. Undoubtedly, poor health helps to explain the reluctance of some of these men to become involved in the excitement of abolitionism, even if they had wanted to take part. Admittedly, to draw conclusions regarding attitudes towards social reforms on the basis of the evidence related to "pastoral commitment" requires extensive research into the psychology and motivations of these men. We are, of course, only suggesting the possibility of parallels here and are not declaring that they existed.

85 Gannett, "Personal and Social Reform" (note 27 above), p. 40.
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fealty to a strong Union, but the waves of antislavery bickering beat mightily against it. Disturbed conservatives were appalled by the disunion sentiment of the radical abolitionists. Those great protectors of the Union, Daniel Webster (1782-1852) and Edward Everett, both Unitarian laymen, led the political thinking of their conservative co-religionists. Everett had a “constitutional fastidiousness of conservativism,” and was obsessed by his love of the Union. Conservative Unitarian ministers took Everett’s obsession into their pulpits. The Union was an “amazing spectacle” to the world, Lunt declared, a mighty instrument “for advancing the cause of freedom and civilization.” The Union was an instructor to the world, agreed Gannett, exciting Europeans especially with its example of “constitutional liberty.” He praised God for the Union and for the men who created it. They knew “the importance of social order,” remarked Gannett. Now there were reformers who denied the value of the Union and sought to destroy it. Their agitation brought it into danger and contempt. To stem the proliferation of disrespect for the Union, Lunt wanted love of the Union to be taught to young people together with love of God; Gannett’s solution was to call in “religion to control the deliberations” of legislation and public men. What if the Union were dissolved? Gannett trembled at the possibility:

I cannot contemplate its possible overthrow but as a calamity too great for the common speech of men to describe. I cling to the Union, and pray that it may be preserved from dissolution, because such an event would involve the disappointment of the dearest hopes of the philanthropist, and put back the

36 John Greenleaf Whittier to Robert C. Waterston, Amesbury, 25 January 1865, MH. For a discussion of this “magnificent obsession” of Everett, see Christian (note 12 above), pp. 301, 312; cf. also Frothingham (note 13 above), pp. 132, 133, 134.


38 Ezra Stiles Gannett, Thanksgiving for the Union: A Discourse Delivered in the Federal-Street Meetinghouse in Boston, on Thanksgiving-Day, November 26, 1832 (Boston: William Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1832), pp. 3-7, 11-12.


40 Lunt (note 37 above), p. 28; Gannett (note 1 above), p. 7.
world. . . . Not freedom only, but civilization, would suffer incalculable detriment. . . . Nothing would be gained by dissolving the Union — nothing — nothing.

Antislavery agitation for disunion was to Gannett "treason," treason to the country, to humanity. Lift up the fervent prayer, he cried, "God save the Union!" 41

Unitarian conservatives also fretted over the accumulation of power by America's democratic electorate. Parkman expressed caution over the pretensions of America's "wild democracy." Frothingham spoke of the "spirit of anarchy" and "democratic bigotry and fanaticism" rampant in the country. "Impetuous masses," said this man who so dearly loved law and order, "are not likely to be the safest lawgivers," or the most law-abiding. The people of a democracy could be "as absolute, as arbitrary, as uncontrolled, and as capricious too," preached George Putnam, as any despotic monarch. Beware of the despotism of "an unmixed democracy." 42 The "greatest atrocities" in history had been carried out, not by kings, but by "excited and dominant masses." They were easily excited against property, showed "a noisy and meddlesome zeal for the rights of the poor," and demonstrated "innumerable means of thwarting, vexing, hampering the thrifty and successful, — making them odious and suspected." 43

Lunt did not agree with Putnam's analysis of "king Majority." Akin to a recent president's suggestion of a "silent majority" was Lunt's idea of a "moderate majority," calm, cool, and quietly in control. However, some believed this conservative majority was being undermined by the extension of the franchise. 44 The future looked bleak and Putnam wailed the conservatives' lamentations:

Absolute and unmixed democracy, such as we are approaching, — far distant be the day of our reaching it! — is tantamount to downright and insupportable despotism, the worst in the world, because it is the reign of chaos and confusion. 45

The conservatives also wrung their hands over the emergence of the force and corrupting influence of the political press; they deplored

41 Gannett (note 18 above), pp. 13, 17, 22.
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the conformist pressures upon the American mind. The press was "more powerful than armies," and public opinion was being manipulated, Orville Dewey reported, "to an extent that private and personal independence was being abridged." 46 The tone of a large portion of the political press, Gannett preached in an election sermon of 1842, was "unchristian, immoral, barbarous." On this occasion, before the governor and legislature of Massachusetts, Gannett called for placing the press "under the control of moral and religious conviction." 46

The Unitarian conservatives would go to war to secure the continuance of political order. War for any reason, of course, was anathema to non-resistant abolitionists. When Dewey spoke of "christian fighting" in an address before the American Peace Society, the Society felt compelled publicly to disclaim his views. 47 Non-resistants would also be perturbed when other conservative Unitarians espoused the "moral duty" of war. 48

Finally, a politics of order required that the church must preserve the pulpit from political preaching. Defending themselves from abolitionist attacks, the Unitarian conservatives maintained that they were also antislavery, but since slavery was a political issue, they were obligated to keep the great commandment "Thou shalt not preach politics." The slavery question was so "full of hard political problems," declared Frothingham, it was outside the preacher's province. 49


48 The conservatives usually expressed their expositions on the "moral duty" of war in sermons before artillery companies. Cf. e.g., Lothrop (note 4 above), p. 20; Lunt (note 18 above), esp. pp. 14-16, 20-23.

49 Frothingham (note 10 above), p. 116. Parkman, Dewey, Everett, and probably every other Unitarian conservative claimed they disapproved of slavery as an institution and therefore were antislavery men. See [Francis Parkman], "Courtesy and Charity of Abolitionism," CR. XXIV:47 (18 October 1845), 23; Orville Dewey, "Abolitionism," Christian Inquirer, I:47 (31 July 1847), 166-167; Dewey, On Ameri-
D. Unitarians of Disorder

Little wonder then that against this backdrop of conservatism, radical abolitionists would be viewed as ultraists of disorder, if possible to be disciplined and crushed, at least to be avoided and ignored. The conservative Unitarians used various epithets in condemning the "spasmodic vituperation" of the abolitionists, calling them fanatics, raving enthusiasts, troublemakers, extravagant, violent and evil, excessive zealots, arrogant and foolish, strange enthusiasts, fierce, and, of course, ultraists. The radical abolitionists' attack upon the churches stung the conservative Unitarians rather painfully and they protested vigorously this attack in their anti-abolitionist harangues. Several Unitarian conservatives were special targets for the radical abolitionists: Dr. Francis Parkman of New North Church, Boston, primarily because he effectively blocked any radical antislavery statements by the American Unitarian Association; Dr. Orville Dewey, minister


[Samuel May, Jr.], "American Unitarians," Notes submitted to Mr. Estlin in 1853 for use in the Anti-Slavery Advocate, May Papers, Boston Public Library. For biographical details of Parkman's life, see William Strueg, Annals of the American
of the Church of the Messiah, New York City, and New South Green, Boston, and president of the American Unitarian Association, 1845–1847, principally castigated by the abolitionists for his ambiguous statements on the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. 64 Dr. Ezra Stiles Gannett of Federal Street Church and president of the American Unitarian Association, 1847–1851, for his hostility towards the abolitionists; 65 Dr. Ephraim Peabody, minister in New Bedford, and afterwards of King’s Chapel, Boston, for betrayal and cowardice before the abolitionists and younger Unitarian ministers; and William Greenleaf Eliot of the Church of the Messiah, St. Louis, for buying slaves in order to free them, and for being “a slave-state time-server.” 66

The conservative Unitarians returned fire, condemning the radical abolitionists as “promoters of insurrection among slaves,” and leaders of a “dangerous movement.” 67 They decried the “foreign meddlers” in their activities. 68 They lampooned “the black and white ladies” who

64 The radicals, before the crisis of the 1850s, had also lashed out at both Dewey and Gannett for their “softness” on slavery. See Samuel May, Jr., to Maria Weston Chapman, Leicester, 23 July 1844, May Papers, Boston Public Library.


met in "an hour of romance and reverie" in order to plot emancipation. Conservative Sidney Willard (1775-1859), as editor of the Christian Register, blamed the 1835 anti-abolitionist riot in Boston upon Maria Weston Chapman's Female Anti-Slavery Society. The women were in bad taste in giving publicity to their meeting. Better the "gentler sex . . . seek information at home, and lend their influence in a more private way." 69 Willard was not alone in condemning the abolitionists for the riots against their activities. William G. Eliot in close proximity to the Alton Affair ranked the contentious Lovejoy with his murderers, a "martyr to his own great rashness." 70 Everett held the opinion that the radical abolitionists of Boston were breaking Massachusetts law and should be prosecuted as criminals. 71 Once the radical abolitionists began to promulgate disunion sentiment in the 1840s, the conservatives feared for federal law more than state law. "I know treason when I see it," announced Frothingham. 72 His fellow conservative, Samuel K. Lothrop, concurred. If the abolition disunionists did not acknowledge the authority of the Constitution and protested parts of it as "weak and ridiculous," then Lothrop declared, in language strongly in the modern refrain of "love America or leave it," they have no right nor claim to the name American. They ought not to have office, vote, civil rights, privileges nor security by virtue of the Constitution. 73

E. Exiling the Source of Disorder

Colonization, the "antislavery reform" of the conservative Unitarians, was a plan to export the element of disorder from American society, religion, and politics. The evidence provided by coloniza-
tionist tracts, proceedings, and periodicals strongly supports the conclusion that the scheme of colonization was the proposal most widely accepted by them for alleviating the problem of slavery. Dewey, Parkman, Lunt, Gannett, and Everett held life membership in either

69 Willard (note 57 above), pp. 2-3.
72 Frothingham (note 5 above), p. 267.
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the American Colonization Society or the Massachusetts Colonization Society.64 Although not holding a life membership, Frothingham, Bulfinch, and Putnam, along with many other Unitarians, contributed generously to the two societies.65 Whether or not the $2 sent in one year to the Massachusetts Colonization Society by "A Friend of the White Race" was from a Unitarian is not known.66

Admittedly, there were few Unitarians who achieved elective office in the societies. Gannett and the Reverend Charles Brooks (1795-1872) were vice-presidents of the Massachusetts Society, and Albert Fearing (1798-1875), a very wealthy Unitarian layman, was on its board of managers.67 It has been suggested that the preponderance of orthodox Congregationalists in the societies made it difficult for Unitarians either to try for or to achieve influence in them.68 This thesis is supported by the treatment Gannett and Sidney Willard received at the hands of the Boston front organization of colonizationists, the American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race, in 1835. Before the organization had come to the end of its

64 Other Unitarians holding life membership in either of the two societies were Convers Francis, George S. Ellis, Jared Sparks, Andrew Preston Peabody, Robert G. Shaw, Samuel Hoar, Christopher Tappan Thayer, Samuel A. Eliot, Oliver C. Everett, Albert Fearing, Charles Babbridge, Charles Grady Loring, Norwood Damon, Thomas Hill, Crawford Nightingale, William Whitwell, Chandler Robbins, John Ailey, Nathan Parker, James Kendall, Henry Edes, James Wilson, Barzillai Frost, Judge Cranch, Frederick West Holland, Isaac Hurd, Millard Fillmore, William Newell, Abiel Abbott, Ezra Carpenter, Francis Watts, and Nathan Appleton. This information was secured by checking the African Repository and the annual reports of the American Colonization Society and Massachusetts Colonization Society against the clerical and life-membership lists of the American Unitarian Association.


short life, its orthodox-dominated leadership had fairly well purged its Unitarian members.  

The racist motivation behind so much of the colonizationist activity is not lacking in the writings of the Unitarian colonizationists. Robert Little (—?–1827) of the First Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C., in one of the earliest Unitarian addresses in behalf of the Colonization Society, called upon his people to think of their posterity. Colonization was humane to the blacks, said Little, a promoter of civilization in Africa, a contribution to the ending of the slave trade, and “the securing of the civil liberties” in America “by preventing the necessity of a large standing army” to keep the freed Negroes in check. Every one of these items was more worthy of financial aid “than all the religious missions of the country.”

Think of our white posterity! This tocsin would be sounded and sounded again.

“It has become so alarming,” worried William B. O. Peabody, for someday the slaves will have power. The slaveholders would release their slaves if they could be withdrawn from the country. The slaves are “the fire-damp of the mine,” ever subject to “a quick and awful explosion.” Listen to the prophet, admonished Peabody, “Thine end shall come!” 

Simeon Doggett listened and seconded Peabody’s call for black colonization. “Many considerations,” Doggett said, seem to recommend and urge this great work. Nature, or rather, nature’s God, hath constituted such prominent characteristics of distinction between the whites and the blacks, as to show that it was his will, that they should inhabit separate portions of the globe. This intimation seems to be corroborated by a kind of instinctive repulsion... And would every white inhabitant in the Union unite their strength in this glorious cause, so natural, so just; it would seem, that a gradual emancipation might be effected, and the different colors placed in the climates for which God designed them.

But when the black was carried to his proper climate, let him take


71 Peabody (note 14 above), p. 13. Fifteen years later, Peabody still supported colonization to relieve the country of slavery; see his Familiar Address (note 15 above), p. 11.

72 Simeon Doggett (note 15 above), pp. 16-27.
with him, advised Stephen G. Bulfinch, “the white man’s faith,” for the emigrants to Liberia “are themselves the monuments of the white man’s mercy and justice.” White Americans should tell the men and women of Africa, continued Bulfinch, that they were sending them liberated men to live in the home we had purchased for them on Africa’s shore. They had done this that they “might win [their] continent for Christ.”

Was this really the reason? Orville Dewey was much more honest. The African people have shown improvement in America, declared Dewey, and those whom we sent to Africa brought Christianity and civilization to the continent. It was not America’s design to civilize Africa, but God was bringing about that goal in spite of our original intentions. Dewey knew those intentions were to get rid of a race inferior to the European albeit having “the faculties and capabilities, the feelings and rights” of men. The southerner asked, and Dewey deeply understood and shared his agony: What should be done? The Negroes could not take care of themselves, they could not be voters, they could not be judges or elected officials, they could not marry whites nor have social equality with whites; they were likely to become “vicious, disorderly, dangerous.” Dewey would have mentioned the question of physical differences between the races, but his personal “repugnance to these details” out of deference to his “brethren of the darker hue” prevented him. Quite apart from southern views, Dewey himself believed blacks would always be forbidden, and justly so for “physiological reasons,” intermarriage with whites. When the blacks saw that they “have not any fair and just position in American society and government,” civil wars could eventually spring up, far worse than any they had ever seen. As long as the Negroes were with us, declared Dewey, they “must ever be a small and depressed minority” separated from us by “impassable physical, if not mental barriers.”

What should be done? Get rid of them. Their only chance lay in

their “entire removal from the country.” 78 Send them over a hill and
far away—“give them a country beyond the mountains,—say the
Californias,—where they might be a nation by themselves.” 79 Send
them back to Africa. 80

There was scarcely a place in America, said William G. Eliot to the
Colonization Society of St. Louis, in 1848, where the Negro people
had any fair chance for improvement and social advancement. Where-
ever they were introduced into the social companionship of whites
they often ended up the objects of ridicule. It was Eliot’s opinion
that to place the blacks

upon equal footing, to give them equal political, social, and civil privileges with
the whites is quite an impracticable thing in our day, and probably will be
impracticable for many generations to come, if not forever. I am by no means
sure that it is desirable. I am certain of its impracticability.

Provide a home for them in Africa, said Eliot, for we were unable to
give one to them here. 81

Tenaciously, many Unitarian conservatives clung to the coloniza-
tionist philosophy as a legitimate antislavery program. They saw
abolitionism as a movement that would undermine all order and
stability. Their pattern of thought was that of committed social con-
servatives who, in the ante-bellum period, desired to refrain from
antagonizing the South, who were prejudiced in varying degrees about
Negro abilities and intelligence, who detested the unsettling con-
sequences of treasonous abolitionist agitation, who shuddered at the
encroachment of political questions upon pulpit and pew, and who
adored the Union with a devotion that bordered upon idolatry. They
argued that abolitionist agitation increased the longevity of American
slavery. They failed to see or to believe that perhaps it was their own
ideas, conduct, and influence that prolonged the life of America’s
most tragic institution.

78 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
81 William G. Eliot, “Address Before the Young Men’s Colonization Society of
Sanlt Louis, January 11th, 1848.” [From the Missionary Herald of Religious Liberty?],
notebook clipping. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. Eliot was president of
the Young Men’s Colonization Society of St. Louis. See Eliot, “[Diary] Notebook
#1,” entries for 2 December 1847, to January 1848, 11 January 1848, 19 March
1848, April 1848, MoSW; W. G. Eliot to Christopher Eliot, St. Louis, 26 January
1886, MoSW.
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