

The New York *Christian Inquirer* on Slavery: Progressive and Progressing Viewpoints?

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American theologian Henry Whitney Bellows was one of the most prominent Unitarian figures of the nineteenth century. He is credited with having established the form for today's largest Unitarian organizations through his creation of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches and is known for his part in forming the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the Civil War.¹ Also a great speaker and writer, he assumed editorship of the New York-based Unitarian newspaper, *The Christian Inquirer*, in 1847 following the death of William Kirkland, the newspaper's founder. Bellows was thus able to spread his Unitarian influence and authority statewide and beyond.² He was devoted, beyond immediate religious pursuits, to related issues. For instance, he favored the eradication of slavery, a fitting position in light of Unitarian belief in the inherent human value and capacity for rational thinking of all persons. Historically, liberal Christians have been aligned with three different sides of the argument on slavery: (1) anti-expansion or gradualism, which supports the abolishment of slavery or the prevention of its growth, but which also believed in salvaging the southern economy and the relationship between North and South; (2) the position which Martin Luther King would later call that of the "white moderate," who believes slavery and racism are morally wrong but will not take action against the injustice; and (3) the support and fight for emancipation, with constitutional abolition the only acceptable option.³ While these categories have received ample scholarly attention, what has not been studied is the interaction of these ideas within *The Christian Inquirer* in the years

preceding the American Civil War.⁴ From the year 1847 through the next decade, the *Christian Inquirer* published numerous articles challenging various issues occurring in the South. The journal argued against some of the most important and controversial statutes, including the Fugitive Slave Law, the Nebraska Bill, and *Dred Scott v. Stanford*. In this essay, I will argue that, as the Civil War approached, a shift occurred in the paper's attitude toward slavery—from simply denouncing expansion to favoring the emancipation of slaves. That change, as I see it, was motivated by Unitarian values.

This transformation began in 1847 when the paper wrote, "it seems to us that every northern press, secular or religious, daily or weekly, should become an anti-extension-of-slavery press," adding that there is, however, "no disposition to needle with the existing slavery in the Union."⁵ Here reside views in line with the gradualist option, suggesting that media should support laws that simply stop the *expansion* of slavery into the country's newly acquired territories, thus—however lamentably—keeping the South's generally pro-slavery policies and practices in place. The publication's views align with those of other organizations throughout New England, their physical distance allowing them to prioritize potential economic repercussions over moral judgement. Although a more progressive stance would better represent Bellows' Unitarian beliefs, it was not until many years and policies later that the *Inquirer* would put radical opinions to print.

Bellows begins to show this political preference for limiting the expansion of slavery, outlining his wish for newly acquired territories: “The brightest day our country has seen since the Declaration of Independence will be that in which Congress passes the resolutions declaring the perpetual independence from the tyranny of slavery of all territories hereafter added to the United States. It will be the finishing stroke of American Slavery.”⁶ Here the newspaper, although referring to slavery as a “tyranny,” merely focuses on the need for slavery to cease expansion. If, at this time, the newspaper believed in total emancipation, its editors would have written that the brightest day would be that in which all slaves were free. Though possibly sensible for its time, I propose that this stance resulted in residual guilt for Bellows and is ultimately what pushed him to support publicly the total abolishment of slavery.

His feelings of culpability surface in the year 1848 when the *Christian Inquirer* challenges Thomas Clingman, senator from North Carolina, on his speech contending that the North has no constitutional right to withhold escaped slaves from owners.⁷ The newspaper responded that while it may not be constitutional to go against Fugitive Slave policy, it is nonetheless immoral to assist slave owners. This argument is important, then, because it successfully inches the journal’s position further away from that of the “white moderate” and approaches an outlook supported by the Unitarian belief in inherent human value. The newspaper’s progression is shown in its 1849 challenge to the passivity of “anti-slavery organizations.” After attending an American Anti-Slavery Society meeting, Bellows concluded that the society is opposed to slavery “in the abstract; opposed to it if it were a thing to be done over again; opposed to it, if they must take sides either

way, (which they need not); opposed to it so far as not directly to support it.”⁸ But they are “not opposed to it in a way to give slaveholders any apprehension, or slaves any hope!”⁹ By challenging this emancipationist group, historically known for its mission to convince the North of the sin of slavery, we see a more proactive, but still cautious approach. Bellows, while qualifying his outrage, nonetheless illustrates that he will challenge any person or organization that is not doing their part aggressively to eradicate slavery.

The Christian Inquirer thus demonstrated a more assertive approach in its writings, but without yet calling for the liberation of slaves. The newspaper continued to print columns on the topic of the Fugitive Slave Law, but did not simply just advocate that the North frown upon the law. He instead suggested that the law be broken. He grounded that antinomianism on the assumption that any policy protective of slavery was sinful: “If God forbids us to return the fugitive, the Constitution and the law which commands us to do it are themselves sinful, and to be disobeyed by every righteous man.”¹⁰ To support the rejection of such immoral policies, the paper advocates for what would now be referred to as a deconstructive, living-and-breathing interpretation of the Constitution: “When we can accommodate the Constitution, it is not well to change its terms. It is better that we should profit by its elasticity, than alter its form. We thus disturb less the veneration of the nation for the fundamental law.”¹¹ By aligning himself with a flexible understanding of the Constitution, Bellows qualifies his outlook on breaking the law, all the while empowering readers to consider their role in public policy.

After the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect in 1850, *The Christian Inquirer*’s commentary on slavery slowed significantly

as a result of Henry Clay's Compromise, which aimed to silence early calls for emancipation.¹² But in 1852, the newspaper challenged a pamphlet titled "Slavery in the Southern States," which argues that slavery and "its evils are excusable on the same principle" as are other immoral occurrences, such as religious persecution.¹³ This position is of course seen as unethical to Bellows, because Unitarians deemed mankind as inherently good; therefore, the argument that bad actions are justified by other wrongdoings was illogical. These values were also apparent in an 1854 column that states, "all those who love the elevation of all races must make friends of the slaveholder as well as the slave, explain to the slaveholder his shortsightedness, explain to the slave his capabilities."¹⁴ This is a clear representation of the Unitarian belief in forgiveness and the human capacity to be good and rational, which is essential in the *Inquirer's* transition from anti-expansionist to emancipationist sentiment. For the Unitarian, virtue should be expected and sought after, with bad actions considered sinful but forgivable; hence, slavery should be abolished but also atoned for. Despite the belief of the Southern States, two wrongs do not make a right, but such transgression can be reconciled in the eyes of the liberal Christian.

Once the Nebraska Bill passed through Congress, a critical shift of opinions occurred in the newspaper's publications. The paper accounted for how, relative to new states,

"risk was small in 1821, when Missouri was admitted. It was greater in 1845, when Texas was admitted. It was greater still in 1850, and greatest of all now; but even now probability renders such risk trifling, compared to what it will be hereafter. Every concession of the

North increases the political power of the slave States, making them more willing to dissolve the Union."¹⁵

The newspaper then announced that it would no longer be on board with current slave policies. While the editors remained moderate in previous issues, stating they would stay out of southern matters if slavery were curtailed from expanding, the newspaper now objected to the prospect of imminent slave-state expansion. This column also suggests that Unitarians were against expansionism and the concept of Manifest Destiny because such outlooks and policies promote the extension of slavery. Thus, the newspaper's position on the matter *had* to change if it were to stay true to liberal-Christian religious and moral principles.

Because Unitarians harbored values that they deemed universal, they thought that everyone would come to the same moral conclusions: "If at the end of that time there is still a majority in its favor, let it pass. We shall have done our duty. But you shall not hurry it through and make it a law without giving the country this opportunity."¹⁶ Here *The Christian Inquirer* recognizes that even if the Nebraska Bill passes through Senate, the newspaper had made a valiant effort to prevent it. The editors knew that their opinions, though strong, could not change the ruling. That said, their lament in some measure influenced other Northerners and politicians and relieved their guilt for not having sooner promoted the emancipation of all slaves sooner. Even if Bellows could not change the ruling, he might at least have expressed contempt for the bill; the newspaper will not stop writing about these issues because its editors "have acted on this principle, and propose to continue so to do in conducting this journal."¹⁷

The *Inquirer* made its largest step toward radical abolitionism (that, an abolition of a Union harboring slavery) in 1855:

It would be a magnificent confidence in humanity and in the God of justice, to do that act of right, to undo that tremendous wrong, and take the consequences. I believe with all of my heart, that it would be utterly, sublimely safe, both for the whites and the blacks. What have the whites to fear from a race of the tenderness of whose affection towards them they are continually boasting?

This sentiment not only demonstrates Unitarian optimism toward the situation, but also strategically attempts to garner popular support for abolitionism as a political movement willing to dissolve the Union. Bellows still subtly avoids directly stating slavery should be illegal, presumably because he is still afraid of sparking too much controversy. But this peacekeeping changed when the paper published a piece titled “The Pro-Slavery Testimony,” an article which argues that Northerners will never get on board with emancipation if the press continues to present southern slaves through a lens of Northern ignorance:

In a state of society like this, can we expect the slave, out of sight and out of mind, the slave, the child of a barbarous race, clothes in darkness, and seemingly marked by Providence with external token of inferiority, a being who owes his partial civilization to the crime that tore him from his home — that ordinarily acquiesces in his bondage, and often hugs his own chains— can we expect, in a partially Christianized and selfish community,

such as every people is, taken as a whole, that the case of the slave shall awaken deep sympathy and self-sacrificing devotion; shall take hold of the conscience and the heart of the Northern society? I appeal from the expectation to the fact. It does *not* take hold!¹⁹

If Northerners choose to ignore the political and social climate of the South, the issue will only worsen over time, rendering them equally responsible for any tragedies that might occur. To Unitarians, willful naivete is not an excuse for sinful behavior. Therefore, journalists must be informed on the realities of slavery and report without hesitation. The *Christian Inquirer* conveys strict intolerance for a false presentation of slaves, further appealing to their readers’ conscience by pointing out that involuntary servitude not only goes against all principles of Unitarian religion but is also a disgrace to the U.S.:

When we think *what a man is*, wherein the true dignity of a human being lies— in self-reliance, forethought, the bearing of his own burdens, the exercise of his own will, the discharge of his own conscience, the education and development of his own nature—what a commentary on the progress of Christianity, what a gloss upon our Constitution, what a libel on our civilization, is the legalized bondage of one-sixth of our population!²⁰

Here we arrive at the truest form of Unitarianism, one that recognizes the disgrace that slavery brings to the country via slaveholders’ total disregard for human intelligence and morality. The *Inquirer* explains that the “roots of slavery lie so deep in the moral indifference and general inhumanity of society” that a true anti-

slavery movement has not yet “fully comprehended its own dignity and importance.”²¹ If the current effort were actually *against* slavery, it would not be so weak in opinion, but would insist on the protection of all people’s dignity.

Attempting to spark a more just movement, Bellows used different techniques over the next few years better to communicate the *Inquirer’s* disapproval of popular outlook. These methods include book and sermon reviews, reprinting the columns of other newspapers, and writing about slavery with greater indignation. For instance, in 1856, the *Christian Inquirer* criticizes a sermon from a “Rev. Conway,” who argues that society operates best when it respects and refrains from challenging others’ opinions.²² The newspaper fights Conway’s position and takes a firm stance in advocating the difference between right and wrong: “We must do all we can and as fast as we can to get rid of Slavery, with a due regard to political obligations we have assumed. We are determined on that point. And the South has got to learn to bear our indignation and hatred of Slavery.”²³ The newspaper then goes on to say that Conway’s suggestions are utterly misguided, if only because passivity is a sin when concerning an oppressive system. Commenting on the positions of a different religious group, Bellows prints a column called “Calvinism and Liberty,” which suggests that even the Calvinists, whose version of Christianity they “detest,” are on the right path.²⁴ Because they take a stance against slavery, Bellows can “trust the piety, intelligence, and influence” of the Calvinist church.²⁵ Further writings detail the negligence of leaving slaves uneducated, calling it an act of “cruelty against slaves.”²⁶ Such conviction shows that the *Inquirer* finally accepted that slavery was not only a crime of exploitation but was also a blow to

the human capacity for reason—a God-given faculty and right.

Recognizing that slavery had no moral place within Unitarian principles, the paper announced that both Bellows and his ministry openly opposed the expansion of slavery and even considered the prospect of dissolving a Union harboring such sin. Bellows, said the newspaper, has “committed himself fully to the position of the Republican party, and boldly declared his preference even for disunion itself rather than submit to the dictation of the Slave Power.”²⁷ His support for the abolition of the Union is noteworthy because most northern politicians altogether avoided anything that could lead to Southern secession. The newspaper extends Bellows’ sentiment, quoting pieces of the Constitution to advance their argument: “To keep a man from liberty, then, is to keep him from happiness—from the possibility of happiness; or, as our own Declaration of Independence phrases it, ‘the pursuit of happiness’—one of its three ‘inalienable rights.’” Human servitude, by contrast, had “taken from the slave the promise of this life.”²⁸ By quoting this passage, the *Inquirer* anticipates the ideas of the 13th amendment, suggesting that if the right to happiness belongs to *all people*, so does citizenship.

Having already established a bolder take than most Northerners by accepting the possibility of a divided country, Bellows went a further in promoting his Unitarian beliefs through an article that appealed to readers’ emotions. He describes a story about a young African American musical prodigy and humanizes him by celebrating his skill and intellect.²⁹ This publication, though short, is deeply rooted in Unitarian values and fights for unprejudiced belief in human reason by suggesting that talent and intelligence reside in all people. Reinforcing that idea that *The Christian Inquirer* had

shifted from overt political editorials to more emotive modes of persuasion is a review in the newspaper of “The Autobiography of a Female Slave.”³⁰ Despite the misleading title, the author, Martha Griffin Browne, was actually a white slave owner turned abolitionist. While the story is not an actual autobiography, it is reviewed as having powerful descriptions of events and trials that many slaves faced and “remains a powerful anti-slavery narrative.”³¹ *The Christian Inquirer’s* column argues that it “glows with the most impassioned indignation” of all books yet.³² The newspaper affirmed that the book seems powerful in influencing Northern emancipationist opinions, as Bellows believed ignorance to be a to be a chief contributor to the persistence of slavery. By encouraging his readership to engage with anti-slavery narratives, he pushes readers toward what he sees as the future of the emancipationist movement, not just showing kindness to slaves, but also taking slaveowners publicly and embarrassingly to task.

After sharing such heart-wrenching slave narratives, *The Christian Inquirer* breaks from subtlety all together, publishing its most hard-hitting piece yet, “What Can Save America?”³³ This column illustrates the country’s sinful and selfish qualities and serves as one last barb in the guilty conscience of readers, criticizing society and its tolerance for slavery: “We have been in a crisis since ’76, and we shall be in a crisis probably for a century to come;” every day “the destiny of a new world unfolding, and the character of a hundred generations to come taking its hue from what we are all saying and doing day to day along this common, beaten path of life.”³⁴ This daunting depiction of America aims to scare readers, and then presents them with the solution—everyone must return to God. “The dark scroll of passion, appetite,

selfishness, sin, unrolls in every morning’s newspaper. The dollar is the god of this world.”³⁵ *The Inquirer* wants its readers to look at the world around them and fear what slavery has made of it, calling them to worship and be faithful to God’s wish for equality among men. Bellows saw selfishness, greed, and the exploitation of human life, and he exposed it, knowing that his God would never reward a deliberately indifferent world. This brutal honesty comes only four years before the onset of the Civil War and shows that *The Christian Inquirer* was not only a forerunner of the emancipationist movement but was also quick to acknowledge the abysmal social and political environment of the country brought on by slavery. These positions, however, were not developed overnight; they were a decade in the making, each submission inching ever closer to a fully formed anti-slavery presence.

These opinions, formally evading scholarly notice, express sentiments that, based on responses to the *Inquirer’s* criticism of passivity, clearly had significant impact. It is therefore essential to recognize the importance of the publication’s voice during this pivotal time. This period is just one chapter in the unsettling history that surrounds America’s formation: Native American tribes forcibly removed from their land and slaves packed into ships to suffer the Middle Passage and whatever loomed on the other side. This bleak period of the country’s history coincides with its celebration of Manifest Destiny. Although a principle once considered a birthright, it nonetheless inflicted pain on hundreds of thousands, merely for profit. Moreover, the nationalist values which anchored these tragedies survive in 21st-century globalism. As with Manifest Destiny, globalization is often driven by fiscal purposes, money being prioritized over the human life and dignity. In this ever-connected world, the

U.S. has become infamously guilty of “fixing” countries by imposing incompatible with those of other cultures. American global policy, which should theoretically advance other countries, instead often generates a spiral of negative consequence. Globalism has even paved the way for the horrors of human trafficking, now known as “modern slavery.” While these unfolding issues should insult our very humanity, technological advancements often blind us from confronting the consequences of globalism in the same way that the *Christian Inquirer* did with slavery. Bellows illuminated the self-serving principles of the nineteenth century and warned what was to come were people to continue to worship money as “the god of this world.”³⁶ Yet over a hundred and fifty years later, America refuses to recognize the full impact of its actions on the past, present, and future. Despite vows never to let history repeat itself, the country continues to be guided by the selfish and separatist values, against which the *Inquirer* extensively warned.

The Christian Inquirer challenged the idea that it was acceptable simply to “dislike” slavery and instead suggested that opinions do nothing without action. Bellows presented the Unitarian belief that neither oppression nor cruelty can be stopped if people are complacent. He confronted self-serving perspectives, challenging readers to uphold strong moral standards regardless of their distance from or experience with slavery. Not only were these opinions forward thinking, but also they predicted the future of American politics and judicial interpretations of the Constitution, suggesting that the *Inquirer* was on the right side of the country’s past.

Notes

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