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Abolitionism and Revivalism: A Study in Religious and Political Motivation

Sandra Lang McNair
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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ABOLITIONISM AND REVIVALISM:
A STUDY IN RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL MOTIVATION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Sandra Lang McNair
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Sandra McHair
Author

Approved, December 1963:

L. H. Johnson III
Ludwell H. Johnson III, Ph. D.

William W. Abbot
William W. Abbot, Ph. D.

Lester J. Cappon
Lester J. Cappon, Ph. D.

A fanatic is a man that does what he thinks th' Lord wud do
if He knew th' facts if th' case.

Peter Finley Dunne in
The World of Mr. Dooley

When hopes and dreams are loose in the streets, it is well
for the timid to lock doors, shutter windows, and lie low
until the wrath has passed. For there is often a monstrous
incongruity between the hopes, however noble and tender, and
the action that follows them.

Erik Hoffer in
The True Believer

ABSTRACT

The Great Revival, a series of outbursts of religious fervor inspired by the work of Charles Grandison Finney and his followers first in the western New York State area and then in most of the northern half of the United States during the late 1820's and early 1830's, was of major importance in the history of America. One of the most outstanding ways in which its influence was felt was in the subsequent growth and success of the tremendous crusade against slavery which swept the country only a few years after the revivals.

Antislavery was led by men who had been converted in the Finney revivals; in it can be seen operating the same psychological determinants which were so vital in explaining the success of revivalism. The crusaders against the evil of slavery preached their doctrine and dogma for almost a decade throughout the north, clinging tenaciously to it in the face of hostile mobs and often at personal risk, either to life and limb or through loss of friends and family. Their absolutism, their singleness of purpose, were in large measure due to their unshakable faith in the righteousness of their cause, a cause which was God's cause.

Abolitionism and revivalism were related in many vital ways. The vast majority of the antislavery crusaders were raised in strongly Christian homes and nurtured on the traditional Protestant doctrines; they were already extremely strong religious personalities at the time they fell under the regenerating influence of the Great Revival. The experience of conversion in the revival gave strong and fresh impetus to their already-firm religious conviction and eventuated in the growth of their already-present antislavery feeling until it culminated in the abolition crusade. The influence of religion in general, and evangelical religion as preached by Finney in particular, can be seen in the doctrine which the abolitionists advocated, the manner in which they advanced these doctrines, and their determination and devotion to their cause in spite of bitter hostility and opposition. There were other important threads in the tapestry of antislavery thought, but those of religious thought and modes of thinking, conditioned by intense evangelical fervor, form the main fabric.

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ABOLITIONISM AND REVIVALISM:
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CHAPTER I
THE SETTING

The second quarter of the nineteenth century in America was a turbulent period of sweeping impulses and strong currents which raced through the country and eventually swept it down into the maelstrom of civil war. Such diverse streams as "Jacksonian democracy," revivalism and "Finneyism," westward expansion, sectional jealousy and friction, and the great tide of antislavery gave this quarter of the century a dynamism and spirit which set it apart from much of the relatively smooth flow of American history. It was, as Alice Felt Tyler aptly calls it, "freedom's ferment," when the young nation, at last free from foreign threat, turned her energy back upon herself to strengthen and change her very nature. This was the age of transcendentalism and Edgar Allan Poe, of the Erie Canal and the Oregon Trail, of growing political awareness and finesse, of nullification and the "monster bank," of Tippecanoe and the Alamo. Giants strode across the stage of American politics, men such as Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Andrew Jackson -- giants who dominated and ruled their scenes so well that when they disappeared there were not equals to take their places, only lesser men who could

not hold in check the ever-growing tension and dissension which wracked the country.

Of all the currents of thought which swept through the land in this time, none was more untamed than that of anti-slavery, a militant abolitionism nourished by the energies of a new generation until it spilled over into the other tributaries of American life, whipping them into a whirlpool of oratory and emotion which boiled over into the fury of the Civil War. This floodtide of antislavery did not suddenly well up; it grew from the antislavery sentiment which had been a part of American thought almost since the introduction of Negro slaves. The lesser streams of antislavery had ebbed and flowed for over two hundred years until in the late 1820's and early 1830's they met in that confluence of ideas and men which resulted in the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded late in 1833, was at first only one of a number of benevolent societies formed by a group of wealthy New Yorkers who saw a multitude of evils in the country and were determined to do away with them. Among the other causes which these dedicated reformers embraced were temperance, manual labor, no mail on Sundays, women's rights, and the Mary Magdalene Society, devoted to aiding the city's "fallen women." The reformers would frequently shift from one cause to another, and sometimes combine two or more crusades into such multi-purpose amalgams

as the "Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society."¹ But the antislavery cause itself soon dwarfed all others and absorbed into itself their most dedicated and able workers, men such as Theodore Dwight Weld and James Gillespie Birney. Led by Weld and financed by Arthur and Lewis Tappan, the agents of the Society travelled the nation for almost a decade seeking converts to their antislavery cause and crusade. They preached that slavery was a sin, an evil, and that it must be eradicated before it brought down even greater evils upon the nation; this doctrine they preached everywhere, often in the face of almost overwhelming odds. Hostile mobs confronted the antislavery lecturers in town after town, threatening their lives and frequently doing them actual physical violence; one abolitionist, Elijah Lovejoy, died a martyr to his cause. To face this open hostility and the grueling physical punishment of night after night of lecturing and travelling -- a strain under which many of them broke -- these men had to leave family and friends, sometimes even forsaking them forever, a tragic thing which happened to several Southerners enrolled in the antislavery crusade. But leave friends and families these dedicated and courageous men did, as they spread the gospel of slavery as an absolute wrong and warned in thunderous tones of the terrible

¹ Theodore Dwight Weld to Elizur Wright, in Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., The Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844, D. Appleton-Century Company; New York, 1934, p. 240.

consequences which must come if slavery continued. They were a remarkable group of men, composed of equal parts of courage and daring, holy righteousness, and fiercely-burning conviction; and they were to have a tremendous influence on the course of American history.

The impact of the antislavery movement upon the nation is difficult to gauge fully, but it is probable that had there been no abolition crusade there would have been no Civil War. Antislavery fervor injected into national politics an emotional tinge which made it increasingly difficult and eventually impossible to discuss the very real sectional differences of the growing nation. Attacked with steadily-mounting virulence by northern abolitionists and afraid of another slave uprising such as the Nat Turner revolt because of antislavery agitation, the South withdrew more and more into herself, turning what had once been a reasonably open society into an increasingly closed and beleaguered -- or so they thought -- way of life.

Even as they split the land, the abolitionists were themselves split into factions, the main one centered around New York City with a smaller, more radical group in Boston under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison. The better part of the fame, and the notoriety, of the abolition crusade has gone to Garrison and his radical compatriots, but the heart and muscle of abolitionism was that band of antislavery lecturers based in and financed from New York. Through their agencies in the Western Reserve, western New York State, Michigan and Indiana

and Illinois, the real work of abolitionizing the country was done. Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Theodore Dwight Weld, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, James Gillespie Birney, Henry Baxter Stanton, and many others less well known to history -- these men brought the antislavery crusade to its fruition.

They, and the areas in which their greatest success came, had been participants, only a few years before the height of the antislavery campaign, in the Great Revival, a series of religious revivals conducted by Charles Grandison Finney, the major American evangelist between Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield in the late eighteenth century and Dwight L. Moody at the end of the nineteenth. Finney's career as an evangelist spanned nearly half a century, and he served as a transitional figure from the impassioned hellfire and damnation revivalist to the less passionate and seemingly more logical contemporary evangelist such as Billy Graham. His influence was everywhere tremendous, and he converted a vast number of Americans, perhaps as many as 100,000. Among the most dynamic and forceful individuals whom he converted were the leaders of the subsequent abolition crusade; there was a link, a very strong and important link, between the labors of Finney in revivalism and the subsequent labors of his converts in abolitionism.

This close connection between Finney and the abolitionists has long been noted by historians; one of the most important, and best, students of the antislavery movement, Gilbert H. Barnes, went so far as to say that:

In leadership, in method, and in objective, the Great Revival and the American Anti-Slavery Society were now one. It is not too much to say that, for the moment [1834], the antislavery agitation as a whole was what it had been in larger part, an aspect of the Great Revival in benevolent form.²

Richard Hofstadter, not an especially close student of antislavery, comments that "the abolitionist movement was based upon a moral frenzy... abolitionism was a religious movement, emerging from the ferment of evangelical Protestantism."³ And Kenneth Scott LaFourette, in his mammoth History of Christianity, notes that "the Christian conscience and resolution were a factor, probably the major factor, in bringing about the abolition of Negro slavery. This was seen in many ways, notably in the great increase of the antislavery movement which issued from the Finney revivals."⁴

Despite the early and almost universal recognition of this relationship, virtually no significant study has been made of the exact nature of this phenomenon. This Thesis will deal specifically with the manner in which the Finney revivals influenced and to a great extent determined the

² Gilbert H. Barnes, The Anti-Slavery Impulse, Peter Smith: Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1957, p. 107.

³ Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It, Vintage Books: New York, 1954, p. 144.

⁴ Kenneth Scott LaFourette, A History of Christianity, Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1953, p. 1269.

behavior of those abolitionists grouped around Weld and working primarily in the Old Northwest and its environs; we will focus on the delicate and subtle interplay of religious and political forces within the personalities involved as much as possible to reach some definite conclusions about the relationship between abolitionism and revivalism.

CHAPTER II

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF THE REVIVAL

Religion has been throughout American history one of the basic components of American culture and life, as well as one of the cornerstones upon which the nation was founded and from which it grew to maturity. Religion today is perhaps waning as a vital factor in many phases of American as well as European life, but for most of the span of our history it has been central. This religion, like so many things American, is distinctive, far different than its European roots. Protestantism in America has been evangelical and revivalistic almost since the nation first began to expand, certainly since the first tentative stirrings of the Great Awakening in the early eighteenth century. "The American religious tradition has been hortatory and moral in its appeal, suffused with emotion, applied -- although sometimes vaguely -- to the affairs of the practical world, and, above all, fervently addressed to the moral decision of the individual will."¹

¹ William Lee Miller, "American Religion and American Political Attitudes," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., Religious Perspectives in American Culture, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1962, p. 81.

Revivalism rose in America as the result of several factors; one of the most important of these was simply the spirit of the age, a search for new and more relevant religious ideas which found expression through German pietism and English methodism as well as American revivalism. This revivalism was in a sense the democratization of American religion, the means by which religion became not merely the right of the privileged upper class, but also the duty of the lower class. The growing frontier nature of American society and the consequent changes in the pattern of social structure and thought were also important in determining the success of the Great Awakening and subsequent revivals; evangelical religion has traditionally been a powerful force along the frontier, in regions where the old norms and status structures are no longer adequate. In these conditions evangelical religion furnishes a new set of norms, a new value system at a primitive and therefore easily assimilable level; as the new communities coalesced more formal laws and codes would be established, laws and codes which in effect embodied the doctrines of the evangelical faith. The contemporary success of Billy Graham and his colleagues in the modern "frontier," the expanding urban environment with which man cannot yet cope successfully, seems to testify to the validity of this thesis.

Closely related to the frontier character of the revival was its nature, in colonial times and later, as an integral part of the struggle between coast and piedmont, then coast

and transatlantic, the older aristocracy against the rising lower and middle classes. In colony after colony, the division over the methods of the Awakening was bitterest and hardest fought between the establishment and the lower classes, the old and the new settlers, the rich and the not-rich; in the face of rising democracy, exemplified by evangelical religion, the aristocracy fought, and fought fiercely, to maintain its economic, social, political, and spiritual supremacy. Traces of this same struggle can be seen in the later revivals as well as the early ones.

Revivalistic religion also furnished a necessary outlet for the accumulated tensions of frontier and rural life during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; often the revival meeting was the only form of socially acceptable diversion and escape available to the inhabitants of the farms and small communities of America. Also important in explaining the vitality of evangelical religion is the fact that America was a country of youth, a country whose citizens were on an average somewhere in their late teens and early twenties, an age span particularly susceptible to revivalism.

Fanned by the incessant labors of itinerant evangelists such as the great George Whitefield, the Tennents and their disciples, and the early Methodists, the fires of revivalism remained a vital force in American religion and culture during the major part of the colonial period. So successful was it, and so deep were its effects, that as astute an historian as

Perry Miller could rightly say that the Revolution was in essence presented to the people in the form of a revival of religion, an expiation of sin necessary for the salvation of the community as a whole.² The flames of revivalism flared up anew in 1800 as Kentucky was swept by an intense evangelical fervor, which took form through the camp meeting, a protracted series of revivalist sermons to which whole families and even towns came, complete with tents and food, and stayed for days and sometimes weeks on end.

In the eastern part of the country, evangelical religion smoldered, occasionally sparking, until the advent of Charles Grandison Finney, whose first major success as an evangelist came in upper New York State in the mid-1820's. Through the work of Finney and his band of disciples, called the Holy Band of Seventy, the fires of revivalism again blazed over the land. Alexis de Toqueville, that most perceptive of travellers, was more than a little taken aback by the entire scene, and quite straight-facedly remarked that "religious insanity is very common in the United States." Despite the usual business-like attitude of most Americans, de Toqueville noted, "certain momentary outbursts occur when their souls seem suddenly to burst the bonds of matter by which they are restrained and to soar

² Perry Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., The Shaping of American Religion, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1961, pp. 322-368.

impetuously toward heaven."³ Seeking an explanation for this phenomenon, the French Catholic hypothesized that because the American people are so concerned with "the pursuit of the worldly welfare," in a revival they quickly go beyond the realms of thought to which they are accustomed, and "as soon as they have passed these bounds, their minds do not know where to fix themselves and they often rush unrestrained beyond the range of common sense."⁴

So tremendous was the impact of this surge of revivalism and so profound its effects that the distinguished theologian and historian H. Richard Niebuhr states that "the nineteenth [century] may be called the period of the coming kingdom" of God. "The Awakening and the revivals tended to bring the coming kingdom into the present and to insist that the spiritual revolution could be and needed to be faced now."⁵ He feels that the nearness of the millennium to the minds of the people accounts for much of the distinctive nature of American religion and politics, and the fascinatingly complex interaction between the two, during the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the best generalization about American religion and politics during the early nineteenth century, and surely

³ Alexis de Toqueville, Democracy in America, II, Vintage Books; New York, 1960, p. 142.

³ Alexis de Toqueville, Democracy in America, II, Vintage Books; New York, 1960, p. 142.

Harv. 4 v. 111 p. 142

one of the most applicable to abolitionism and revivalism, is that "the general characteristic contribution of American religion to American politics...has been -- not perspective, wisdom, depth of insight -- but the rousing of the sentiments and energies of charity, generosity and social reform; the characteristic vices have been those of a tremendous oversimplification and sentimentalization of politics."⁶

The meaning and purpose of the revival lies in conversion of the sinner, so that he may through the spirit of God work toward his own salvation. "Conversion" does not mean a sudden change from a state of atheism to one of total faith, contrary to much popular misunderstanding; conversion rather usually occurs in the individual in whom there are already strong religious characteristics, the result of early training, and reinforces and brings to the fore these characteristics. As William James expresses it: "To say that a man is 'converted' means...that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy."⁷ Frank Starbuck, a leading student of the conversion process, states that the

⁶ William Miller, "American Religion and American Political Attitudes," p. 103.

⁷ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience. Collier Books: New York, 1961, p. 165.

effect of conversion is to bring about "a changed attitude toward life, which is fairly constant and permanent... the persons who have passed through conversion, having taken a stand for the religious life, tend to feel themselves identified with it, no matter how much their religious enthusiasm declines."⁸ Finney himself viewed conversion primarily as a change of heart on the part of the sinner: "evangelical repentance is a change of willing, of feeling, and of life in respect to God... It is willing and feeling as God does in respect to sin."⁹ This conversion leads to a new heart, which "consists in a preference of the glory of God and the interests of the kingdom to come to one's own happiness."¹⁰ In other words, "it is a change from selfishness to benevolence" which "lies in the manner in which [converts] are disposed to use, and do actually employ, their moral and physical powers."¹¹

The phenomena of the revival and conversion have intrigued psychologists as well as ministers for several generations, and as a result there is a rather good under-

⁸ quoted in James, Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 210.

⁹ Charles Grandison Finney, Lectures on Revivals of Religion, Fleming H. Revell Company, New York, 1836, p. 349.

¹⁰ Charles Grandison Finney, Sermons on Important Subjects, John S. Taylor, New York, 1836, p. 10.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

standing of the psychological mechanisms through which conversion is achieved and the manner in which it may affect various individuals. The evangelists themselves, as far back as Edwards and Whitefield, were shrewd judges of human nature who knew intuitively the methods best suited to produce the conversions they sought; recent psychological studies have for the most part only followed their early thoughts and writings on conversion to arrive at some systematic conclusions about the nature of the conversion process, conclusions which are vital for understanding both the nature of conversion itself and some of the results which it might have on the thought structures and actions of the converts.

Conversion does not simply occur within the individual who has never thought about religion or religious matters; it is something for which the individual must be ready, which indeed he often has himself been seeking. The potential convert as a result of both internal and external pressures reaches a certain mental state in which he is ready for immediate conversion through the agency of another individual, usually a minister, or for eventual conversion through his own agency. Sante de Sanctis, a Jesuit student of conversion, outlines six "psychic situations favorable for the occurrence of religious conversion," of which four are particularly applicable to the sort of conversion which Finney achieved:

First -- The presence of general religious tendencies or religiosity, deriving either from heredity, from the family, or from impressions in

the infancy or childhood of the individual... Second -- An habitual tendency of the intellect towards absolute convictions, whether affirmative or negative, in respect of philosophy, theology, politics, etc.... Fourth -- a richness of affective potential ...in the Freudian terminology, such affective potential is the amount of energy (libidobetrag) which the subject can hold in suspension... Sixth -- The recurrence of painful experiences...¹²

When such a state has obtained within the individual, conversion is imminent; although it is usually obtained through some variation on the old hellfire and damnation school, occasionally it comes as the result of the individual's own work upon himself, as was the case with Finney. The phenomenon of conversion can be explained almost entirely in terms of physiology; this is done brilliantly by William Sargant, a British psychoanalyst, in his provocative Battle for the Mind, which draws heavily upon Pavlov's pioneering research in conditioning.

Pavlov, the brilliant Russian experimentalist to whom contemporary psychology owes so much, noted startling changes in the behavior of his conditioned dogs as a result of the great Leningrad flood of 1924. During this flood, the rooms in which he kept these animals were partially flooded, nearly

¹² Sante de Sanctis, "Six Psychological Conditions Favorable for Conversion," in Orlo Strunk, ed., Readings in the Psychology of Religion, Abingdon Press: New York, 1959, pp. 139-140.

killing them and inducing great stress in all of them. When Pavlov resumed his work after the flood, he found that in the most excitable and unstable animals, previous conditioning had been partially and in some cases totally disrupted, apparently because of the traumatic experience of the flood. Exploring this further, Pavlov discovered that any of his animals, even the most phlegmatic and best-conditioned, when subjected to more stress than the central nervous system and the brain itself could stand, would enter a state he termed "protective inhibition," a purely physiological reaction designed to protect the over-stressed brain cells. During the state of protective inhibition, previous conditioning could be easily reversed, or entirely new behavior patterns implanted with relative ease. Pavlov also found that when new behavior patterns were implanted during this period, the animals would become sensitized to the stimuli associated with this change, and thus could be re-conditioned with increasing ease in later experiments.¹³

Conversion in the human being, as well as brain-washing, Sargent believes, is achieved by an analagous process and is essentially the result of physiological changes with the brain and central nervous system. "Basic behavior patterns in man

¹³ William Sargent, Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1957, pp. 21-54.

are indeed more dependent on our inherited higher nervous systems than we sometimes care to admit. The personality can react only along limited lines to all environmental changes... the basic patterns of reaction to stress...are physiologically determined," states Sargant.¹⁴ Thus, when the evangelist launches into a hellfire and damnation sermon, incessantly pounding away at the conscience and consciousness of his hearers, building upon the free-floating guilt and anxiety present in every human being, he may induce enough mental stress to upset the state of "dynamic equilibrium" in which the brain maintains itself and thereby bring about the same stage of protective inhibition which Pavlov noted in his dogs. "Various types of belief can be implanted in many people after brain function has been sufficiently disturbed by accidentally or deliberately induced fear, anger, or excitement."¹⁵ In this state, the individual is extremely open to suggestion and to the implantation of the new ideas and thoughts which would be offered by the evangelist, for the evangelist must and does offer such ideas, ideas which serve as means of escape from the state of protective inhibition.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 105-106.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

Sargant points out that:

It is not enough to disrupt previous patterns of behavior by emotional assaults on the brain; one must also provide an escape from the induced mental stress. Hellfire is presented only as the result of rejecting the offer of eternal salvation won by faith. Emotionally disrupted by this threat, and then rescued from everlasting torment by a change of heart, the convert is now in a state to be helped by dwelling upon the complementary gospel of love.¹⁶

For such an effect to occur in the individual, he does not have to be excessively neurotic, or even exceptionally excitable; in fact, Sargant maintains that "the ordinary person, in general, is much more easily indoctrinated than the abnormal."¹⁷ This would be because this "ordinary" person is normal both in the physiological sense and in the sense that he has already shown himself susceptible to suggestion and persuasion by his very acceptance of the social conditioning which makes him considered "normal" or ordinary."

The techniques employed to gain conversion of the individual are similar in almost every respect to those used in brainwashing, which might well be classified as an attempt to instill contemporary religious belief of a sort in reluctant political sinners. Sargant summarizes his findings and conclusions:

Animal experimentation, it must be once more repeated, showed that when the brain was

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

stimulated beyond the limits of its capacity to tolerate the stresses imposed, protective inhibition finally supervened. When this happened, not only could previous behavior patterns implanted in the brain be suppressed, but former positive conditioned responses could become negative, and vice versa. Similarly, the administration of too exciting, or too frequent, brain stimuli may sometimes cause human victims to reverse their previous patterns of behavior. And others are likely to become more suggestible, accepting whatever they are told, however nonsensical, as the inescapable truth.¹⁸

In addition to the physiological mechanisms and phenomena cited by Sargant, there are two other major factors closely related to the success of the revivalist and to the sincerity and frightening earnestness with which his converts hold their new ideas and ideals. First, the conversion process most commonly takes place within a group of people, a crowd, in this case the hyper-excited atmosphere of those attending the revival meeting; individuals within a crowd of this nature are subject to a fairly well defined set of laws which describe and to some extent determine the behavior of the crowd and the individual member of the crowd. Second, the majority of those converted to evangelical religion are in their late teens or early twenties at the time of their original conversion; recent work in ego and adolescent psy-

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

chology emphasizes the critical importance of the age factor, the peculiar psychological makeup of the adolescent, in discussing conversion to any cause or doctrine.

The near-hypnotic influence of the crowd upon the individual has fascinated observers of human behavior for generations; almost any individual placed within a crowd will alter his normal behavior patterns more or less to conform to those of the crowd. Even a clinically trained observer sent to study the phenomenon of contemporary evangelism, specifically Billy Graham's crusade in New York a few years ago, found herself so swayed by the influence of the crowd and the evangelist that she professed conversion, a conversion which she repudiated almost immediately after leaving the influence of the crowd.¹⁹ Frederick Davenport, an early and still important student of revivalism, writes that "there is no population, there are comparatively few individuals in any population, who cannot be swept from the moorings of reason and balanced judgment if brought under the mysterious and potent influence of the psychological 'crowd'."²⁰

¹⁹ Kurt Lang and Gladys E. Lang, "Decisions for Christ: Billy Graham in New York," in Maurice Stein, Arthur Vidick, and David White, eds., Identity and Anxiety: Survival of the Person in Mass Society, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1960, pp. 424-425.

²⁰ Frederick N. Davenport, Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1917, p. 10.

Sigmund Freud, in his perceptive and challenging Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, suggests that the member of the crowd, who frequently regresses to a very primitive and often violent level of thought and action, is "brought under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses. The apparently new characteristics which he displays are in fact the manifestations of this unconscious."²¹ In a crowd the individual suddenly casts off the inhibitions which society has imposed upon him and returns to a much earlier, almost primordial, level of thought and behavior. "Thus the group appears to us as a revival of the primal horde. Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection; in so far as men are habitually under the sway of group formation we recognize in it the survival of the primal horde."²²

The concept of the crowd's reversion to the primal horde is especially important as it accounts for the nature of the ties which bind the crowd together and to some extent determines its behavior, and also as it helps explain the complex

²¹ Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, Bantam Books; New York, 1960, p. 9. See also Gustave LeBon, The Crowd, The Macmillan Company; New York, n.d.

²² Freud, Group Psychology, p. 71.

relationship of the leader to the crowd. Any group or crowd, says Freud, is in essence bound together by a series of libidinal ties: "love relationships (or, to use a more neutral expression, emotional ties) also constitute the essence of the group mind."²³ Libido as Freud defines it here is not merely sexual attraction or love, although this element is present, but "the energy, regarded as a quantitative magnitude, of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the term 'love',"²⁴ In the crowd, these libidinal ties center around the leader, who represents the primal father and fulfills the group's need for someone upon whose judgment and leadership they may rely as they revert to a childlike state. This is particularly important for the study of revivalism, for when coupled with the concept of God as the father-surrogate as advanced by Freud in The Future of An Illusion, it leads to the conclusion that there is a transfer of love or libidinal energy from the mental image of God to the actual, material image of the minister. The tremendous devotion which ministers of all sorts and revivalists in particular inspire becomes much more readily comprehensible through this concept, as does also the almost erotic nature of the writings about and to such ministers. Similar libidinal ties were a vital part of the abolitionist

²³ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

group, and the devotion of this group to their leader, Theodore Dwight Weld, can be understood through this set of concepts, and through the probability that the strong libidinal ties within the group were transferred from the earlier revival group which centered around Finney.

Another important aspect of the influence of the crowd upon the individual is that it greatly heightens his suggestibility. Freud attributes this to the stripping away of inhibitions and the acceptance of the leader as the surrogate for the primal father or for God.²⁵ Davenport advances an equally plausible suggestion, that "the influence of a crowd largely in sympathy with the ideas suggested is thoroughly coercive or intimidative upon the individual sinner."²⁶ Another explanation of this greatly increased suggestibility particularly relevant to the revival crowd, most of whom are already somewhat religiously oriented, is advanced by Hadley Cantril:

A more familiar condition of suggestibility arises when an individual's mental context is so patterned that a stimulus or interpretation presented is thoroughly consistent with the frames of reference and standards of judgment that constitute the mental context.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁶ Davenport, Primitive Traits, p. 248.

²⁷ Hadley Cantril, The Psychology of Social Movements, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1941, p. 71.

Thus it can be seen that the individual in the revival crowd is under several powerful influences -- the stripping away of his inhibitions, greatly heightened suggestibility, libidinal ties with and ego identification with the leader/minister -- which in conjunction with the physiological phenomena pointed out by Sargant make him a likely candidate for conversion and an intense outburst of religious feeling.

A final vital part of the success and fervor of the revival meeting, and similarly abolitionism, is the average age of the new convert. Starbuck observed that "conversion is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity."²⁸ Finney, as well as other evangelists, was quite aware of the comparative youth of his converts; he stated that "it is a solemn and alarming fact, that a vast majority of those who give evidence of piety are converted under twenty-five years of age. Look at the history of revivals, and see even in those that have had the greatest power, how few aged persons are converted."²⁹ Which, naturally enough, led him to conclude

²⁸ quoted in William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 167.

²⁹ Finney, Sermons, p. 235.

that "aged sinner, it is more than fifty chances to one that you are a reprobate."³⁰

Adolescents of every era and every society have been particularly susceptible to the lure of a cause, a crusade; during the physical and psychological turmoil of adolescence they search for a cause in which to immerse themselves, in which they can become "true believers." One student of the phenomenon explains it:

Adolescence is notoriously the time when the temptations of the flesh multiply and when many youths, oppressed by their "animal" impulses, seek to escape from the burden of guilt by adopting the ceremonial pattern provided in the religious observances of society. Adolescence is so often a period of high ideals, which are typically reaction formations to "low desires," that adolescence is the happy hunting ground for proselytizers of every breed.³¹

Erik Erikson, a psychoanalyst, has done some highly significant work in ego and identity psychology which also greatly illuminates the nature of the adolescent and his need to join, to have a cause, or to be a rebel without a cause.

The period of late adolescence, which depending on the individual can be anywhere from 18 to 30, contains a major life crisis which Erikson calls the identity crisis: "it occurs in that period in the life-cycle when each youth must

³⁰ Ibid., p. 327.

³¹ Harold D. Lasswell, Psychopathology and Politics, Viking Press: New York, 1960, p. 84.

forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood."³² This is a period of high tension and drama for the adolescent; often it lasts for several years, until he finds his new, adult identity. During this "moratorium," the adolescent is especially open to any form of ideology, be that ideology religious or political, as long as it is presented in positive and absolute terms. "Late adolescence is the most favorable period...for indoctrination; because in adolescence an ideological realignment is by necessity in process and a number of ideological possibilities are waiting to be hierarchically ordered by opportunity, leadership, and friendship."³³ While some adolescents may succumb to this ego identity crisis and be submerged in it, others "will resolve it through participation in ideological movements passionately concerned with religion or politics, nature or art."³⁴ This passionate participation arises from the fact that the outstanding characteristic of the adolescent undergoing the identity crisis is "totalism, a to be

³² Erik Erikson, Young Man Luther: A Study in History and Psychoanalysis, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1962, p. 14.

³³ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

or not to be which makes every matter of difference a matter of mutually exclusive essences, every question mark a matter of forfeited existence; every error or oversight, eternal treason."³⁵

To the adolescent, involvement in a cause, whether it be revivalistic religion, abolitionism, or "Ban the Bomb," is a natural outlet. By committing himself passionately and totally to an ideology, by which we mean any defined and purposeful belief structure, the adolescent gains, according to Erikson:

(1) An overly clear perspective of the future, encompassing all foreseeable time, and thus counteracting individual "time diffusion"; (2) an opportunity for the exhibition of some uniformity of appearance and action counteracting individual identity consciousness; (3) inducement to collective role and work experimentation which can counteract a sense of inhibition and personal guilt; (4) submission to leaders who are "big brothers"; (5) introduction to the methods of the prevailing technology, and thus into sanctioned and regulated competition; and (6) a seeming correspondence between the internal world of ideals and evils, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the outer world with its organized goals and dangers in real space and time; a geographic-historical framework for the young individual's budding identity.³⁶

It might also be pointed out that the adolescent undergoing such an identity crisis would be susceptible more than

³⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁶ Erik Erikson, "The Problem of Ego Identity," in Stein et al., eds., Identity and Anxiety, p. 87.

ever to suggestion, especially from a stern and commanding figure who could and would tell him what was right and what was wrong and what he could do about it -- in other words, a figure such as Wald or Finney.

Thus, there are operating within the religious revival a number of potent psychological and physiological factors which account for much of the success of the revival and make it possible to virtually ignore the theological doctrines of the revivalists in discussing conversion. The physiological mechanism of protective inhibition, the influence of the crowd upon the individual, and the effects of the identity crisis are a virtually unsteppable combination -- a combination used to great effect by Finney and taken over by the abolitionists, who had learned well the lessons of the Great Revival.

CHAPTER III
THE FINNEY REVIVALS

Charles Grandison Finney is one of the key figures in the history of American evangelism; his coming in the 1820's heralded the end of the emotion-packed hellfire and damnation revivalism which had characterized the Great Awakening and the Kentucky camp-meetings, and prepared the way for a calmer and more logical evangelism, which did not however neglect to warn the sinner of his misdeeds and of the terrible fate which awaited him if he continued. In the same manner, Finney's theology marked a turning point in American Protestantism: "he stood at the turn of the tide, and with all the strength of a really vigorous intellect he repudiated the theological concept of the total depravity of humanity, and espoused with vehemence the notion of moral agency."¹ It was in the remarkable series of revivals con-

¹ Davenport, Primitive Traits, p. 182.

ducted by this man that many of the most prominent figures in the subsequent abolition movement were converted and thereby gained a fresh impulse to benevolence and reform. In fact, one authority goes so far as to say that "Charles G. Finney probably won as many converts to the [abolition] cause as William Lloyd Garrison."²

Intellectually and physically, Finney was an imposing figure. A portrait of him at the age of forty, when he was at the peak of his power and activity, shows an individual whose outstanding features are a high forehead from under which loom dark deepset eyes capable of piercing a sinner to his very soul; a long, perhaps slightly supercilious nose; and high, prominent cheekbones -- in all, a handsome and prepossessing gentleman.³ The mind behind the face was equally impressive and imposing; Finney's formal training was in law, and no one reading his powerful and logically constructed sermons can doubt the effect he would have had on a jury, both by force of argument and by eloquence of appeal.

The great evangelist was born in Warren, Connecticut, in 1792, living there only two years before the family moved

² Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America, Abingdon Press: New York, 1957, p. 161.

³ frontispiece in Charles Grandison Finney, Memoirs of the Rev. Charles G. Finney, A.S. Barnes and Company: New York, 1876.

to Oneida County, New York, "which was at that time, to a great extent, a wilderness." Of his family background we know little except that, by his own word, it was not especially religious. Finney received a good education and taught in high school before entering the law office of "Squire W----" in Adams, New York. Up to this time, he had been little exposed to religion, that little exposure consisting almost entirely of "dry, unimpassioned and monotonous" reading of written sermons. "When I went to Adams to study law, I was almost as ignorant of religion as a heathen. I had been brought up mostly in the woods, and had no definite knowledge of religious truth." In Adams the fledgling lawyer encountered the Reverend George W. Gale, an old-school Presbyterian who preached "what has been called hyper-Calvinism."⁴ While Finney gained little from Gale's preaching, it did awaken his mind to religion and finally, "on a Sabbath evening in the autumn of 1821, I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God."

In his attempt to solve the problem of his salvation, Finney at first shut himself off from all others: "I was very unwilling to have any one know that I was seeking the salvation of my soul." After a few fruitless hours of meditation,

⁴ Finney, Memoirs, pp. 4-7.

he suddenly "saw that His work was a finished work; and that instead of having, or needing, any righteousness of my own to recommend me to God, I had to submit myself to the righteousness of God through Christ." Finney then went out to a favorite spot in the woods to pray, but could not, until suddenly "an overwhelming sense of my own wickedness in being ashamed to have a human being see me on my knees before God, took such powerful possession of me, that I cried at the top of my voice, and exclaimed that I would not leave all that place if all the men on earth and all the devils in hell surround me" until conversion occurred.

Just at that point this passage of Christian scripture seemed to drop into my mind with a flood of light: "Then shall ye go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. Then shall ye seek and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." I instantly seized hold of this with my heart... I know that it was God's word, and God's voice that spoke to me. I cried to Him, "Lord, I take thee at thy word. Now thou knowest that I do search for thee with all my heart, and that I came here to pray to thee; and thou hast promised to hear me"... He then gave me many other promises, both from the Old and New Testaments, especially some most precious promises respecting our Lord Jesus Christ... They did not so much seem to fall into my intellect as into my heart; and I seized hold of them, appropriated them, and fastened upon them with the grasp of a drowning man.⁵

After praying there in the forest for a long time, "I know not how long," he found himself heading back to town.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 12-15.

There, in his office, still struggling for the salvation of his soul, Finney underwent a mystical experience, almost a vision, which determined him to become an evangelist.

There was no fire, and no light, in the room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face... He said nothing, but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at his feet... I fell down at His feet and poured out my soul to Him. I wept aloud like a child, and made such confessions as I could with my choked utterance... as I turned around and was about to take seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost... The Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel that impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love. No words can express the wonderful love that was abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally believed out the unutterable gushings of my heart.⁶

There, still on the floor of his office, Finney realized that God intended him to be a minister, to go out and to preach the Gospel to sinners and to save their souls. Before this he had never even prayed in public, but now

after receiving these baptisms of the Spirit I was quite willing to preach the Gospel. Nay, I found that I was unwilling to do anything else. I no longer had any desire to practice law... My whole mind was taken up with Jesus and his salvation; and the world seemed to me of very little consequence. Nothing, it seemed to me, could be put in competition with the worth of souls; and

⁶ Ibid., pp. 19-21.

no labor, I thought, could be so sweet, and no employment so exalted, as that of holding up Christ to a dying world.⁷

This first mystical experience was shortly followed by yet another, which came after a protracted period of almost ceaseless prayer during which the new convert "held frequent days of private fasting." This second experience gave Finney the final impulse to begin his career as an evangelist, for "the Lord showed me as in a vision what was before me."

He drew so near to me, while I was engaged in prayer, that my flesh literally trembled on my bones. I shook from head to foot, under a full sense of the presence of God. At first, and for some time, it seemed more like being on the top of Sinai, amidst the full thunderings, than in the presence of the Cross of Christ. Never in my life was I so awed and humbled before God as then... God assured me that he would be with me and uphold me; that no opposition should prevail against me; that I nothing to do, in regard to all this matter, but to keep about my work, and wait for the salvation of God.⁸

Understanding this second mystical experience, coming as it did after prolonged prayer and fasting, is not difficult; it is quite similar to the "medicine" visions of the Plains Indians and other primitive tribes in which a period of physical strain, usually fasting and prayer, is combined with an intense desire to a religious experience; this wish

⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁸ Ibid., p. 193.

is fulfilled eventually as the result of physiological and psychological necessity. Very much the same basis for mystical experience is to be found in all varieties of religion, ranging from the very primitive to the very sophisticated. There is also a strong element of sexuality in the mystical experience, as evident in Finney's account of the one in his office; many of these are virtually sublimations of the sex act and climax itself.

With these two powerful experiences still fresh in his mind and soul, Finney began his career as a revivalist. Adams was, symbolically enough, the first town which he evangelized, but so effect was his preaching that his influence soon went far beyond the confines of a single town; in fact, he was almost solely responsible for the great outburst of religious fervor which swept western New York in 1826 and 1831, spilling over into surrounding parts of Ohio and Pennsylvania and even New England. "Wherever I went," he recalled, "the word of God took immediate effect; and it seemed only necessary to present the law of God, and the claims of Christ, in such relations and proportions as were calculated to secure the conversion of men, and they would be converted by scores."⁹ The lawyer-turned-minister swept whole communities from their normal routines; shops closed for days and even weeks at a time

⁹ Ibid., p. 300.

as everyone in town adjourned to hear the great evangelist, whose fame was rapidly spreading.

The area in which Finney achieved this early prominence as a revivalist perhaps was itself partially responsible for his success, Western New York, where he held his first and great revivals, was known as the "Burned-Over District" because of the flames of enthusiasm which had seared it almost from the time of its settlement in the eighteenth century. Whitney Cross, the historian of this area, states that it was the seed-bed of many forms of ultraism -- a tendency to enthusiastic extremes and excesses -- both before and after it was again burned over by the flames of Finneyism; the Yankees who had originally settled the area were former participants in some of the more violent phases of the Great Awakening, and "Direct and indirect testimony from all denominations suggests a special spirit in the region."¹⁰ This spirit expressed itself not only through intense religious feeling but also through such things as antimasonry, fanatical antislavery, and Mormonism; once ignited, the Burned Over District was sure to glow with the flames of ultraism in whatever cause. Cross lays this tendency to ultraism to a variety of factors: the Yankee inheritance, the religion

¹⁰ Whitney R. Cross, The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1950, p. 51.

resulting from this, an emotional faith with great emphasis on the Holy Ghost and his personal intervention in the individual life, and the economic conditions of agrarian maturity in the section:

A view of the other sections of the country to which these movements spread confirms the propriety of designating them as concomitants of a fully developed agrarian society. Antismasonry, antislavery, and temperance; revivalism, perfectionism, millerism, and spiritualism -- all of these flourished in the Yankee belt extending from New England into the Middle West.¹¹

Frederick Davenport, slightly less sympathetic than Cross to ultraism in any form and Finneyism in particular, explains the phenomenal success of revivalism in this area by saying that

There was a large element of highly neurotic people who demanded strenuous excitement, and who were accustomed to look for it particularly in religious movements. And it was this class which first fell under the potent sway of Finney and of the great revivals with which his name is associated.¹²

Elements of truth lie in both statements, although one contemporary observer points out that it was usually the professional class -- the lawyers, judges, doctors -- who first fell under Finney's sway;¹³ perhaps their greater education had heightened their neurotic tendencies.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 76.

¹² Davenport, Primitive Traits, p. 190.

¹³ Henry Baxter Stanton, Random Recollections, Harper and Brothers: New York, 1887, p. 42.

Whether or not he was dealing with a population predominantly composed of neurotics, which is doubtful, Finney was surely an effective evangelist. His sermons were not of the hellfire and damnation school, but were moderate in tone and well organized, almost as if he were presenting a brief or arguing a case in court. However, the doctrine he preached was still that of the necessity of choice between immediate repentance or eternal damnation, and enough mention is made of the horrors of such damnation to be quite effective. A delightful story, and one indicative of the mood and tone of his revivals, is told by a man, apparently an old-line Yankee, who called on Finney while the evangelist was in Boston. Finney's small daughter answered the door. "Is your father in?" asked the visitor. "No," answered the little darling, "but come in, poor dying sinner, and mother will pray for you."¹⁴

Finney was a tall man, and in the pulpit he towered over his congregation, his grave countenance somewhat offset by his non-clerical garb. H.B. Stanton, who after his conversion by Finney was a primary figure in the abolition movement and a secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, says of him that "in his loftiest moods, and the higher passages of a discourse on a theme of transcendent purpose, he was the

¹⁴ Frank C. Beardsley, A Mighty Winner of Souls: Charles G. Finney, American Tract Society: New York, 1937, p. 101 n.

impersonation of majesty and power. While depicting the glories or terrors of the world to come, he trod the pulpit like a giant. His action was dramatic. He painted in vivid colors. He gave his imagination full play. His voice, wide in scope and mellow in pathos, now rang in tones of warning and exhortation, and anon melted in sympathetic accounts of entreaty and encouragement."

Finney was capable of transfixing his audiences, virtually hypnotizing them; if in the course of a sermon he would suddenly move his arm from one side to another, "the audience in that part of the house towards which he threw his arm would dodge as if he were hurling something toward them." In a slightly lighter vein, Stanton adds that "in describing the sliding of a sinner to perdition, he would lift his long finger towards the ceiling and slowly bring it down till it pointed to the area in front of the pulpit, when half his hearers in the rear of the house would rise unconsciously to their feet to see him descend into the pit below."¹⁵

Finney himself was well aware of the tremendous power which he possessed while preaching, and was equally aware that it represented something more than mere circumstance. He was a shrewd man with an excellent intuitive understanding of human nature, and his words, gestures,

¹⁵ Stanton, Random Recollections, p. 42.

and actions during a revival, even the more radical moves such as installing the "anxious seat," were well-calculated. Finney thought that "revivals were to be promoted, by the use of means designed and adapted especially to that object," and that it was the solemn and sacred duty of the revivalist to have discovered and employed all such means.¹⁶

Revivals of religion, by Finney's own definition, were "the arousing, quickening, and reclaiming of the more or less backslidden church and the more or less general awakening of all classes, and insuring attention to the claims of God."¹⁷ Almost all great outbursts of religion have been produced by revivals, according to Finney, for "god has found it necessary to take advantage of the excitability there is in mankind, to produce more powerful excitements among them before he can lead them to obey."¹⁸ The methods which Finney employed in his revivals were, according to him, "simply preaching, prayer, and conference meetings, much private prayer, much personal conversation, and meetings for the instruction of earnest inquirers."¹⁹ When he came to a town which he felt needed a revival, he would remain there weeks if he must until

¹⁶ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹ Finney, Memoirs, p. 77.

he felt that his work was thoroughly done. Because of the great number of towns in which he felt himself needed, he remained an itinerant evangelist for almost a decade, not accepting a "call" to a stationary post until he went to Oberlin at the request of the Lane Rebels -- most of them his converts. There he remained, using the college as a base for his decreasingly frequent evangelical forays, until his death forty years later.

Finney, probably as a reaction to the dull sermons he had suffered through as a youth, insisted that "we must have exciting, powerful preaching, or the devil will have the people."²⁰ He refused to speak from notes because it would hinder him and detract from his style; he also feared that it would lessen the effect that he was talking directly and personally to the congregation, an effect on which he placed great value. He would loom out over his audience from the pulpit, point that great long forefinger at them, and thunder "Do not think that I am talking about anybody else; but I mean you, and you, and you," the hand sweeping dramatically around the church.²¹ In a very interesting book on revivals and how to conduct them, Finney set forth several criteria for what he considered truly effective preaching, criteria

²⁰ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 259.

²¹ Finney, Memories, pp. 92-93.

which he himself followed to great advantage:

[Good preaching] should be conversational...
it must be in the language of common life...
illustrations should be constantly used...
drawn from common life... gestures are of
more importance than is generally realized...
The manner of saying it is almost every-
thing.²²

Finney probably would have subscribed wholeheartedly to the philosophy of the noted orator who enumerated three basic points for successful public speaking: "First, delivery. Second, delivery. Third, delivery."

In his sermons and lectures Finney emphasized above all the necessity of the sinner's obtaining conversion then and there, the need for immediate and unconditional repentance, for "sinners should be made to feel that if they now grieve away the Spirit of God, it is very probable that they will be lost forever."²³ The doctrine of immediate repentance was the base upon which his evangelical work rested; again and again he emphasizes that "the prime object with the preacher is to make present obligation felt...sinners are expected to repent now."²⁴

To obtain immediate conversion Finney realized the necessity of overburdening the sinners' minds and constantly preaching

²² Finney, Lectures on Revivals, pp. 198-203.

²³ Ibid., p. 197.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 196.

on one subject, one sin, "for it is of great importance that the sinner should be made to feel his guilt."²⁵ In discussing the manner in which the preacher should deal with the individual sinner, Finney writes a penetrating analysis of the methods of conversion:

The preacher should therefore acquaint himself with [the sinner's] refuge of lies, and as far as possible take into consideration his whole history, including his present views and state of mind; should wisely select a subject; as skillfully arrange, so simply and yet so powerfully to present it, as to engage the sinner's whole attention, and then put himself out to the utmost to bring him to yield upon the spot. He who deals with souls should study well the laws of the mind, and carefully and prayerfully adapt his matter and his energy to the state and circumstances, views and feelings, in which he may find the sinner at the time.²⁶

Finney also states that the preacher should "be careful to find the point where the Spirit of God is pressing a sinner, and press the same point in all your remarks... Take pains to learn the state of his mind, what he is thinking of, how he feels, and what he feels most deeply upon, and then press that thoroughly... Do not fear to press that point, for fear of driving him to distraction."²⁷ Again he warns that "whoever relieves the sinner from a sense of blame is calculated to give him false comfort... it is a comfort full of death."²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., p. 196.

²⁶ Finney, Sermons, p. 40.

²⁷ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 164.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 324.

The most effective psychological device which Finney regularly employed -- as well as one of the most controversial of his methods -- was the "anxious seat," forerunner of the "sourners' bench," which was "a particular seat in the place of the meeting, where the anxious [those seeking conversion] may come and be addressed particularly, and be made subjects of prayer, and sometimes be conversed with."²⁹ It first came into extensive use during the great Rochester revival of 1831; prior to this Finney had usually asked "anxious" members of the congregation to stand. He realized that often those who were seeking conversion had to overcome a sense of shame or fear; "they were too proud to take any position that would reveal them to others as anxious for their souls." Because of this Finney felt that he needed a device which would "make the impression upon them that they were expected at once to give up their hearts; something that would call them to act, and to act as publicly before the world as they had in their sins; something that would commit them publicly to the service of Christ." This public commitment to Christ was especially important, for the sinner who has gone this far seldom steps back down. Thus in Rochester Finney asked those sitting in the first few rows of pews to vacate their seats so that "persons whose convictions were so ripe that they were willing to

²⁹ Ibid., p. 253.

renounce their sins and give themselves to God" could come forward to pray and be prayed over.³⁰ So successful was this at Rochester that Finney continued to use it for the rest of his career, despite the sometimes vehement opposition of more conservative ministers.

The results which Finney achieved by this combination of powerful preaching, the anxious seat, and insistence on the necessity of immediate repentance, coupled with vivid pictures of the awful fate awaiting the unrepentant, were often startling. "It became very common under this teaching, for persons to be convicted and converted, in the course of a few hours, and sometimes in the course of a few days."³¹ Even more startling than the end results were some of the reactions which took place within the congregation while Finney was preaching, and which he eventually came to regard as almost commonplace; there was usually much crying and lamentation during his revivals, with people moaning and groaning under the burden of their conviction, and even literally writhing in the aisles.³² Some such examples impressed themselves vividly on the mind of the evangelist. In one town he went to visit a man who was weep under the conviction of his sins; "accustomed as I was to

³⁰ Finney, Memoirs, pp. 288-289.

³¹ Ibid., p. 190.

³² Ibid., passim.

seeing persons under great conviction, I must confess that his appearance gave me a tremendous shock. He was writhing in agony, grinding his teeth, and literally gnawing his tongue for pain.³³ Even more startling was the case of one devout woman who had prayed fervently for the conversion of her son-in-law; "he came home a convert, and she was so rejoiced that she fell down and died upon the spot."³⁴ Hopefully she had already been converted, and could enjoy the fruits of her strange celebration.

A psychologist discussing these cases, and the thousands like them which occurred under Finney's preaching, would undoubtedly classify them as hysteria induced by excessive mental pressure, the same sort that Sargant finds a necessary preliminary to conversion; the gnashing of teeth, uncontrollable weeping, and other symptoms noted by Finney are all manifestations of the state of protective inhibition. In fact, the entire method of conversion which Finney employed is that outlined a hundred years later by Sargant in his discussion of the physiology of conversion: extreme pressure exerted on the individual mind through repetition of ideas of sin and guilt, relieved by protective inhibition, and then further relieved by the implantation of new religious beliefs and the strong reinforcement of old and half-forgotten ones.

³³ Ibid., p. 262.

³⁴ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 63.

The theological doctrines which Finney taught early in his career, when his influence on the abolitionists was most profound, are difficult to systematize neatly, for he had not yet evolved his own theological views totally; his opus magnum, Systematic Theology, did not appear in book form until the late 1850's. The main point upon which his theology rested, as gleaned from sermons published in the early part of his career, was the doctrine of the moral agency of each human being and the concurrent responsibilities of the moral agent. Moral agency and its corollaries were the most vital of the evangelical doctrines in their influence upon the abolition movement, but the remainder of Finney's basic doctrinal structure cannot be ignored. By birth and by what small amount of training he had had, Finney was a Presbyterian Calvinist, but he departed radically from the hyper-Calvinism of those such as Rev. Gale. He sums up the doctrines of his early period as:

the total moral, voluntary depravity of unregenerate man; the necessity of a radical change of heart, through the truth, by the agency of the Holy Ghost; the divinity and humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ; his vicarious atonement, equal to the wants of all mankind; the gift, divinity, and agency of the Holy Ghost; repentance, faith, justification by faith, sanctification by faith; persistence in holiness as a condition of salvation.³⁵

³⁵ Finney, Memoirs, p. 134.

In his doctrine of voluntary moral depravity Finney departed furthest from the old school Presbyterian theologians, and got into the greatest difficulties with his more conservative colleagues. Where strict Calvinists insisted that moral depravity was total and innate, and that only a few elect of God would be saved, Finney insisted that "moral depravity is, and must be, a voluntary attitude of the mind; that it does, and must, consist in the committal of the will to the gratification of the desires, as the Bible expresses it, of the lusts of the flesh, as opposed to that which the law of God requires."³⁶

Holding this view of voluntary depravity, Finney could, and did, then insist that the sinner remained in an unrepentant state only through his own choice, his own refusal to accept God. He thundered at his congregations that "your salvation or damnation is as absolutely suspended on your own choice, as if God neither knew nor designed any thing about it."³⁷ This was the necessary and logical result of man's very nature as a moral agent made by God to live in a universe subject to moral laws and moral government.

Finney defined this concept of the moral government which resides in the universe and its effect on man and

³⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

³⁷ Finney, Sermons on Important Subjects, p. 217.

man's actions:

God's moral government is made up of considerations, and inducements, designed, and calculated to influence the minds of intelligent creatures to pursue that course of conduct, which will in the highest manner, promote the glory of God, their own interest, and the happiness of the universe. It lays down a definite and perfect rule of feeling and action. Its precept marks, with the clear light of sun beams, the exact course of duty. Its sanctions hold out on the one hand, all the blessedness of everlasting life; and on the other, denounces against offenders all the pains of everlasting death. Thus holding before the sinners' feet, the clear lamp of truth, and its awful penalty gathering around him on every hand, over his head, and beneath his feet, all the moving considerations that heaven and earth and hell can present, to hold his mind in an exact course of obedience.³⁸

Because man is a moral agent, he "has understanding to perceive and weigh; he has conscience to decide upon the nature of moral opposites; he has the power and liberty of choice."³⁹ And because he is a moral agent and because he has the power and freedom of choice, the tremendous responsibility of his own salvation rests on him and him alone: "Your creation as moral agents, and making you the subjects of moral government, suspends your salvation upon your own choice, and renders salvation impossible to you in any other way. If you are reprobated, it is because, when the choice is given you, you choose wrong and obstinately persist in it."⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 230.

However, and this is a very important part of Finney's theology as far as the abolitionists are concerned, the responsibility resting on the moral agent does not end with his own salvation, but only begins there; a far greater responsibility, the responsibility for other men's souls, also rests upon the converted moral agent, the Christian, who must by the example of his own life and by teaching save other souls, lest he lose his own. "The city is going to hell. Yes, the world is going to hell...[and] here you are, going to the judgment, red all over with blood... hundreds of souls will meet you in the judgment, and curse you...for leading them to hell, by practically denying the truth of the gospel."⁴¹ This should not and must not be, for "it is the great business on earth of every Christian, to save souls... Christians are bound to warn sinners of their awful condition, and exhort them to flee from the wrath to come, and lay hold on everlasting life."⁴² Children of God, Christians, must do this, they have much more obligation to do this than have firemen to save those in a burning house: "You must give an account for the souls of others, God commands you to be his co-worker with him in converting the world. He needs your services, for he saves souls only through the agency of men."⁴³

⁴¹ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 148.

⁴² Ibid., p. 164.

⁴³ Finney, Sermons on Important Subjects, p. 201.

Time and time again Finney stresses the tremendous responsibility which rests upon the individual as a moral agent and as a human being:

Every step you take, you tread on chords that will vibrate to all eternity. Every time you move, you touch keys whose sound will re-echo over all the hills and dales in heaven and through all the dark caverns and vaults of hell. Every moment of your lives, you are exerting a tremendous influence, that will tell on the immortal interests of souls all around you.⁴⁴

An important corollary to the doctrine of moral agency and almost overpowering responsibility of the human being is the doctrine of stewardship: "True Christians consider themselves as God's stewards; they act for him, live for him, transact business for him, eat and drink for his glory, live and die to please him."⁴⁵ God likewise considers men his stewards, says Finney, and expects them to account to him for their time, talents, influences upon others, souls, sentiments they entertain and propagate, and their opportunities for doing good.⁴⁶ Implicit in this concept is the idea that since every man is a steward of God and must give an account of his stewardship to God, he will therefore use all his talents and oppor-

⁴⁴ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 146.

⁴⁵ Finney, Sermons on Important Subjects, p. 207.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 197 ff.

tonities to the greater glory of God, and incidentally to the greater good of himself.

As Finney does not hesitate to point out, the Christian's attempt to convert sinners, to save the world, is not an altogether altruistic course; in fact, it doubly guarantees the Christian's own salvation, both because the individual is not guilty of allowing others to slide to hell, and because he may "rely upon it, if you do your duty, in a right manner, God will not keep back his blessing."⁴⁷

Another important matter for the convert to remember is that "a growing intencity and steadfastness of zeal in promoting the cause of God, is evidence of growth in the favor of God... As Christians grow in piety, their zeal becomes deep, intense, and steady, and as you are conscious of this, and in your life and spirit give evidence of it to others, you have, and give, proof, that you are growing in the favor of God."⁴⁸

Young converts were particularly the center of Finney's emphasis on the work² which Christians should perform; the young convert, he said, "should aim at being perfect... it is the duty of all to be perfect and to purpose entirely perpetual, and universal obedience to God."⁴⁹ The young convert

⁴⁷ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 133.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 437.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 401.

should be taught how to win souls, and he should be taught to do his duty, however difficult. Youthful converts "should never rest satisfied till they have done their duties of every kind, in relation to their families, the church, Sabbath schools, the ignorant around them, the disposal of their property, the conversion of the world."⁵⁰ Not only this, but the young converts should also "set out with a determination at being being useful in the highest degree possible... if they see an opportunity where they can do more good, they must embrace it, whatever may be the sacrifice to themselves."⁵¹ This discussion of the role of the young convert is especially important as most of the abolitionists who fell under Finney's influence were converted while they were young and would thus have heard and taken to heart these strictures.

Summing up and capping his revivalism in these early years, when his influence on abolitionism and the country at large was greatest, Finney exhorted his followers:

What shall we do, to lift up the standard, to move this entire nation, and turn all this great people to the Lord. We must DO RIGHT. We must all have a better spirit, we must get down in the dust, we must act unitedly, we must take hold of this great work with all our hearts, and then God will bless us, and the work will go on.⁵²

He might well have been writing a handbook for the abolition movement -- as indeed, in more than one sense, he was.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 385.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 386.

⁵² Ibid., p. 291.

CHAPTER IV
THE ABOLITION CRUSADE

The crusading abolitionists, that band of seventy antislavery lecturers who journeyed through the country spreading the gospel of abolition in the 1830's, were as remarkable a group of orators and agitators ever assembled for a single cause in this country. In their unswerving devotion to their holy cause and in the near-fanatical zeal with which they preached their doctrine, the abolitionists are virtually unique in American history. Their counterpart is to be found not in the relatively calm and even flow of American history, but rather in the turbulent currents of European history and the revolutionary movements -- anarchism, nihilism, communism -- which wracked the continent for over a hundred years. True, the activities of the abolition agitators were not proscribed by their government, and they were not forced to adopt the clandestine ways of the European revolutionaries; but popular opposition to their proselytizing was at first tremendous, and they constantly faced fiercely hostile mobs. The most basic and most vital parallel between the Americans and their European counterparts

lies in their fervent and total devotion to "the cause," their single-minded determination to let nothing deter them from furthering this glorious cause.

Abolition per se, although its roots grew from deep in the American past, crystallized as a movement late in 1833 with the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society at a convention in Philadelphia.¹ In its own words, the Society "was formed for the purpose of awakening the attention of our whole community to the character of American slavery, and presenting the claims and urging the rights of the colored people of the United States, so as to promote, in the most efficient manner, the immediate abolition of Slavery, and restoration of our colored brethren to their equal rights as citizens."² Lewis Tappan, one of the founders and chief financial backers of the Society, wrote that its members "were men of peace, and they believed in the potency of moral suasion, relying also upon the promises and warnings of the Almighty Ruler of Nations."³

¹ see Gilbert Barnes, The Anti-Slavery Impulse, for the best study of the movement as a whole.

² American Anti-Slavery Society, Commission to Theodore Dwight Weld, Weld-Orinke Letters, p. 124.

³ Lewis Tappan, Life of Arthur Tappan, Hurd and Houghton: New York, 1870, p. 371.

Truth -- the truth about slavery and the consequences it had had and might have upon the nation -- was the potent, and indeed the only, weapon upon which the Society would rely. Truth, said the Society, "the truth is the instrument by which the world is to be renovated. It is adequate to overthrow any system of iniquity."⁴ Today's cynical world, its citizens witness to the success of the "Big Lie," may find this faith in the efficacy of truth almost unbearably naive, but it was a strong and deep part of the abolitionist doctrine:

We expect to accomplish [the overthrow of slavery] mainly by showing to the public the true character and legitimate fruits, its contrariety to the first principles of religion, morals, and humanity, and its special inconsistency with our pretensions, as a free, humane, and enlightened people. In this way, by the force of truth, we expect to correct the common errors that prevail respecting slavery, and to produce a just public sentiment, which shall appeal both to the conscience and love of character, of our slaveholding fellow citizens, and convince them that both their duty and their welfare require the immediate abolition of slavery.⁵

To spread this truth and thus bring about the death of slavery, the American Anti-Slavery Society commissioned, in time, a band of approximately seventy agents, whose mission it was to "abolitionize the country." These field agents were the heart and muscle of the abolition movement, and it is with

⁴ American Anti-Slavery Society to Weld, Weld-Grimké Letters, p. 147.

⁵ American Anti-Slavery Society to Weld, Ibid., p. 125.

them that we are primarily concerned. According to David Donald, who ran a statistical survey on the leading figures in the abolition movement, the median age of the antislavery crusaders at the time of the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society was twenty-nine. The great majority were either New Englanders or of New England ancestry; Donald states that "although I made every effort to include Southern and Western leaders, eighty-five per cent of these abolitionists came from Northeastern states, sixty per cent from New England, thirty per cent from Massachusetts alone."⁶ Another student of the movement found that "antislavery conviction coincided closely with Yankee derivation, social maturity, superior education, and at least average prosperity."⁷

The key figures in the Society were the Tappan brothers, Arthur and Lewis, who were the financial guardian angels of the movement; Elizur Wright, corresponding secretary; Theodore Dwight Weld, the most effective and revered of the abolition crusaders in the field; James Gillespie Birney, later the Liberty Party candidate for President; and James Thome, Sereno Strestor, Beriah Green, R. B. Stanton, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, and a few others, who were the leading field agents and

⁶ David Donald, "Toward a Reconsideration of Abolitionists," in David Donald, Lincoln Reconsidered. Vintage Books: New York, 1961, p. 27.

⁷ Cross, The Burned-Over District, p. 226.

most dedicated abolitionists -- as well as the most prolific letter writers. Around this group, based in New York City and lecturing mainly in New York, Ohio, and peripheral areas, centered the main work of the abolition cause, and in them were contained and summed up the principal ideas and ideals of the crusade.

Binding these leaders together was a series of strong libidinal ties which were freely expressed and acknowledged among members of the group; marriages among co-workers in the cause of the slave were not uncommon, and even correspondence between male members is frequently filled with fulsome compliments and expressions of devotion, sometimes bordering on the erotic. The following passage, while an extreme example, is not totally atypical:

Allow me to say dearest brother that the assurances of your affectionate regard for so insignificant a being as I, are highly prized. That you should ever have been led as you intimate to feel a peculiar attachment to me, is a fact quite as unexpected as it is gratifying. Pardon my frankness when I say that I have never been able, hitherto, to satisfy myself that you reciprocated even a little of that affection which I have ever cherished for you, but which I have been restrained from expressing lest it might appear to your masculine, Roman, nature girlish and sickly. You must often have perceived that my intercourse with you has been constrained and stiff, so it always has been; I have felt that the current of my hearts affection was dammed up by entering your presence, and often when the gushings of my soul have prompted me to throw my arms around your neck and kiss you, I have violently quelled these impulses... thus your stern voice startles me from my maiden dreams.⁶

⁶ James Thome to Weld, Weld-Grinke Letters, p. 642.

The group composed of the chief figures of the abolition movement was tightly organized and highly cohesive, with frequent communication and reinforcement among members; the antislavery movement as a whole constituted in essence a microcosmic society within which all the members had a definite place and from which they drew strength and reinforcement as well as fresh ideas. This cohesion among members is an important factor in explaining the success, longevity, and dynamism of the antislavery movement, for it furnished the individual abolitionists the support without which they would probably have abandoned the crusade, or at least have been seriously tempted to do so. Within the antislavery group itself, the libidinal ties came to center around Theodore Dwight Weld, who was their acknowledged leader from the beginning and whose ties with many dated to the heyday of the Finney revivals and the "Holy Band of Seventy."

Leadership and personal magnetism were Weld's outstanding qualities, the characteristics around which his "fellow workers for the oppressed" molded their affection and esteem. Weld himself, although he did not fully understand the source of his leadership and was at times somewhat dismayed by it, was well aware of his influence on others: "Those with whom I have been associated have always deferred and conceded to me -- they have spontaneously

yielded to me. I have hardly ever known what it was to experience a counteraction of my will... these around me and those most intimate with me always have had unlimited confidence in me."⁹ Lyman Beecher, who had no great reason to like Weld after the young abolitionist had effectively doomed Beecher's Lane Seminary by leading away the famed Lane Rebels, could still say that "Weld was a genius. First-rate mental capacity, but uneducated. Would have made a first-rate man in the Church of God if his education had been thorough. In the estimation of the class, he was president. He took the lead of the whole institution. The young men had, many of them, been under his care, and they thought he was a god."¹⁰ Another former teacher characterized Weld as "a young man of surpassing eloquence and logical powers, and of a personal influence even more fascinating than his eloquence."¹¹ His fellow abolitionists were deeply under this personal sway, and were to a great degree dependent on Weld; in virtually every letter, they implore him to go east, or west, or to Oneida, or to Lane, or to Philadelphia, for he is "the only man that can get

⁹ Weld to Angelina Grimke, Ibid., pp. 638-639.

¹⁰ Lyman Beecher, The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher, II, Belknap Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, p. 241.

¹¹ quoted in Ibid., p. 241.

the thing done.' Even Finney, his spiritual mentor, tells him that "this is work that must be done and be done by you. No one else can do it."¹² At the root of this trust in Weld was his fellow-workers' realization not only of his tremendous personal power and magnetism but also of his great energy and the brilliant eloquence which he could bring to bear on almost any topic. A Pittsburg newspaper in 1834 praised Weld's speaking abilities:

Mr. Weld is one of nature's orators -- not a declaimer, but a logician of great tact and power. His inexhaustible fund of anecdote and general information, with the power of being intensely pathetic, enables him to give the greatest imaginable interest to the subject. His powers of teaching are of the first order -- that is, his facility for generalizing broadly and regularly, for passing into profound abstraction and bringing his wealth of ideas into beautiful light by clear, striking, and familiar illustrations.¹³

The major things which we know of Weld's character, of his deepest personal feelings and ambitions, come from a remarkably perceptive and honest series of letters cataloguing his strengths and weaknesses, his eccentricities and his ways of thinking and living, which he addressed to his

¹² Finney to Weld, Weld-Grinke Letters, p. 91.

¹³ quoted in Hazel Catherine Wolf, On Freedom's Altar, University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1952, p. 54.

fiancee, Angelina Grimke, also a fervent abolitionist.¹⁴ Weld characterized himself as having "an untamed spirit -- wild as the winds... often the leading strings thrown over it and made fast by reason and conscience snap at its first wild bound." He was, by his own testimony, "a quivering mass of intensities kept in subjection by only the rod of iron in the strong hand of conscience and reason and never laid aside for a moment with safety." When this "iron rod" was laid aside, Weld would indulge himself in a wild, reckless daring which was still strong in him at the age of forty; his childhood had been a series of accidents and injuries, usually caused by this daring: "I had almost killed myself in my reckless daring," he told Angelina, "broke one of my hands and a bone in one foot, have dislocated bones at least four times, cut off the cords of one finger, had one of my eyes literally hooked out of the socket." This delight in recklessness and daring later led Weld to risk his life more than once in front of hostile mobs, and led directly to that abuse of his splendid voice and physique which ended his career as an effective field agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Weld suffered under what he considered the one "great besetment" of his soul -- pride. He was "too proud to be ambitious, too proud to seek applause, too proud to tolerate it when lavished upon me." To counteract this tendency to pride

¹⁴ Information following taken from the Weld-Grimke Letters, pp. 560-597.

he was almost pathologically careful to avoid the spotlight even within abolition circles; he managed to "hide his light" so effectively that not until the work of Gilbert Barnes a hundred years later was the magnitude of his influence in and on the abolition movement realized.

Wald's mental makeup was in terms of absolutes, the sort of mind perfect for the abolition crusade; his cause was right and just, and those who did not totally agree and comply were absolutely wrong. "In two instances I have broken the closest and longest friendship in an instant and spurned from me those who in a single instance blanched from principle... Now mark, the moment I saw him falter I spurned him. I said to him you are a traitor to the slave, to your brethren, and to God. I wash my hands of your friendship in the name of the perishing."

He had an exceptionally strong and able mind, one which could grasp almost any situation with ease. However, his formal education was slight, something which he bitterly regretted, for too often while he was young he had left school for the sake of crusading in some cause -- temperance, manual labor, and many others. Some of his mental habits would probably make a fascinating study for the competent psychoanalyst. His memory for many things was terrible, although at one time he had lectured on the science of mnemonics; he frequently had to consult a calendar to find out what month it was, and a friend to find out where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. He would also "swing like a pendulum in a dreamy totally

totally abstracted reverie" during which he would not hear anything which was said to him, but would "go on making a sort of inarticulate nasal um, um, um, um, as a sort of unconscious mechanical assent."

In personal appearance Weld was no less peculiar than in some of his mental habits; he was a shambling bear of a man, addicted to baggy suits and coats -- but let him speak for himself: "I have always been slovenly and careless in my appearance, a slouching gait, a listless air, shoes slipshod, not blacked once a month, coat not brushed as often as that, beard generally long as a hermite." His hair, which his mother lovingly if somewhat regretfully called her "oven broom," was treated thus: "I don't comb it once a year. Every morning I put my head all over into cold water half a dozen times, then frictionize it with the stiff hair brush after wiping it dry and then let it straggle in all directions like the quills of a porcupine." The face beneath this wild hair was unusually stern and severe; an artist trying to capture its expression said that its severity was "like a streak of lightning," and Weld frightened at least one small child simply by looking at her. He felt that this severity of countenance was important, for "it is nature's own certificate of an unlovely disposition and a stern habitude of mind." Such an "unlovely disposition" is impossible to find in his personal letters, however; in them he appears a very warm and friendly

person, deeply devoted both to his friends and to the cause in which they were working.

Weld came to this cause, fervent abolitionism, through several paths; it is virtually impossible to distinguish the moment at which he became an abolitionist in sentiment, although it is somewhat easier to tell when he decided to enter upon a permanent career of reform agitation. The young Weld was the pupil and close friend of British abolition leader and itinerant evangelist Charles Stuart in the early 1820's, before Stuart had really taken an intense interest in the campaign for abolition of slavery within the British Empire. In the late 1820's, as his own interest in abolition quickened, Stuart began sending Weld volumes of his fiercely antislavery pamphlets, advocating that the younger man at least read them; eventually Stuart began urging Weld to take a more active part in the American antislavery crusade.¹⁵ Another source of Weld's antislavery feeling was the trip which he took in 1822, 1823, and 1824, lecturing on the science of mnemonics; during this trip he went through several Southern states where, he later said, "I saw slavery at home, and became a radical abolitionist."¹⁶ Benjamin Thomas, Weld's most recent biographer, writes that the final and principal antislavery impulse came from

¹⁵ Stuart to Weld, Weld-Grinke Letters, passim.

¹⁶ quoted in Beecher, Autobiography, p. 232.

a series of conversations which Weld had with Benjamin Storrs, president of Western Reserve University, Elizar Wright, and Beriah Green late in 1832, "with Weld ripe for conversion by reason of his recent sojourn in the South."¹⁷ Undoubtedly Weld also had the benefits of an upbringing in a society unfriendly to slavery, especially as his father was a minister, and had never seen slavery as anything but an evil. A final, and vital, factor was Weld's conversion to evangelical religion by Finney in the Utica revival of 1826, which is discussed more fully in the following chapter.

The most plausible explanation for Weld's final plunge into antislavery as an active agent evolves from the above factors as they were combined with another, a providential series of rescues from the "jaws of death" which convinced Weld that he had a mission in the world and was one of the noticed of God. These incidents and the interpretation put upon them by Weld and his friends are also important as illustrations of their essential religious outlook and the stress which they placed upon the concept of a God intensely concerned with each individual. Late in December 1831 Weld was involved in a stagecoach accident; a drunken driver ran his stage off the road over an eight-foot cliff, the stage turning over and striking on its top; Weld was thrown violently

¹⁷ Benjamin P. Thomas, Theodore Dwight Weld: Crusader for Freedom, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1950, p. 37.

against one of the top beams, head first, and "but for my thick fur cap and a large pocket handkerchief which I had providentially put in it, have little doubt the blow would have been serious." Weld interpreted his avoidance of injury as a sign from Heaven: "So you see, dear Brother, the Lord has laid his hand on me a little. I think it has already been a great blessing to me."¹⁸

If Weld felt that this incident was providential and indicated that God had special plans for him, this thought was doubly and trebly reinforced by a far more serious accident which followed only a month later. Crossing a swollen creek during a storm, the coach in which Weld was riding overturned and he was thrown out into the icy and turbulent stream; "all that saved me (under God) both while entangled among the horses, and afterward while buffeting the stream -- was perfect coolness, and entire self-possession. The Lord enabled me to devise expedients, and execute them, free from all flutter or trepidation."¹⁹ He was swept downstream by the current, finally managed to crawl ashore, soaking wet and freezing, far down from the point of the accident; a few weak cries for help were all he could manage, but one of them was heard by a nearby farmer whose wife, unable to sleep that night, had

¹⁸ Weld to Arthur Tappan, Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹ Weld to Stanton, Ibid., p. 65.

thought she heard a noise. The farmer found Weld, half-dead, and carried him to the house, where good nursing and Weld's strong constitution pulled him through.²⁰ Weld, his friends, and his family alike joined in proclaiming this rescue a miracle and a providential deliverance. To Finney Weld wrote of his "drowning agony and resurrection" that "Jesus has recently revealed his arm for my rescue from the horrors of a drowning death. Pray for me that this sluggish heart may be quickened by this most solemn visitation."²¹ His brother Lewis wrote him that "I never knew of [a rescue] in which every circumstance was so marked as the direct ordering of a special Providence... oh my brother, you have been on the very threshold of the eternal world and yet are you restored to your friends, to society, to the church; to prosecute labours of usefulness, to do I trust and to enjoy much good in the world."²² And in the same manner his father wrote of how clearly the hand of God was visible in every detail of the rescue; "You must, you will more than ever realize that you are not your own, that you are bound by every tie to devote your time, your talents, your life, your all to the service of God... Your life and health and the business of your agency

²⁰ Weld to Stanton, Ibid., pp. 60 ff.

²¹ Weld to Finney, Ibid., pp. 71-72.

²² Lewis Weld to Weld, Ibid., p. 73.

have appeared almost wholly in a new light. If God has indeed preserved your life, as is more than possible, to become an instrument of more than ordinary good to his cause, he will prepare you for it...by rendering you more humble, more spiritual, more prayerful, more conscious of your own insufficiency and nothingness, and of your entire dependence upon an almighty arm."²³

At the time of his two deliverances from death, Weld was already touring the country lecturing on a variety of reform subjects, primarily temperance and manual labor, causes in which he was both interested and effective. Within six months after them, he had decided to devote his life solely to the antislavery crusade: "Abolition immediate universal is my desire and prayer to God; and as long as I am a moral agent I am fully prepared to act out my belief in that."²⁴ By the end of that year, 1832, Weld had been instrumental in converting James G. Birney to the cause of immediate emancipation and enlisting his valuable services in the great crusade which was just then beginning to take form and direction.

Joining Weld in his work for the freeing of the slaves were individuals from all parts of the country and a wide range of backgrounds. The paths by which these individuals joined the great antislavery crusade differed greatly, but

²³ Ludovicus Weld to Weld, Ibid., p. 76.

²⁴ Weld to Elizur Wright, Ibid., p. 99.

their reason, intense hatred of slavery and all that it meant, never varied. Arthur Tappan, president and chief financier of the American Anti-Slavery Society, was brought into active anti-slavery work by none other than William Lloyd Garrison. In 1831, when Garrison was languishing in a Baltimore jail after being convicted of libel for a news story about a shipment of slaves, Tappan happened to hear of his plight and bailed him out. On his way back to the friendlier climate of Boston, Garrison stopped to visit Tappan, and then began sending him copies of the Liberator, which made a vivid impression on the merchant; "henceforth, the condition of the slaves, as well as the condition of the free people of color, became leading subjects with him, occupying his thoughts, his reading, his conversation, his correspondence, his benefactions, and his prayers."²⁵ Tappan was already deeply involved in a number of benevolent societies in New York; as his brother remarked in his biography, "Mr. Tappan took much pleasure in aiding unpopular causes; the more unpopular they were the more they secured his patronage, providing they were deserving."²⁶

Many, perhaps the majority, of the field agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society became advocates of emancipation through the famous series of debates on slavery, colonization,

²⁵ Tappan, Life of Arthur Tappan, p. 164.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 396.

and abolition held at Lane Seminary in 1832. Henry Baxter Stanton, for instance, states that when the debate began he favored colonization, but by the end of it he had become an immediate emancipationist.²⁷ Weld records that at the seminary, attended incidentally primarily by Finney converts who had been members of the Band of Seventy and were returning to school to study for the ministry, "we early began to inculcate our views, by conversation, upon our fellow-students. Those of us who sympathized together in our abhorrence of slavery selected each his man to instruct, convince, and enlist in the cause."²⁸ So successful were these efforts that when the Lane trustees refused to permit further discussion, virtually the entire seminary departed en masse for the more congenial atmosphere of the new college at Oberlin, where Finney was induced to become Professor of Theology.

The circumstances of Birney's conversion to the cause of immediate emancipation through the agency of Weld were touched upon above, but it is worthwhile to note that his son, writing a biography based on his father's personal papers and recollections, states that Birney "could not remember a time when he believed slavery to be right"²⁹ although

²⁷ Stanton, Random Recollections, p. 110.

²⁸ quoted in Beecher, Autobiography, p. 242.

²⁹ William Birney, James O. Birney and His Times, D. Appleton and Company: New York, 1890, p. 24.

he was a plantation owner and slaveholder for many years. In a particularly perceptive passage, the son states that "Mr. Birney was a man of his time and place; not superior to the limitations that restrain men generally, susceptible to social influences, bound to the South by ties of birth and kindred, and devoted to his native and adopted states [Kentucky and Alabama]. In his early liberalism on the subject of slavery he did not differ from very many of the leading men of Kentucky or from many of the most intelligent citizens of Alabama prior to the reign of Jackson."³⁰ Thus Weld's discussions with Birney, which "converted" him to the antislavery cause, took place against a background of conviction that slavery was wrong and in fact came after Birney had worked as an agent for the ill-fated American Colonization Society; "Mr. Weld's visit was important in its collateral results, and as laying the foundation for a life-long friendship, but it 'converted' Mr. Birney to nothing. His antislavery principles were the organic growth of a lifetime, not a sudden revelation,"³¹ something which can be said of virtually all the abolitionists.

Sarah and Angelina Grimke were also slaveholders who became staunch abolitionists, but their case was different

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

from those of Birney, James W. Davis, James A. Thome, and the other Southerners who became antislavery workers primarily as the result of personal contact with others who were already firmly convinced abolitionists. The Grimke sisters, natives of Charleston, South Carolina, as unhealthy a climate for abolitionists as existed, had owned household slaves, but had had relatively little contact with field hands, whose lot was generally far worse. Abolitionist pamphlets and propaganda somehow managed to filter into Charleston -- perhaps through the Quaker movement, for both sisters were Quakers and that sect had long been prominent in antislavery agitation -- and Sarah acquired some of this literature. "She began to read antislavery publications, and for the first time saw that slavery, under all circumstances, was sinful; she had always mourned over the ignorance, degradation, and cruelty of slavery, but never understood the chattel principle, out of which all these abominations grew as naturally as the trunk and branches from the root of the tree."³² Sarah soon convinced her younger sister, Angelina, of the evils of slavery, and the two young Southerners then embarked on a remarkable career of antislavery lecturing and crusading. Through this work, Angelina met, fell in love with, and married Weld -- once they had determined that such an alliance would not hinder their

³² Sarah and Angelina Grimke to the Editor of the National Enquirer, Wald-Grimke Letters, p. 471.

work in the abolition cause. Like many of their compatriots, the Grimke sisters were also active in several other reform fields, particularly women's rights.

The majority of the abolitionists who were active anti-slavery agitators followed the pattern outlined above -- their antislavery convictions were the result of personal experience with slavery or contact with already-staunch antislavery advocates either in person or through their literature. Almost all, even the Southerners, had been raised in a society which considered slavery wrong, and their religious background supplemented and intensified these early convictions.

For many of the antislavery crusaders, their cause was a means of finding themselves and weathering the identity crisis, much as revivalistic religion. Thome, for instance, writes that from the time he entered Lane "I was at once thrust amid the conflict of high and solemn principles, calculated to draw out my soul. Since then my feelings and associations have been entirely changed; and I seem all swallowed up in the causes which never troubled me before."³³ Later he wrote of his antislavery agency that "for the past three years, I have walked in a new world. Every foot-tread has touched some spring and revealed fresh treasures of happiness. Life has been rapture."³⁴

³³ Thome to Weld, *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁴ Thome to Weld, *Ibid.*, p. 301.

A Southern woman, converted to abolition by the Grimke sisters, declared that "I confess I am wholly indebted to the Abolition cause for rousing me from apathy and indifference, shedding light into a mind which has been too long wrapt in selfish darkness."³⁵ Sarah Grimke, prior to becoming an abolitionist, "had found the world a waste howling wilderness." Once converted to antislavery, she seemed to herself "just now awakened, or rather awakening, to a true perception of the end of my being, my duties, my responsibilities, the rich and perpetual pleasures which God has provided for us in the fulfillment of duty to him and to our fellow creatures. Thanks to the A.S. cause, it first gave an impetus to my palsied intellect and strengthened me to break the prison of my soul..."³⁶

Erik Hoffer, whose The True Believer is a classic study of the mass movement and the devotion which it draws from its followers, points out that

a mass movement attracts and holds a following not by its doctrine and promises but by the refuge it offers from the anxieties, barrenness, and meaninglessness of an individual existence. It cures the poignantly frustrated not by conferring on them an absolute truth, or by remedying the difficulties and abuses which made their lives miserable, but by freeing them from their ineffectual selves -- and it

³⁵ Sarah Forten to Angelina Grimke, Ibid., p. 379.

³⁶ Sarah Grimke to Weld, Ibid., p. 528.

does this by enfolding them and absorbing them into a closely knit and exultant corporate whole.³⁷

Hoffer also makes the point that "when we renounce the self and become a part of a compact whole [usually through a mass movement], we not only renounce personal advantage but are also rid of personal responsibility."³⁸ This is important in discussing the abolitionist, for he seemed to feel no responsibility to anything but his cause; his primary concern was with the cause itself and not even with the object of the cause. He did not go to the South where the real evil of slavery lay so that he might fight the enemy in person, but rather stayed close to home and "converted" those who already believed basically much as he did. Perhaps this is due to another phenomenon of mass movements which Hoffer notes, that "missionary zeal seems rather an expression of some deep mis-giving, some pressing feeling of insufficiency at the center. Proselytizing is more a passionate search for something not yet found than a desire to bestow upon the world something we already have. It is a search for a final and irrefutable demonstration that our absolute truth is indeed the one and only truth."³⁹

³⁷ Erik Hoffer, The True Believer, Mentor Books; New York, 1958, p. 44.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

And proselytize the abolitionists did, in every widening circles which swept them through the Old Northwest and the northeast, sometimes taking them perilously close to slave territory, but almost never plunging them into the home of the evil. It is worth noting that only the Grimke sisters, Southerners born and bred, ever insisted upon the necessity of lecturing in the South, and that only James G. Birney did any considerable amount of work in the South -- that in his homeland, the border state of Kentucky. Most of the abolitionists' work was done in the Ohio-New York area characterized by Cross as populated by old-line Yankee strains, people converted under Finney as their ancestors had been converted under Whitefield and Edwards. But even here, far from slave territory, the abolitionists still constantly faced tests of their courage and determination.

The devotion with which these men preached antislavery is frightening in its intensity and singlemindedness. Convinced of the righteousness of their cause in the eyes of God and knowing well the sacrifices which they might be called to make, they continued their crusade; they were threatened, stoned, mobbed, in town after town, but they stayed in these towns until the mobs, worn down against such granite determination and stamina, would listen to their message and at last be converted. Weld in particular, because of the extent of his travels and the value of his work, was the almost unceasing target of the mob; eventually even his splendid health

and voice broke under the strain, but he calmly cast his lot with the New York office and began to compile the data for American Slavery As It Is, all the while writing letters of encouragement to the agents still in the field. And the death of Elijah Lovejoy, martyr to an anti-abolition riot in Illinois, only spurred the antislavery crusaders to new and greater energy and effort.

Perhaps even more painful than the purely physical stress which the abolitionists endured was the mental and emotional strain to which they were subject, particularly the Southerners, butts of bitter recriminations from friends and families. Condemned and cast out by their former lives, these abolitionists were driven more and more back into the already closed society of antislavery and became even more dependent on their cause for support, friends, and a purpose in life. Birney for instance records that his labors for the slave "have separated me, almost entirely from my family-connections, and brought me no small amount of persecution."⁴⁰ However, this neither deterred nor intimidated him; "it has rather proved to me how hateful Oppression is, and how necessary it is for the happiness of our own country...that in every form and phase [slavery] be overthrown."⁴¹ Another

⁴⁰ Birney to Weld, Dwight L. Dumond, ed., The Letters of James Gillespie Birney, D. Appleton-Century Company, New York, 1938, p. 485.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 486.

"turncoat," a young Kentuckian who joined Weld at Lane, reported that "I have had great change of circumstances, since I became an abolitionist. Before I had money as I wanted, My father was a man of influence, and as his son I was respected and loved by all who knew me both in Ky. and here. Now the people of Ky. shun me as they would a rattlesnake. And the nobility of Marietta are as cool towards me as can be."⁴² The Grimke sisters likewise found themselves totally alienated from their family and friends in Charleston, especially as the family remained slaveholders.

Despite these hazards, the abolitionists never faltered. An almost morbid example of their absolute conviction is found in the letters about their family which the Grimkes addressed to Weld. Dispassionately, the sisters lamented the fact that their family were still slaveholders and would probably die such; however, if they did, then they surely were damned, and deserved to be; Weld agreed. Another example of the singleness of purpose and devotion to duty which possessed the abolitionists also concerns Weld and the Grimke sisters. Weld refused to go to Rhode Island to see his beloved fiancée, Angelina, deliver a major antislavery address to the legislature because he would suffer such mixed feelings at seeing his dear one testify against slavery and

⁴² James W. Davis to Weld, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 267.

knowing how much she feared and hated public speaking. "You would see the conflict [in me] and it would distress and cumber you, and the dear cause might be perilled."⁴⁴

The singleness of purpose with which the abolitionists worked for the "dear cause" was the necessary result of the singleness and absoluteness of thought with which they viewed slavery and the antislavery cause. All things were either right or wrong, in black or in white, and energies of the mind and body must be totally devoted to the crusade and the crusade alone.

"This is the crisis age of the world," wrote Weld, "and this [antislavery] is the crisis of the age."⁴⁵ Many abolitionists had formerly been involved in other crusades against other evils, but now that they had directed themselves against slavery, it is upon this and this alone that they must concentrate. Weld was at first willing to "let Delvan drive Temperance, McDowell moral reform, Finney Revivals, Tappan anti-slavery etc."⁴⁶ but he later changed his mind, for the slavery crisis "not only overshadows all others, but it involves all others and absorbs them into itself."⁴⁷ He shrewdly divined that:

⁴⁵ Weld to Angelina Grimke, Ibid., p. 637.

⁴⁶ LWeld to Lewis Tappan, Ibid., p. 243.

⁴⁷ Weld to Lewis Tappan, Ibid., p. 244.

Moral reform has been successfully advanced in only one way, and that has been by uplifting a great self-evident central principle before all eyes. Then after keeping the principle in full blaze till it is admitted and accredited and the surrounding mass of mind is brought over and committed to it, then the derivative principles which radiate in all directions from this main central principle have been held up in the light of it, and the mind having already embraced the central principle, moves spontaneously outward over all its relations.⁴⁸

Arthur Tappan's thought was quite similar to Weld's: "He was in immediatist also, not as an abolitionist merely, but on all subjects touching the proper restraint and thorough reformation of man."⁴⁹

This antislavery fervor and singleness of thought rested upon a single idea and keystone -- that slavery was a sin, contrary to the will of God, and must be eradicated. The American Anti-Slavery Society, according to one of its founders, "considered slaveholding a crime against man and a sin against God."⁵⁰ In its charter and in its instructions to its agents, the Society avowed that it was to "insist principally on the SIN of slavery."⁵¹ Weld, as usual, summed up their position superlatively:

⁴⁸ Weld to Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Ibid., p. 434.

⁴⁹ Lewis Tappan, Arthur Tappan, p. 106.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

⁵¹ American Anti-Slavery Society, Special Instructions To Theodore Dwight Weld, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 125.

God has committed to every moral agent the privilege, the right, and the responsibility of personal ownership. This is God's plan. Slavery annihilates it, and surrenders to avarice, passion, and lust, all that makes life a blessing. It crushes the body, tramples into dust the upward tendencies of the intellect, breaks the heart, and kills the soul.

Therefore I am deliberately, earnestly, solemnly, with my whole heart and soul and mind and strength for the immediate, universal, and total abolition of slavery.⁵²

Slavery was not only against God's will, but was also against human nature itself. "There is not a man on earth who does not believe that slavery is a curse. Human beings may be inconsistent, but human nature is true to herself. She has uttered her testimony against slavery with a shriek ever since the monster was begotten; and till it perishes amidst the execrations of the universe, she will traverse the world on its track, dealing her bolts upon its head, and dashing against it her condemning brand."⁵³

Slavery was against God and God's nature and God's laws, and it was also a monstrous evil in and of itself, an evil resulting in barbarous cruelty to the slaves. The abolitionists found thoughts of such cruelty deliciously horrifying and repulsively fascinating; "many and many a tale of romantic horror can the slaves tell," wrote one tender-souled

⁵² Weld to American Anti-Slavery Society. Ibid., p. 120.

⁵³ Theodore Dwight Weld, American Slavery As It Is. American Anti-Slavery Society: New York, 1839, p. 7.

female antislavery worker.⁵⁴ Weld prefaced his American Slavery As It Is, the opus magnum of antislavery, with a long list of the cruelties and evils which resulted from slavery, barbarities which the book was intended to prove through documents and testimony:

We will prove that the slaves in the United States are treated with barbarous inhumanity; that they are overworked, underfed, wretchedly clad and lodged, and have insufficient sleep; that they are often made to wear round their necks iron collars armed with prongs, drag heavy chains and weights at their feet while working in the field, and to wear yokes, bells, and iron horns; that they are often kept confined in the stocks day and night for weeks together, made to wear gags in their mouths for hours or days, have some of their front teeth torn out or broken off, that they may be easily detected when they run away; that they are frequently flogged with terrible severity, have red powder rubbed into their lacerated flesh, and hot brine, spirits of turpentine, &c. poured over the gashes to increase the torture; that they are often stripped naked, their backs and limbs cut with knives, bruised and mangled by scorns and hundreds of blows with the paddles, and terribly torn by the claws of cats; drawn over them by their tormentors; that they are often hunted with bloodhounds and shot down like beasts, or torn into pieces by dogs; that they are often suspended by the arms and beaten till they faint, and when revived by restoratives, beaten again till they faint, and sometimes till they die; that their ears are often cut off, their eyes hooked out, their bones broken, their flesh branded with red hot irons; that they are maimed, mutilated, and burned to death over slow fires.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Angelina Grimke to Weld, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 523.

⁵⁵ Weld, American Slavery As It Is, p. 9.

No wonder this book had such a profound effect upon the country and the abolition movement in general, and induced one sweet little old New England lady to write such a tale of woe and horror as Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Abolition of slavery would thus be of incalculable good to the black man by freeing him from such torture; it would also be of equally incalculable benefit to the white man as well, for "the contest is becoming -- has become -- one not alone of freedom for the blacks, but of freedom for the whites. It has now become absolutely necessary that slavery shall cease, in order that freedom may be preserved in any portion of the land."⁵⁶ Not only was freedom endangered, but the nation itself stood in peril if it continued to harbor the evil of slavery. Although Weld late in his antislavery career stated that as he saw the warclouds gathering over the country all he could do was "rejoice and leap for joy" and feel "more than a perfect peace,"⁵⁷ while he was young he had viewed the matter differently, and most of his fellow abolitionists still felt that way. "When I look at the great slave question," the younger Weld had written, "trace its innumerable and illimitable bearings upon the weal of the world, every year augmenting its difficulties, its dangers, its woe and its guilt, my heart aches with hope deferred [sic], mocks all prescrip-

⁵⁶ Birney to Gerrit Smith, quoted in Birney, James Co. Birney, p. 185.

⁵⁷ quoted by Angelina Grimke, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 522.

tions, and refuses to be comforted. I am ripe in the conviction that if they Colonization Society does not dissipate the horror of darkness which overhangs the southern country, we are undone."⁵⁸ Lewis Tappan summarized the prevalent view among the abolitionists when he said that:

The Almighty has never permitted nations to trample upon the rights of mankind without inflicting upon them severe chastisements. Both sacred and profane history bear evidence of this. Now, as nations are punished in the world for their evil doings...it is certain that a nation persisting in transgression will meet with Divine chastisement. This being the case the vials of God's wrath will surely be poured out upon a people like slaveholding America.⁵⁹

In fact, when the Civil War did break upon the country, a good many of the former abolition leaders felt that this too was God's work; they "recognized the arm of Divine Justice wielding the avenging sword for the punishment of a NATION, North and South, that had so long, as slaveholders, or the abettors of slaveholding, trampled upon human rights, defying the arrows of the Almighty."⁶⁰

Because of the dual nature of the sin of slavery -- against God and against country -- and because of the punishment which would surely be inflicted upon the nation if it

⁵⁸ Weld to Birney, Birney Letters, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Lewis Tappan, Arthur Tappan, p. 372.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 373.

continued, it was the duty, the solemn responsibility of those who saw the evils of slavery to take up arms against it whenever, wherever, and however they could. "What unspeakable responsibilities rest on you -- on YOU!" Weld wrote to the Grimkes, and they responded. Sarah Grimke testifies eloquently to this sense of awesome responsibility which she, her sisters, and her fellow antislavery workers felt weighing upon them:

As I left my native state on account of slavery, and deserted the home of my fathers to escape the sound of the lash and the shrieks of tortured victims, I would gladly bury in oblivion the recollection of those scenes with which I have been familiar; but this may not, cannot be; they come over my memory like gory spectres, and implore me with resistless power, in the name of a God of mercy, in the name of a crucified Savior, in the name of humanity; for the sake of the slaveholder, as well as the slave, to bear witness to the horrors of the southern prison house. I feel impelled by a sacred sense of duty, by my obligations to my country, by sympathy for the bleeding victims of tyranny and lust, to give my testimony respecting the system of American slavery.⁶¹

Her sister added: "What we have written we have written from a deep and solemn sense of duty, and neither life nor death can shake the rock of principle upon which we stand. It cost us more agony of soul to write those testimonies [for American Slavery as It Is] than any thing we ever did; but the Lord required it and gave us strength to do it, leaving all the consequences in his holy hands."⁶²

⁶¹ Sarah Grimke, Birney Letters, p. 23.

⁶² Angelina Grimke, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 789.

In their testimony against slavery and their lectures on abolition, the antislavery crusaders frequently showed a frightening lack of contact with reality and sense of responsibility. This is most evident in their failure to advance any concrete plan for freeing the slaves or for dealing with them after their emancipation; the very real problems which the South faced, and would face in greatly intensified degree were emancipation effected, were totally ignored, with the tragic result of reconstruction and the reverberations which still rock the country today. The abolitionists excused this in themselves by saying that if such a plan were proposed, the proponents of slavery would use a single small flaw to tear down the whole structure of antislavery; "let there be set up a principle, false or unsound in any of its parts -- under the false or unsound part, slaveholders, as well as owners, will take refuge, however small and insufficient it may be for their protection."⁶³ Perhaps the abolitionists had a point there -- but again, perhaps the slaveholders also had a point. The abolitionists, in their catalog of the evils of slavery, also overlooked the fact that not every slave was horribly maltrated, and magnified the picture of suffering and torture far out of proportion to achieve their effect. Their failure to take the campaign against slavery into its homeland, as pointed out above,

⁶³ Birney to Gerrit Smith, Birney Letters, p. 148.

is another example of the lack of contact with reality and lack of a sense of responsibility which the abolitionists sometimes displayed.

In essence then these were the mainstays of the anti-slavery campaign and crusade as it was waged in the 1830's: the strong conviction that slavery was a sin against man and God, that it could only result in evil for slave and for country, and that it was the duty of all to bear witness against slavery with all of their abilities and powers. Fortified with these thoughts, trained by years of agitation for other causes, and strengthened by constant contact and communication with one another, the abolitionists went forth to brave mob and riot, to risk their lives, their health, even their families, in the great crusade against evil. Fearless and uncompromising, they marched behind their revered leader to abolitionise half a nation -- and irrevocably antagonize the other half -- in the unshakable certainty of their religion and their cause, which were often virtually identical.

CHAPTER V

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ABOLITIONISM AND REVIVALISM

Religion for the great majority of the abolitionists was the ruling factor in their lives; trained from childhood in the strongly fundamentalist Protestantism of rural nineteenth century America, they constantly looked to their religious principles for guidance, and based all their actions, including abolition agitation, on religious foundations. Religion was thus the prime motivating factor within the antislavery crusade, and an understanding of the religious backgrounds and concepts of the abolitionists is essential to an understanding of the nature of their great cause.

Childhood training in religion is the most important factor in conditioning people to a "religious" outlook on life and in accounting for the subsequent "conversion." It is not surprising to find that the majority of the leading abolitionists came from strong religious backgrounds; the America of their generation was a land still mightily ruled by religion and the churches, and the culture if not the family provided a strong religious background. However, for

most of the abolitionists it was the family which furnished the strongest religious impulse. Weld, for instance, was the son of a Presbyterian minister and "grew up under the rigorous Puritan discipline which relied upon Biblical precepts and a stern, dogmatic theology to thwart the ever-present beguilements of sin."¹ His parents' letters are filled with admonitions to look after his own soul and those of others; "Let us my son at all times and in every way look to Jesus, trust in God, submit to his holy dispensation, and when adverse breezes fan us, may we quietly submit," his mother wrote.² The biographies of the other abolitionists show a similar intense training and interest in religious matters during the formative years of childhood.

Revivalistic religious was also a vital part of the abolitionists' early training and memories; Stanton for instance records that "the echo of Whitefield's early fame lingered among my native hills. My grandmother told me of the mellow accents of his voice, now soft as a flute, anon swelling like a bugle; of his dramatic gestures and thrilling appeals, which swayed great audiences as if swept by the wings of the tempest... I have bent reverently over the sepulchre of the peerless preacher in Newburyport."³

¹ Thomas, Weld, p. 8.

² Elizabeth Weld to Weld, Weld-Grinke Letters, p. 9.

³ Stanton, Random Recollections, p. 13.

Thus it is not too surprising that most of the abolitionists, trained in religion from childhood, should have undergone a "conversion" of some sort, mainly through evangelists or evangelical churches. Weld, like so many of his fellow evangelical abolitionists, was converted by Finney; his story is perhaps typical. An open and vocal opponent of Finney and his "new measures," Weld was visiting an aunt in Utica when Finney began a revival there; Weld refused to attend the meeting, only to be tricked into going by his aunt, who said that the sermon would be given by the regular minister. Weld dutifully trooped to church, where he was treated to a two-hour sermon by Finney on those who would oppose the spirit of God working through the revival; appropriately, the sermon was entitled "One Sinner Destroyeth Much Good." Finney recalls, "I suppose that I drew a pretty vivid picture of Weld, and of what his influence was, and what mischief he might do." Weld, fuming, tried to leave, but his aunt refused to budge. Shortly after this, the two men had an angry confrontation in town, with Weld railing away at Finney until the evangelist stopped him cold by asking, "Mr. Weld, are you the son of a minister of Christ, and is this the way for you to behave?" Chastened, Weld stormed home to his aunt's, where the family was already hard at work praying for his conversion. He went to his upstairs room and remained there all night pacing the floor in terrible agony of soul; "Just at daylight...a pressure

came upon him that crushed him down to the floor, and there he lay, until, later in the morning, his aunt coming up, found him upon the floor calling himself a thousand fools." Thus converted, Weld stood up in church the following night and made "a very humble, earnest, broken-hearted confession."⁴ After his conversion, he became the de facto leader of Finney's Band of Seventy, the young disciples and converts who roamed the country preaching the gospel and conversion. Most of these young men went to Lane Seminary, and most of them left Lane for Oberlin, with Weld still their leader and Finney their spiritual mentor; from Oberlin most of them went into the field as agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Arthur Tappan, who later became a follower of Finney, was at first converted through the offices of his wife, who attended an evangelical Presbyterian church in New York; at the age of thirty Tappan became a member of this church. "He had never forgotten the instructions of pious parents while under their roof, nor the faithful counsel they had given him in their letters in subsequent years. He had been a child of prayer, and the strong faith evinced by his parents, especially his mother, made his conversion, not an unexpected, although it was a joyful, event to her and his other Christian friends. The mother's fervent prayers were answered."⁵

⁴ Finney, Memoirs, pp. 184-188.

⁵ Tappan, Life of Arthur Tappan, pp. 62-63.

Birney likewise "from his youth up...had revered religion"; "His deep and sincere nature and love of truth predisposed him to the acceptance of religious principle as the guide of his life." Under the influence of his beloved first wife, a deeply religious woman, he in his mid-twenties was converted to the Presbyterian church. "From that event dates his new and better life, his performance of duty as he saw it, his increasingly intelligent conscience."⁶

It is apparent from these case histories, which are typical of the fervent abolitionists in the west, that their religious faith was deeply rooted in their childhood training; religion permeated their very beings almost from their earliest memories. When they were converted, they were not converted in the sense that they were made to see something new and wonderful in religion, but rather in the sense that a deeply felt religiosity which had lain semi-dormant for years was brought again to the fore under the powerful personal influence of a minister, a wife, a mother, who pressed for their conversion. Conversion was an intensification of the religious flame, a renewal of faith, not a discovery of it.

The religious faith which most of the abolitionists professed was quite simple, almost fundamentalist in modern terms; they believed in a personal God who guides the fates

⁶ Birney, James G. Birney, pp. 53-54.

of men and nations, a God who can be kind and generous but who also can be the God of wrath so vividly depicted in the Old Testament. They believed in the saving grace given them through Jesus Christ, and that salvation could be theirs; for the most part they were content to leave their destinies in the hands of God, and to submit totally to his will. Their personal letters abound in Biblical quotations, in expressions of trust in divine guidance and goodness, and in religious advice to one another and to their families. There was a religion looking to the millennium and the glorious coming of the kingdom of Christ, an event which they were sure was imminent. Arthur Tappan's faith, here summed up by his brother, is representative:

As a Christian he was devoid of ostentation and pretense. With a firm belief in the evangelical faith, he relied upon the mercy of God through the atoning sacrifice of the Savior, discarding all thoughts of his good deeds as meriting reward in another life, although he firmly believed that as evidences of piety they were essential.⁷

To these men, the presence of God was very near and very real when they needed it. "Altho' I am in the midst of enemies...and am often much perplexed, yet altogether I have never had so much -- never before have I felt God to be a help so present, or the character of the Savior, in his invariable holiness and constancy, so altogether precious."⁸

⁷ Tappan, Arthur Tappan, p. 388.

⁸ Birney to Weld, Birney Letters, p. 191.

Another abolitionist wrote that "I feel that God is my helper and that he has infinite fullness of all things and will communicate to me just such qualifications as I need."⁹ The idea that the Lord would be with them in any crisis was a pervasive and persuasive note in the abolitionists' religious thought; "God is my shield and fortress, my life, my strength. Surely his comforts to those who seek them are great!"¹⁰ Weld wrote that "Our trust is in Him who made the universe and who rules it. His truth will stand. The gates of hell shall not prevail, nor the expectation of the poor perish forever. God sits above the storm all undisturbed. He is the Pilot at the helm and needs not the tossing beneath nor the storm blast around."¹¹

A vital part of the abolitionists' religious thought was their conviction of God's intense personal interest in them, a conviction which could sometimes reach heights of ecstasy and exaltation bordering on mysticism:

It has often occurred to me that God might have ordered it in his Providence as a Crowning trial, to test my love to Him and see whether I would at his bidding cheerfully relinquish all, but Him and for Him...Tho' he slay me yet will I trust in Him...If God call me to it I am girded for it, and will, yea, I can and will come off conqueror. I can and will, yea, I trust I have, brought my insurrectionary spirit into captivity unto the obedience of Christ. However I shall be torn in the conflict,

⁹ Phoebe Matthews to Weld, Weld-Grinke Letters, p. 213.

¹⁰ Birney to Lewis Tappan, Birney Letters, p. 311.

¹¹ Weld to Birney, Ibid., p. 248.

mine shall be the victory thro' Him that loved me and gave himself for me. I can and will bear the burdens he layeth upon me; and however for a time they may bow me down, I shall rise again for the Lord upholdeth me. The cup that my Heavenly Father giveth me shall I not drink it? Yea verily I will drain it too, tho' it be gall and wormwood.¹²

The faith of these abolitionists was a simple and trusting one based on belief in the goodness and righteousness of God; it was a faith which could enable Birney to say that "thrice my peace has been slain in the death of my little ones -- but praised be His name who chose to take them to himself. He has made it, as I trust, great gain to me. Whilst I sorrow for them even now, when in imagination I see their sweet bodies lying in the cold ground, and have in my mind's eye their playful conversation and jocular countenances, the tears I shed are not of grief but of joy -- because I can say without a murmur good is the will of the Lord."¹³

However, the abolitionists' picture of God was not totally sweetness and salvation; the benevolent and loving Father could also become the angry Jehovah of the Old Testament when his will was ignored, he could rage forth to punish those who did not worship and obey him. "God's terrors

¹² Weld to Angelina Grimke, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 535.

¹³ Birney to Gerrit Smith, Birney Letters, p. 241.

have begun to blaze upon the guilty nation. If repentance, speedy, deep and national does not forestall Jehovah's judgments, they will break upon us from the thickening air and heaving earth and the voice of a brothers blood crying from the ground will peal against the wrathful heavens and shake down ruin as a fig tree casteth her untimely fruit." But for God's elite, those who had carried out his will, even in such circumstances there was still hope of salvation, salvation to be found in and through the Lord: "May God purify us, gird us for the conflict, give us faith and then we shall stand unscathed by the flames which blaze around us."¹⁴

Also strong in the religious thought of the antislavery workers was the idea of the millennium, the coming of the Kingdom of God, which H. Richard Niebuhr has so well depicted in his work on nineteenth century Protestantism. This millennialism, this sense of the nearness of the Kingdom and the salvation it would bring for some and the damnation for others, was a very important part of the abolitionists' religious thought, as will be demonstrated later.

The nature and content of the religious thought which the abolitionists held is vitally important to understanding the manner in which they felt and acted toward other things,

¹⁴ Weld to Birney, Ibid., p. 289.

particularly their cause and crusade. Recent study of the nature of belief systems, thought structure, and personality types, such as Theodore Adorno's The Authoritarian Personality and Milton Rokeach's The Open and Closed Mind,¹⁵ indicates that thought systems and belief structures, the ideological content of the individual's mind, are not unrelated, but are deeply rooted in the very nature of the personality. Personality does not merely contain a certain number of thought systems or beliefs, but is molded and shaped by them as well. Thus an individual such as the abolitionist has a basic belief system and thought structure, the religious one, upon which many of his other beliefs are centered; on the basic structure formed by the religious beliefs would be molded any subsequent ideological structures, such as antislavery. In other words, within the personalities and thought patterns of these men was a structure already established by the nature of their religious thought and training which would determine a great deal of the manner in which they thought about and worked for the abolition cause once they had adopted it;

¹⁵ Theodore H. Adorno, The Authoritarian Personality, Harper: New York, 1950; Milton Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind: Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems, New York: Basic Books, 1960.

indeed, their very espousal of the cause was to a large degree determined by their early religious training and by the intensification and renewal of this early training through evangelical conversion.

The religious thought of the abolitionists had several characteristics which were of the utmost importance in determining the sort of crusade for the abolition of slavery which they would conduct. First of all, theirs was a simplistic religion, people with only the Trinity; there was no complexity of ideas, no realization that things are not always so easy to explain and accomplish as they might seem. Secondly, theirs was a future-oriented religion, concerned with the coming of the millennium and with the fate of the individual after death. Third, it was a religion which laid great stress on the authoritarian role of God and emphasized putting one's total faith and trust in him and him alone. It was because of this a highly protective religion, one which made the believer feel secure no matter what he faced; or, if you will, one which would drown his sensibilities to the subtle undercurrents of life, and give him a crutch upon which he could lean rather than learn to rely upon himself and his own initiative. It was also a faith which gave the believer a firm sense of right and wrong, of moral absolutes, and which made his pictures of the world one painted solely in terms of moral issues, in black and white with precious little grey shading.

On the basis of this faith, the abolitionists came to their conclusions about the antislavery crusade and the means best calculated to achieve its goal. In this crusade many of them were following a course already pointed out by Finney, whose abhorrence of slavery predated his career as an evangelist. Finney dealt with slavery frequently in his sermons in this early part of his career, and never hesitated to say that "it is a great national sin... it is a sin of the church [for] the churches by their silence, and by permitting slaveholders to belong to their communion, have been consenting to it."¹⁶ Despite his aversion to slavery, Finney "did not, however, turn aside, to make it a hobby, or divert the attention of the people from saving souls."¹⁷ This was his primary purpose, and the primary purpose of the entire clergy: "let a church express her opinion of the subject and be at peace."¹⁸

After two years of intensive antislavery agitation, Finney very much began to fear the sure consequences of it: "Brother Wald, is it not true, at least do you not fear it is, that we are in our present course going fast into a civil war? Will not our present movements in abolition result in that? Shall not we ere long be obliged to take refuge in a military despotism? Nothing is more manifest to me than that

¹⁶ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 282.

¹⁷ Finney, Memoirs, p. 324.

¹⁸ Finney, Lectures on Revivals, p. 287.

the present movements will result in this, unless your mode of abolitionizing the country be greatly modified." Finney feared that "the church and world, ecclesiastical and state leaders, will become embroiled in one common internal squabble that will roll a wave of blood over the land." But warn as he might that the leaders of the abolition movement are good but not necessarily wise men, and that "some of them are reckless," Finney was helpless to stem the tide which he had in large measure loosed upon the nation;¹⁹ Finney, in a very real sense, had played Frankenstein to the abolition movement, and was as justifiably frightened of and unable to control his creature as the original had been. Shortly after this letter to Weld, the revivalist, by this time convinced that the present course could only lead to disaster, spoke to his students at Oberlin, trying to convince them that they might best save the nation not through radical antislavery but through revivalism and the conversion of sinners; although his counsel did cause some serious soul-searching among the students, when weighed against Weld's urging of antislavery, it proved the lighter. His converts, their religious zeal rekindled at his hands, went on to spread the gospel of antislavery and to spark the fires of civil war -- civil war which as Finney all too clearly foresaw did "roll a wave of blood over the land."²⁰

¹⁹ Finney To Weld, Wald-Griske Letters, pp. 318-319.

²⁰ Thome, Allen, Alvord to Wald, IBID., pp. 323-328.

Throughout the papers, letters, and published writings of the abolition workers there are clear examples of the manner in which their religion and their conversion through Finney or other agents influenced and directed their antislavery thoughts and actions. Because of the far-reaching consequences of some of these thoughts and actions, it is vital to realize how deeply rooted in the personalities and religious beliefs of the abolitionists were many of what seemed to be the most radical antislavery measures, and how many of their methods were almost direct copies of the methods of revivalism.

The first, and most important, manner in which religion influenced the abolitionists was to convince them that their cause was right and that God was on their side and would aid them. As Weld wrote to Eliza Wright, "the cause we are wedded to is the cause of changeless eternal right. God has decreed its ultimate triumph, and if the signs of the times are not mockers, the victory shout will ring round the world before the generation that now is, goes to the dead."²¹ The abolitionists saw themselves as laborers in God's holy cause, as agents of the Lord; and God himself was directing their labors, protecting his holy cause. Since they were working not for themselves but for God, there could be no compromise, no hesitating, for truth and truth alone was the instrument which would win over the world, and "almighty God will surely prosper [antislavery] if his chosen instruments and agents firmly and

²¹ Weld to Wright, *Ibid.*, p. 100.

agents firmly and faithfully persevere in the performance of their duties."²² No statement, no action was too radical for those enlisted in God's service; after all, "may not God have permitted a course bordering on denunciation and violence, in order at first to secure this excitement of the public mind [on abolition]?"²³ And because they are workers in God's cause, the abolitionists cannot let any thing stand in their way, they must not be frightened at the course which lies before them, they must stand firm no matter what. "We ought to be ashamed of ourselves if the mountain obstacles in our way make us cower. The cause we are wedded to is the cause of changeless eternal right," wrote Weld to Thome.²⁴ A fellow abolitionist concurred: "I thank God that his truth will stand, and go forward notwithstanding the seeming obstacles in the way. Having based myself on that eternal rock, I can smile at the dashing billows, and bid defiance to the rocking tempests."²⁵

Corollary to the belief that the cause in which they labored was holy and blessed of God was the belief that slavery was indeed a sin and must be attacked as sin. "Nothing but the Gospel of Christ can serve us," wrote Beriah Green.²⁶ And

²² Benjamin Lundy to Birney, Birney Letters, p. 314.

²³ Birney to Wright, Ibid., p. 151.

²⁴ Weld to Thome, Weld-Grinke Letters, p. 287.

²⁵ J.R. Pierce to Weld, Ibid., p. 183.

²⁶ Beriah Green to Weld, Ibid., p. 868.

Birney likewise acknowledged that "our main reliance, dear brother, is upon those great principles of action that Christ has preached to his church... the only means of succeeding at all is to apply the whole truth to the conscience."²⁷

Another facet of the abolitionists' religion which gave impulse to their antislavery agitation was the millennialism which they shared; slavery must be abolished because "the principle of slavery in its various forms to direct oppression and unchristian prejudice and exclusiveness is now the great obstacle in the way of the millennium."²⁸ Through working in the antislavery cause, the abolitionists could themselves help prepare the way for the coming of Christ: "May the Lord direct and bless you and make your contemplated act a commissioned herald to usher in the millennium," wrote Weld to Birney as the latter was about to begin publication of his short-lived antislavery newspaper in Kentucky.²⁹

The fact that their religion was so future-oriented, so concerned with the millennium and with fate after death, is also vital. A person whose main concern is with the glorious future may take refuge in a holy cause of some sort to escape the sordid present; this seems to have happened with some of the abolitionists. Because he thinks in terms of the future, such a person will also want to make that future a better time

²⁷ Birney to Lewis Tappan, Birney Letters, p. 178.

²⁸ Weld to Birney, Ibid., p. 120.

²⁹ Weld to Birney, Ibid., p. 114.

and place to be, and thus would seek desperately to do away with the evils of the present by any means. He would also be in a hurry to do this, lest the future arrive before he is ready for it. And with the coming of the Kingdom almost at hand, this person would do everything he could, no matter how radical, to assure his own salvation. Hokeach points out that a future-oriented time perspective of this nature is a chief characteristic of the closed belief system, a rigidly-structured belief system which permits no new thoughts and admits no possibility of being wrong, a system of absolutes.³⁰ All these qualities were to a greater or lesser degree present among the abolitionists and were important in determining their behavior.

Because slavery was against the will of God, the abolitionists feared it would bring ruin upon the country -- and themselves -- if it were not immediately repented: "Slavery is sin before God," said Finney, "and will end, if not abandoned, in the ruin of our country."³¹ Weld was much more vivid in his description of the evil and of the consequences which it could have -- a vividness in writing and style which stemmed in large part not only from his natural eloquence but also from his work with Finney and from his reading of the Bible:

³⁰Weld to Lewis Tappan, Weld-Griske Letters, pp. 247-248.

³¹Finney to Weld, Finney Letters, p. 210.

The terrors of God! The faintest gleam of that excites men with trembling or maddens them with frenzy. Oh them whose heart can endure, whose hands be strong when the breath of God sets the Universe of fire and a million worlds burn down at once! My brother I can't resist the conviction that this terrible rebuke [the New York fire of 1837] is but a single herald sent in advance to announce the coming of a host. The land is full of blood. It will [mutilated] cover up the slain. The groans of slaughtered thousands go up to heaven from the dust where they welter. Truth has fallen in the streets, judgment is turned away backward. Warnings have been unheeded. Entreaties and tears have been scoffed at. The poor have cried and ears have been stopped and the hearts have been steeled; and avarice has clutched the last pittance, and lust has gorged itself with spoil, and prejudice has spurned God's image with loathing, and passion has rushed upon the helpless and trodden down the needy in the gates; and when iniquity has been visited by terrible rebuke, it has swelled with pride and gnashed with rage, and cursed the poor and blasphemed God -- scorning repentance and defying wrath to the utmost. Shall I not visit for these things and shall not my soul be avenged on a nation like this? What can save us as a nation but repentance -- immediate, profound, public, proclaimed abroad, wide as our infamy and damning guilt have gone. This awful calamity which has whined the queen-city of the Land seems to me so like Jehovah's voice, its last warning spoken in articulate thunder over the sealed ear of a besotted people drugged by its sins into the sleep of death.³²

But at times this same religious faith made Weld "rejoice and leap for joy" at the thought of war. Indeed, when the

³² Weld to Lewis Tappan. Weld-Crinke Letters, pp. 247-248.

war did come, many of the abolitionists accepted it was the will of God, as his way of avenging himself on the nation for allowing slavery to continue for so long. Arthur Tappan, for instance, "believed that the free states were guilty, in the sight of heaven and earth, for the alliance with the slave states in political and religious affiliations, and deserved the punishment afflicted upon them in the loss of life and treasure. He believed also that God, in his retributive justice, had brought desolation and destruction upon the South for its flagitious cruelty to the colored man."³³

The abolition crusaders' highly personal concept of religion, their feeling that God was with them and directing their actions, also led to the conclusion that God himself had called them to this cause and that it was their duty to do all they could, no matter how distasteful it was or how much danger it placed them in. The Grimke sisters wrote that "we believed God has called us to bear our testimony in this way against the abomination of slavery, and trusting in him we feel strengthened to drink the cup he gives us, rejoicing at seasons that we are found worthy to open our mouths for the dumb."³⁴ Weld came to antislavery as a fulltime agent because "the providence of God has for some time made it clear to me that the Abolition of Slavery and the elevation of the free colored race have intrinsic demands upon me superior to every other cause."³⁵ When

³³ Tappan, Arthur Tappan, p. 258.

³⁴ Sarah Grimke to Weld, Weld-Grimke Letters, p. 551.

³⁵ Weld to Shipard, Ibid., p. 152.

the abolitionist realized that this was his duty to God, a conclusion frequently reached after long prayer, he could not shirk this duty. At one time or another almost all the antislavery workers wished that they might end their work and return to their families, earn a decent living, but the call of God held them in the field for the American Anti-Slavery Society. One woman expressed it, "the necessity that some time since I felt laid upon me, to cry against the sins of the Nineveh in which we live, becomes every day heavier and heavier, and I become very day less and less able to bear it. When I feel that returning weight of the pressure, I can do nothing but weep, and I have prayed most earnestly that this cup might pass from me, not feeling that I could drink it."³⁶

Martyrdom and the desire for it in the abolition movement has been thoroughly explored by Hazel Wolf in On Freedom's Altar; she concludes that "upon this concept the abolitionist crusaders sought to capitalize... they begged Americans to see the parallel between their experiences and those of Fox's heroes and heroines."³⁷ This is overstating the case somewhat; the antislavery agents realized that death and martyrdom might well be their lot, but it was their strong religious background rather than political motivation which ex-

³⁶ Abby Kelly To Weld, Ibid., p. 747.

³⁷ Wolf, On Freedom's Altar, p. 8.

plain their calm acceptance of the fact. Weld, writing even before Lovejoy's death, said: "Let every abolitionist debate the matter once for all, and settle it with himself whether he is an abolitionist from impulse or principle -- whether he can lie upon the rack -- and clasp the faggot -- and tread with steady step the scaffold -- whether he can at the post of duty and suffered all, stand -- and if cloven down, fall and die a martyr, not accepting deliverance. O what revelations of character have already been made by this question, and yet these are but the shadow of those to come... God gird us all to do valiantly for the helpless and innocent. Blessed are they who die in the harness and are buried on the field or bleach there."³⁸

The lack of responsibility in abolitionist thought and action is also in large part a function of the essentially religious nature of their thought on slavery. The abolitionists did not go to the South, to that part of the country which most needed antislavery proselytization, because they felt it was already beyond hope. "It is time for Christians to leave the slaveholding states. With them I fear that all is lost. All the signs of the times, it seems to me to show, that they are to be visited with judgments."³⁹ God's will and wrath were working themselves out in the South, and the abolitionists could leave it to Him; slavery was going to be des-

³⁸ Weld to Ray Potter, Weld-Orinake Letters, p. 310.

³⁹ Birney to Smith, Birney Letters, p. 243.

troyed, and they should labor only to save that part of the country which could still be reached. The abolitionists were working within a far larger cause, and theirs was not the responsibility for cause or consequence; God was directing it, and upon him the responsibility lay.

Another way in which the religious feelings of the abolitionists and their political actions were related was that this tremendous lashing out against the South and slavery was in large measure a mechanism for releasing guilt accumulated over the years by the abolitionists as a result of the high standards which they and their religion set for them and the frustration they experienced when they failed, as they must, to live up to such high standards. In their correspondence the abolitionists are constantly bemoaning their failure to live true Christian lives and recounting their faults; undoubtedly they had, and had grown up with, deep-rooted guilt because of these failures. Projecting this guilt upon the South, the abolitionists could crusade with all the more fervor because of the tremendous relief which such agitation afforded them. In his Psychopathology and Politics, Harold Lasswell points out that the twentieth century agitator is frequently driven by intense guilt;⁴⁰ guilt of this sort would undoubtedly occur in a person raised under the strict tenets of early nineteenth century Calvinism, even though his later training and dogma might not be so rigid.

⁴⁰ Lasswell, Psychopathology and Politics, p. 250 ff.

In addition to furnishing the abolitionists with much of the content and structure of their belief system about slavery, and to conditioning the actions which they would take and the price they were willing to pay, religion, specifically the evangelical religion, was also vitally important in terms of the abolition group itself.

When the American Anti-Slavery Society began its serious work of "abolitionizing" the country, it found at its call an already-formed cadre of trained agitators who could easily carry over the methods and experience of their work for Finney to the new cause of abolition. This group had already coalesced at Lane Seminary and had transferred its leadership loyalty from Finney to Weld before the antislavery movement began in full earnest. Ties of loyalty and of shared experience within the revival movement already bound together many of the antislavery agents with the vital libidinal ties so important to the success of the movement. The thought systems formed by early training and refined and reinforced by revivalistic conversion, the thought structure which was to prove to be so vital to abolitionism, were already present, and the new belief system of antislavery was easy to graft onto them. The abolitionists -- the vitally important field agents of the Society -- were a cohesive group with an outstanding leader long before they were fervent abolitionists.

The methods which the abolitionists adopted to convert the country to antislavery were very much those of the revival

as tried and proved by Finney and perpetuated by themselves. Their technique was to remain in a single town for ten days, two weeks, a month, lecturing twice or more each day, for whatever period of time was required to break down resistance to abolition within that town and convert new members to the cause. Like Finney, the abolitionists would speak for two or three hours at a time, painting a vivid picture of the evils of slavery and the horrors which would befall the country if this sin were allowed to continue and even to prosper.⁴¹ The work of the abolitionists in the Finney revivals had taught them which techniques and psychological devices were most effective; they were quiet as shrewd and calculating speakers as the great evangelist. In fact, they spoke and wrote in a style similar to that of the revivals, making frequent biblical references and allusions to hellfire; the abolitionist dialogue was in fact a rich compound of righteous indignation and holy crusading set forth in the wonderful prose of the King James Bible.

A final manner in which the earlier work of the revivalists was vital to the abolition crusade was that the sections of the country in which the abolitionists carried on most of their work, and in which they enjoyed their greatest success, had already been thoroughly covered by them and their compatriots in the revivals of five years or so earlier. The religious

⁴¹ Weld to J. F. Robinson, Weld-Grieks Letters, pp. 295 ff.

attitudes which were so important in determining the abolitionists' own ideas had already been implanted and intensified in the inhabitants of these areas, making it that much easier for the very similar ideas and methods of the abolition crusade to take root. Resistance to this manner of crusade had already been broken down once, and the people of these areas were, as Pavlov would express it, sensitized to the stimuli which characterized both revivalism and abolitionism. And if the towns could no longer find excitement and release in the frying pan of revivalism, they could now turn to the fire of abolitionism, as they did.

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VITA

SANDRA LANG MCNAIR

Born in Charleston, West Virginia, 14 June 1941.
Graduated from Harbor High School, Ashtabula, Ohio, 8
June 1959. Received A.B. in History from the College
of William and Mary in Virginia 10 June 1962. Returned
to William and Mary September 1962 as a graduate assis-
tant in the Department of History.