

are to pass judgment on them at all, it must surely be not simply in terms of the extent to which they adhered to some given standard of antislavery orthodoxy, but in terms of their effectiveness in bringing their congregations to an increased awareness of the greatest moral issue confronted by that whole generation of Americans.

HENRY W. BELLOWS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

The organization of the United States Sanitary Commission was Henry W. Bellows's greatest public service, and the one for which he is best remembered today. The organization of the National Conference in 1865, and his leadership in its affairs until his death in 1882, was his most important service to the Unitarian denomination. The exact nature and significance of this contribution to the Unitarian cause has been largely forgotten, however, with the result that the Unitarian debt to Bellows is not generally recognized. Furthermore, the story of the founding of the National Conference has never been told with full attention to the wealth of detail revealed in Bellows's own papers. The role he played has been seen, for the most part, through the eyes of the "radicals" of that day, who were unsympathetic with his objectives, reluctant participants in his projects, and willing critics of his successes. While the disaffection of men like Octavius Brooks Frothingham and Edward C. Towne is part of the story of those years, it is not necessarily the most significant part of it. Nor can one understand the renewed vitality of Unitarianism after two decades of stagnation if one relies chiefly on Towne's *ex parte* account of the organizing convention in New York in 1865. Between Bellows and his critics there is a balance yet to be struck, and much of the evidence is available in the Bellows Papers, in the custody of the Massachusetts Historical Society.¹

I

In 1865, Bellows was at the height of his career. For more than twenty-five years he had been the minister of the Church of All Souls in New York, to which he had come as a young man, recently graduated from

the Harvard Divinity School. Twice already his congregation had outgrown its house of worship and had built anew. The range of his influence in Unitarian circles was extended by the *Christian Inquirer*, the weekly religious newspaper he founded in 1847, for which he wrote constantly. In the life of New York City, he had assumed a prominent role, both as a religious and as a civic leader. In the antislavery movement he had led his congregation to an increasingly advanced position without becoming an extremist. In the secession crisis of 1861 he had helped to mobilize Union sentiment. In 1865, he was fifty years of age; his natural powers were vigorous and undiminished; his confidence in his ability to enlist men in the willing and enthusiastic support of good causes was sustained by his undoubted successes in the Sanitary Commission; his contacts with men of consequence throughout the country were far-reaching; his reputation was a commanding one.

During the course of the war, Bellows had become convinced that new tides of popular feeling were beginning to surge through the country, that old theological formulations were crumbling, and that the churches were entering a period of flux from which new patterns and alignments were likely to emerge. A new sense of American nationality had developed, and Americans had been brought into new relationships with one another. Nonsectarian philanthropic activity like that of the Sanitary Commission had broken down walls of denominational exclusiveness. The doctrine of human dignity had been vindicated in the abolition of slavery. Soldiers facing death on the field of battle had been thrust back to the foundations of religious faith, and away from theological debate and sectarian polemic. The actual faith by which men were living was no longer represented for them by the creeds of evangelical Christianity. As a result, Bellows argued, millions of Americans had become "thoroughly undermined in the foundation of the faith of their parents"; they were "trying to find some substitute in ethics or pseudo or real science, for a religion in which they cannot longer believe."²

In such a situation, in which sectarian lines were being shaken and the "crust of ecclesiastical and theological usage" had been broken up "as the ice is broken by the spring freshet,"³ Bellows saw an opportunity for the Unitarians to become for the first time a denomination with national influence. His conviction that this was the case was reinforced in the Spring of 1864, when he went to California to assist the

San Francisco church after the untimely death of Starr King, and saw openings there for Unitarian advance on all sides, awaiting only vigorous and sustained missionary activity. "The attractions of this field are great & almost irresistible," he wrote home:

There is much to be done which *can be done!* It is like furnishing a new house when you have the money in hand! You cant keep your hands off the new carpets, they cry so to be tacked down! All things are possible here. . . . Liberal Christianity has taken new root, & movements to multiply our Churches on this coast are fairly under hopeful consideration. I shall be disappointed if, a year hence, there are not five or six Unitarian Societies on foot.⁴

Bellows was not one to see a job to be done and shirk his own responsibility in the matter. Early in 1864, he wrote to Edward Everett Hale:

As soon as the War is over, there will be a chance for great doings. . . . I hope to live to take an active part—when the [Sanitary Commission] is off my hands,—in this new Reformation, which will like a good householder bring forth things *new & old*, in its Church-life & creed.⁵

Towards the end of 1864, when preliminary planning for the New York convention had begun, he wrote even more pointedly to his son:

I have a buoyant hope that we are on the verge of a grand revolution in the theological & religious views of Society & that *now* is the day & hour for great undertakings in our Body. . . . I feel as if my Sanitary work had been only a providential discipline & preparation for this still nobler & more imperative undertaking.⁶

Although opportunities for denominational growth were developing in many areas, it was uncertain whether the Unitarians would be able to take advantage of them. Ever since Emerson's Divinity School Address in 1838, and more particularly since Parker's South Boston Sermon in 1841, serious tensions had existed within the denomination. The more conservative wing was insistent that Christianity was of divine origin and sanction and that Jesus Christ, though not a person of the Trinity, was divinely authorized to proclaim the way of salvation to erring men. At the other extreme the "radicals"—as they were coming to call themselves—were moving towards a wholly naturalistic interpretation of religion, which allowed no specially privileged place for Jesus. Emerson had referred to the tendency of historic Christianity

to dwell "with noxious exaggeration" on the person of Jesus. By way of reaction against traditional Christian piety quite as much as against orthodox Christian doctrine, some radicals had developed an extremely negative response to even the most liberal interpretation of the personality of Jesus. But to the extent that Unitarianism was becoming polarized this way, it was also becoming paralyzed, and support for the Unitarian Association was diminished. "This outbreak, if I may call it so, of Mr. Parker," insisted Samuel K. Lothrop, "disintegrated the clergy and the whole body of Unitarians. . . . Since then the Unitarian Congregationalists as a body have never been a unit, as they were during the first forty years of this century."⁷ In Lothrop's comment, there is a suggestion that Parker was somehow personally to blame for the failure of Unitarianism to retain its earlier momentum. But one does not have to accept that implication to acknowledge the essential validity of his judgment. There seems to be good reason to believe that financial support of missionary activities had been adversely affected by divisions within the Unitarian body.⁸

Historians have generally ranked Bellows with the conservative wing of the denomination.⁹ But it was never his way to adhere to any extreme position, whether of the right or of the left, if it were possible to find a middle ground. "I am I believe on both sides of all great questions," he wrote in 1863, "because truth rides *a-horse-back*; her limbs are invisible to each other & in opposite stirrups, but her trunk is one."¹⁰ He acknowledged that he often found himself in difficulties because of his readiness to treat half the truth, for the time being, as the whole truth, reserving for another occasion the counterbalancing half. But the role of mediator was the one for which he was temperamentally fitted, and he chose it consciously:

I have endeavored to bring into our own Denomination, the elements which sectarian antagonisms had for a time excluded. . . . I have sought deliberately to be on *both sides* of the theological, the political & the social questions of the day, endeavoring to do a reconciling & an impartial work, in a spirit of love & charity. This has often subjected me to charges of vacillation & changeableness, among those who merely saw the pendulum now in one & now in another portion of its arc, without observing the fixed centre from which it swings so freely.¹¹

But the friends who knew him best understood him for what he was: an inveterate middle-of-the-roader, who sought always to draw the ex-

tremes closer together. Bartol's comment after his death was a just one:

Accordingly, his talent, his temper, was to mediate, harmonize, reconcile. He admitted he was on board to trim the ship, to unfurl or reef the sail, to roll the heavy, iron-laden car on trucks from side to side of the main deck to keep from careening and maintain an even keel. To what was peculiar and sometimes seemed inconsistent in his position, this was the key. He had no notion of letting any enterprise he was embarked in, by following extreme counsels, or by any exclusive tendency, go to excess.¹²

If the Unitarians were to survive, Bellows felt, the conservatives and radicals would both have to be brought closer to a middle ground, if not in theology, at least in their willingness to cooperate in common endeavors. But more than that, the Unitarian body as a whole would have to be persuaded to organize more effectively, to take seriously the problem of creating the kind of institutional structures that would enable free men to consolidate their efforts and do together what they could never do separately. Doubtless it was Bellows's experience in the Sanitary Commission that had sharpened his vision of what might be achieved. In the organization of scores of local auxiliaries, in the collection of money by sustained solicitation and subscription, in the detailed planning that was necessary for the popular and successful Sanitary Fairs, Bellows had learned how much could be done by the voluntary efforts of men and women mobilized by able leaders in the service of a great cause. It was a similar vision of the possibilities of Liberal Christianity that he had glimpsed, and it was a comparable method of organization that seemed to him the way to success. After the Civil War, the development of industrial society in America meant that the forms of effective human association would involve larger units in many fields—business, government, and labor most obviously. Several of the religious denominations likewise began to develop new forms of national organization. Among Unitarian leaders, Bellows was the one who saw most clearly that his own denomination would also have to develop new institutional forms, with a national scope and vision, in which the laity would have to participate actively.

For this kind of constructive enterprise, the Unitarians were singularly ill prepared. They had inherited the most parish-oriented version of New England congregationalism, which had always shunned regularly established extra-parochial structures. Doubtless this had mattered

little in colonial times when the population was only just beginning to be religiously pluralistic and when state support of the Standing Order provided the churches with a structure to which they could attach themselves in the absence of ecclesiastical relationships. But even when times had changed, when society had become pluralistic and the Standing Order was gone, Unitarians continued to be narrowly parochial. It was assumed that churches that had survived for two hundred years with no formal organization for cooperative endeavor would continue to survive without it, and that new churches would somehow spring up on their own with no need for intervention on the part of the older ones. Hence the refusal of many old-line Unitarians in the first half of the nineteenth century to acknowledge that there could be any legitimate kind of denominational organization, their frequent rejection of the Unitarian name, and their halfhearted support of the American Unitarian Association, even though this was no more than a voluntary association of individual subscribers.

Bellows feared that it would take an enormous effort to overcome parochialism and apathy on the part of the conservative wing. "I see nothing but sure decay for our cause, in the sybaritic sloth, the Sadducean skepticism, the contented respectability, that now clothes its older members," he wrote to Hale.¹³ The men he had in mind are easy to identify. They were the older Boston ministers, whom he characterized thus:

The elder men, old fashioned Unitarians, very *ethical* in their humor—preaching the doctrine of self-culture & personal righteousness. This part is identified with Boston respectability, & is opposed to all *vulgar publicity* & popular methods of arousing attention. Moreover it is very Congregational—sticklers for individual independence in the churches, and very little disposed to expect great things, or to undertake large enterprises. It is conservative too, & very spiteful towards the transcendental or radical wing, and pretty jealous of any thing which dont originate in Boston. I think Dr. Gannett may be considered as the head of this section, & George Ellis, Lothrop, Thompson, Hill, of Worcester are specimens of it.¹⁴

Mentioned separately by Bellows, though the distinction may seem to us excessively refined, is what he called a "*small section* of Evangelicals . . . of whom Rufus Ellis, Mr. Sears & a very few others are samples." These men, he believed, "want to *secede* & are disposed to deny any fellowship with the looser & more liberal party."¹⁵

In Bellows's view, the chief problem with the Boston ministers was that they had a truncated doctrine of the Church: "Is not the notion of *the Church* as distinct from the Churches, pretty much lost out of the N-Eng^d consciousness? especially out of the Unitarian consciousness?" But if the Boston conservatives had a limited and parochial concept of the Church, the radicals were in worse shape, because they had almost none at all. "I feel a dreadful *thinness* in the philosophy & phrasing of my dear Bartol," Bellows went on to say.¹⁶ Radicalism might be intellectually alive and stimulating, but it seemed to have little corporate vitality. The truth is, Hale complained, "that the extreme left is very apt to select for itself a lazy sort of life—stepping out occasionally to lecture or to supply a vacant pulpit—but turning up its philosophical nose at the routine of the organization of a parish."¹⁷ Rationalism, or radicalism, Bellows was persuaded, "is *not a working power*, even at its *livest state*"; he predicted that the young men, "noble & earnest as many are," would find this out "when they attempt *work* on a grand scale—outside the little field of N. Eng. where what comes up is due to the general husbandry of the past, more than to the labors of the present farmer."¹⁸

The Boston conservatives stood for congregational self-sufficiency; this gave them strong local churches but limited horizons. The radicals stood for individual self-sufficiency and freedom; this gave them "churches of two, churches of one,"—sometimes considerable intellectual vigor, but no viable institutional structures to assure survival. "These men are shy of Convention," Bellows commented, "thinking some test may be applied, some creed slipped round them. They take alarm at any suggestion of any standard of faith—however generous, but are partly willing to co-operate on some platform of *Work* which has no doctrine in it."¹⁹

Bellows identified himself with neither the conservatives, nor the "evangelicals," nor the radicals, but with "Broad Church men" like Clarke, Hedge, and Hale. These men and numerous others, he declared, "recognize the elements of truth in all the other sections & believe in the possibility of welding them together . . ."²⁰ There is no hint either in letters or public statements of any desire to cut off either wing. Indeed, so far as the radicals were concerned, he seems to have had more respect for them than for the conservatives, despite his disagreement with their theology and with their extreme individualism.

"The real *life* in our body is in the *heretical wing*," he wrote to Hedge. "If we cut *it* off, there is nothing to move with!"²¹

Whether the middle party was large enough and strong enough to build on, Bellows felt, could only be discovered by making the attempt. Usually he was hopeful; sometimes he despaired of success; but in any event, it would be the extent to which the New York convention would draw support from all factions that would determine success or failure. Widespread apathy or deliberate refusal to participate would disclose the judgment of history, not simply on the convention, but on the Unitarian movement itself:

It is to test our *virility*. We either *can* or *cant* propagate our species! If we are impotent, we are to show it, & make way for those who have the future in their loins. The sooner we are *known* to be as a Denomination, childless—"no son of ours succeeding," the sooner the throne of liberal Xty will pass into the hands of another Dynasty; & if we cant fill it—it is time it should. I fear our Brothers dont know what peril of being superseded we are in. Five years of our present apathy, divisions, & meditations on our own navel, will kill us sure—if we are not dead now. . . . So, be it successful or a failure, I'm equally interested in putting our cause to the test of this occasion.²²

Yet the sensitivity of the radicals on the issue of intellectual freedom would pose a problem, as Bellows knew full well. No organized national religious movement could come into being, he was convinced, if it was unwilling to define for the public at large what its essential theological stance was to be. The new organization could not avoid some kind of doctrinal statement. Bellows struggled with the problem, which has proved to be a perennial one for Unitarians, of how to make a statement of belief that would be descriptive of the prevailing consensus without being limiting, that would mark out a distinctive part of the theological landscape which the Unitarians proposed to occupy without walling it in. At the outset, he assumed that some kind of creedal statement or "pronunciamento" was called for. But the language he used shows that he sought a unitive statement of opinion, not a definition of Unitarian orthodoxy that could be used to exclude nonconformists. In January 1865, he detailed to Hale what he had in mind:

Now I dont expect to be able to *suit every body*, in any statement; & let the unsuited drop—but cant we make a statement which will articulate the *actual* opinions of the vast majority of thotful Unitarians of both wings? It is not desirable that the *creed* should take the terms of

Science, or be in *stupid prose*. It should be somewhat mystic, & poetic in the true sense, addressed to the spiritual imagination; retaining the symbolism, but sloughing off the husks of the Church Universal (Historical). I think we might *boldly* design such a statement, which would be stable enough to stand on & fight with, & yet not so fenced in, & measurable with inch & foot lines, as to crowd out & alarm the free & the rational.²³

Enough opposition to any such statement was promptly expressed in many quarters—and not merely by the radicals—for Bellows to conclude that discussion of the matter at the convention would be divisive rather than unifying.²⁴ He, therefore, dismissed the notion at least three weeks before the meeting assembled:

It is plain that what *I* desired in the way of a creed (without the objection of its binding authority) a creed that should show the continuity of the Christian consciousness to be in our body, & form the bridge *over* for those anxious to leave their present [straightened (?)] quarters, but *afraid* to come to *us*—is an idea for which our people are *not* prepared, & the value of which they dont understand. The discussion on that point is vastly better *out of Convention* than in it. *It has been discussed*, & plainly, the feeling & experience of the Body is *against* it. Let us abandon it then, altogether, in that form. . . . I think in place of a Christian symbol our people *are prepared for a practical statement* of our fundamental & distinctive ideas. . . .²⁵

Bellows was willing to adopt a "practical" statement of purpose instead of a Christian creed or "symbol," but that does not mean that he proposed to abandon Christianity as the basis for the new organization. But the reason for his loyalty to the Christian tradition was not the usual one for that generation, and so the real point of difference between him and the radicals can easily be misunderstood. In the 1840s, conservative Unitarians like Andrews Norton had confronted the Transcendentalists with a rehearsal of Christian evidences, especially the miracles of Jesus, as the essential basis for belief in the divine origin and sanction of Christianity. Bellows in 1865 was not that kind of conservative; Christian evidences in the traditional sense had become peripheral in his thought. He had read Parker's *Discourse of Religion* and was not bothered by the concept of "Absolute Religion," which is the common possession of all men everywhere.²⁶ God, he readily acknowledged, is universally present, "in the world, in Nature, in your souls, everywhere."²⁷

What he objected to in the Parkerites was not their characterization of cherished aspects of Christianity as transient expressions of absolute religion, but the fact that they undervalued the historical particularities through which we apprehend the Absolute. "It is very much like saying that because the *Sun* is the source of light & heat, we will give up fires on our hearths or gas & candles in our houses, & live out of doors."²⁸ People are not religious in general, Bellows seems to be saying, but are religious in a particular way as they participate in a present situation shaped by a particular historical tradition. It is the transient aspects of religion that require our care and attention, lest we be left with no religion at all. The church, in particular, is the instrument through which Christian contact with God has been sustained and made fruitful. So far as our relations with God and Christ "are not instituted, organized, methodized, they lack steadiness, force and influence." There are "natural sources of connection" with God and Christ; but "the church is the only unfailing, organized, direct connection with them, we have." Joining the church is not denying "that any life or power exists in reason, nature, literature, conscience, life to give [us] spiritual food; but only seeing that it is best to go where express, ample and constant provision is made by God to meet that great want."²⁹

Bellows's insistence on a Christian basis for the National Conference, then, was not so much a defense of the supernatural claims of Christianity as it was an assertion that no substitute for the historic fact of the Christian church was available. Whatever might be said in an abstract, philosophical, timeless sense about Absolute Religion, human beings live here and now, and need the institutions that are relative to human wants and weaknesses. "We shant want Christianity in heaven, any more perhaps than the Bible—which we surely shant have. But we want it *now* prodigiously, both as the *public* Religion, and the private cultus."³⁰

It is misleading, therefore, to see the disagreement between Bellows and the radicals—even though some of them doubtless did see it that way—as a simple conflict between conservative Christian confessionalism and a free religion unfettered by inherited intellectual dogmas or limits. What was controlling with Bellows was not Christian supernaturalism, though he accepted it, but a doctrine of the Church—that is to say, a concept of the nature and necessity of institutional religion. It was the fact that Bellows had a doctrine of the Church, while the

radicals did not, that made the difference between them. The fact that he was Christian, while they were "naturalists," or "rationalists," or "free religionists," has to be understood in the context of that even more basic disagreement.

Bellows was never an ideologue who believed that salvation would be found in some perfectly thought-out theological or philosophical system. Practical results were too important to him; he was convinced that the way to get things done was by organizing the necessary institutions. If the acceptance of a particular ideology would lend strength and cohesion to an institution, well and good, but he was not inclined to sacrifice a necessary institution for the sake of maintaining some standard of ideological purity.

Since the denomination was, in fact, predominantly Christian, this was the obvious basis on which to start building. If the new enterprise was to grow by attracting disillusioned liberals from other Christian groups, all the more reason to erect a standard of liberal Christianity. If, as a consequence, some of the radicals developed scruples that would inhibit them from participating, however generously they might be invited, there was no reason why they should be either coerced or condemned. Bellows sincerely hoped that there would be few who would not go along, just as he hoped to draw in the Boston parochialists. But if any remained without, it should be by their own choice, not by any act of exclusion. "We want to describe a large eno' circle to take in all who really belong with us—and provided one, & the *fixed* leg of the compasses is in the heart of Jesus Christ I care very little how wide & far the other wanders."³¹

Of course Bellows was not alone in thinking that Unitarians would have to organize a new effort of wider scope to take advantage of new opportunities. Others may not have been as conscious as he of the whole range of possibilities, and did not project schemes that were as ambitious—even grandiose—as his, but they were nevertheless making similar criticisms and suggestions. Thus in an essay read to his ministerial brethren in the spring of 1864, James Freeman Clarke identified individualism as "our great foe," and complained that the "social and corporate element in our religious system is very weak."³² At the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association in May, the Reverend Carlton A. Staples spoke of the need for reorganizing missionary activity in the West, and he, like Bellows, argued that the influence of

the War, and indeed the whole drift of events, had been favorable to liberal religion.³³ The same note was struck by the Reverend William J. Potter of New Bedford, whose address at the special meeting of the Association on December 7, 1864, may well have given Bellows some ideas for the elaboration of a theme that had already attracted him.³⁴ Bellows did not singlehandedly produce the ferment which had begun to stir in the denomination, but more than anyone else, he brought a variety of proposals into focus and into relationship to one another. It was his role to lay out a program of action, to enlist workers in the cause of a "new reformation," to be the tireless and eloquent spokesman for many who could not command the attention that he could, and to push through to some kind of permanent organization, more representative and hence more effective than the A.U.A.

II

The first formal step on the path that ultimately led to the New York convention was taken, not by Bellows, but by the executive committee of the Unitarian Association. Meeting in Boston on September 12, 1864, the committee was confronted with a severe financial crisis, and the president, Rufus P. Stebbins, was asked to prepare a special appeal for funds. A vote was also passed "to appoint a Committee of three to report some plan for increasing the usefulness of the Association . . ." Named to the committee, in addition to Stebbins, were the Reverend Charles Lowe, who was later to become the quietly tactful and efficient secretary of the Association, and Warren Sawyer, a layman from the Hollis Street Church.³⁵

At the October meeting of the executive committee, the treasurer, Charles C. Smith, reported a deficit; a month later, as a temporary expedient, he was authorized to dip into capital. At the November meeting, also, the special committee, at Lowe's suggestion, proposed an extraordinary meeting of the Association on December 6 and 7, at which the whole financial problem should be explored. The plan was approved, and details entrusted to the special committee, now enlarged to include the treasurer and Henry P. Kidder, a Boston banker and an active member of Edward Everett Hale's church.³⁶

The usual Autumnal Convention was not held in 1864, and so a large group was attracted to the special meeting, held at the Hollis

Street Church. Bellows came on from New York, having been particularly requested by Lowe to report on California in the hope of fostering increased financial support for the cause of Liberal Christianity.³⁷ On Tuesday evening, December 6, Rufus Stebbins spoke first, detailing the financial needs of the Association, the expedients that had been adopted for economical operation, the encouraging response to his special appeal that had begun to come from the churches, and the unmet calls on the limited funds of the Association. One suspects that Bellows felt these remarks to be too prudential and cautious, for when called upon to speak next in turn, he began by asserting that the work of the Association, though carried on with zeal and integrity, "was too small to satisfy our pride, moral ambition, or spiritual desires." In vivid language he went on to describe the work Starr King had begun in California, which now needed additional impetus; he outlined the needs of Meadville and Antioch; and he urged the formation, on a large scale, of an organization for missionary efforts in which the churches would be represented by both lay and ministerial delegates.

The following day, James P. Walker, a Boston layman whose publishing house specialized in Unitarian literature, spoke at length of the inadequate support the Association had received from the beginning. The average annual budget, as he computed it, had been only about \$8,000. He proposed a financial drive to raise \$25,000 for the current year and gradually increasing sums thereafter. Edward Everett Hale responded that the sum should be \$100,000, and Walker's proposal was amended to that effect on motion by Henry P. Kidder. Bellows then declared that the crux of the matter was "the want of the proper machinery" for enlisting widespread and continuing support. He proposed a committee of ten persons, three ministers and seven laymen, to be charged with the responsibility for calling a convention in New York "to consider the interests of our cause and to institute measures for its good." The resolutions by Walker and Bellows were received with great enthusiasm, and were unanimously adopted. Needless to say, Bellows was named to head the committee, to which Hale was also appointed.³⁸

Bellows deliberately suggested a committee on which laymen would be in a majority, because he was much concerned to secure their involvement in denominational affairs. One of his recurrent criticisms of the A.U.A. was that it was too much a clerical operation. Laymen of

prominence and substance were chosen, with the obvious intent of giving prestige to the undertaking. They included Henry P. Kidder of Kidder, Peabody & Co.; A. A. Low of Brooklyn, merchant and financier; and Enoch Pratt of Baltimore, capitalist and philanthropist.³⁹ It was also no accident that the convention was to meet in New York, rather than Boston, and that only four of the members of the committee were from New England. One, Artemas Carter, was from as far away as Chicago. There was, nevertheless, some criticism from western ministers that none of their number had been included, and so Bellows afterwards added George W. Hosmer of Buffalo.⁴⁰

Bellows wrote in detail to his son about the meeting in Boston:

We had a special meeting of the American Unitarian Association, on Tuesday & Wed^d of last week in Boston. Tuesday, I occupied pretty much the whole evening with an exposition of our interests on the Pacific Coast, with great interest on the part of the audience. Wednesday we debated the wants & prospects of our Unitarian cause. I bro't forward a scheme for reorganizing the whole denomination on a basis of *work*, & not of creed; argued the importance of a strictly representative organization, minister & two delegates from each parish, to legislate in a National Convention for the interests of the whole body; to raise large sums of money; to endow Antioch College; re-animate Meadville & stretch our cords over the Union, in a deliberate & powerful effort to meet the New Civilization & new public sentiment, developed by the War, by a Religion free, large, spirited & up to the times. I maintained that the time had come for a reanimation of our Liberal Xty & its appearance on the public Stage, in National proportions. It made a great Stir, was hailed by the young men with enthusiasm, by the middle-aged with Sympathy & offers of co-operation, & by the older ministers with *tacit acquiescence*. They did not support me openly or gladly, but were silent & non-committal. . . . I see a great future in it, & wish I had nothing else to do but to carry it out with a bold energy which would ensure success.⁴¹

So it was that the shaping of the denomination was placed largely in the waiting hands of Bellows—for it seems hard to accept as anything but a temporary aberration his comment to his son: "Our people are aroused & demand action, and I find myself in the post of leader, against my will & expectation."⁴² Hale was, in effect, second in command, with special responsibility to talk up the convention among the Boston brethren. Of course, doubts and hesitation were expressed in some quarters. The Reverend Charles H. Brigham of Taunton was

"sceptical about the practical worth of very large schemes for a body so small as ours," even though he had been named to the committee of ten,⁴³ and it was reported that Rufus Stebbins was beginning to wonder whether he had done the right thing in allowing the new movement to receive the sanction of the A.U.A. Bellows's leadership of it was apparently resented by some:

It is very evident that there is a small, mean dissent from it, and unwillingness to enter heartily into it, on the part of a few men—I really believe that three fourths of this opposition proceeds from jealousy of Dr. Bellows. These men foresee that with his splendid gifts, his magnetic speech, his royal personality and above all his magnificent devotion to great movements and ideas, he will naturally be the leader, the Head of the new regime. If this new movement succeeds he will be at the top of the new American Ecclesiasticism. This is a consummation most devoutly not wished for by a few men who have tried to be dictators but could not [get] anybody to accept their dictation.⁴⁴

It should be kept in mind that, in the weeks that followed, both Bellows and Hale were concerned with many projects besides the New York convention. Bellows was attending regular meetings of the Board of the Sanitary Commission in Washington. Hale and he were consulting frequently with those involved in the selection of a new president for Antioch College, which they saw as a feeder for Meadville and hence an essential part of denominational strategy.⁴⁵ The *Christian Inquirer* needed a new editor; and Joseph Henry Allen, editor of the *Christian Examiner*, was negotiating for the transfer of the magazine to Bellows, so that it might be tied in with the new denominational organization.⁴⁶ Both Bellows and Hale were helping to raise the \$100,000 for the A.U.A. voted on December 7.⁴⁷ And all of this was in addition to regular parish duties.

Nevertheless, Bellows summoned the committee of ten to meet at his home, 59 East 20th Street, on Wednesday, January 25; and Hale responded to Bellows's request that he go on to New York ahead of time, to "cut & dry the business of the Committee the day before it meets."⁴⁸ The attendance on January 25 was all that could have been expected. Pratt was not present; Hosmer was prevented by illness; and Brigham had to be at an installation. But substitutes were found for Pratt and Brigham, so the committee was almost full.

One needs only to compare the letter Bellows wrote to Hale ten days

before the meeting, outlining his views as to what had to be done, with the official report issued at its close, to realize the extent to which the chairman placed his own stamp on the proceedings. There seem to have been only a few points—such as the date for the convention to meet, which was set for April 5 and 6—for the committee to work through to a conclusion of its own.⁴⁹ On most matters, Bellows's advance preparation had laid out conclusions for the committee to ratify. It was at this particular stage in the development of plans for the convention that Bellows had the most elaborate notions of the kind of doctrinal statement, or "rallying-cry," the convention might adopt. He outlined his views in a prepared statement, which met with general approval. While its presuppositions were unambiguously Christian, and while it suggested the use of an abridged and thoroughly Unitarianized version of the Apostles' Creed, its main concern was to find common ground on which the largest possible number might stand. It would be impossible to draw a line through the Unitarian body, declared Bellows, without leaving men of equal worth on either side, nor could any group be cut off without losing "something vital, significant, and precious." Furthermore, the Liberal Christian Church of America, of which Bellows dreamed, would be expected to attract many restless believers out of orthodox churches who had never had any previous Unitarian connection. Therefore "no excision, denial of Christian standing, or refusal of fellowship, is to be encouraged in either direction, whether towards those leaning towards the old creeds, or those leaning towards Rationalism."⁵⁰

For both Hale and Bellows, one measure of the success of the convention would be the number of churches represented and delegates, especially lay delegates, present. A convention which could win no more support than the A.U.A. had had would be, almost by definition, a failure. Hale wrote of the necessity "to lay out a plan, for approaching in advance each church of importance—& getting them to promise to be present."⁵¹ A sermon delivered by Bellows to his own congregation was printed as a sort of campaign document,⁵² and an official invitation, followed by an "Address to the Churches," went out early in February.⁵³

Bellows was especially concerned about the response from parochial Boston. Hale reported that Dr. Gannett "saw difficulties unnumbered,"

but was nevertheless willing to attend with his two laymen.⁵⁴ Since Gannett was not at all well, this indicated genuine concern for the common cause, regardless of what Bellows may at times have said about Gannett's conservatism. Rufus Ellis, on the other hand, laid the question before the members of the First Church without recommendation, and was doubtless well content when they "voted thirty-nine to four not to send."⁵⁵ Hale was convinced that actually subtle pressure had been applied, and made sure that one hundred copies of Bellows's sermon were sent over to the First Church. "Young America in the parish was rampant," and kicked up a row, but to no avail.⁵⁶ At the Second Church, Chandler Robbins preached a sermon in which he stated that the Society had a right to vote as it saw fit on the matter, but that if the decision was to send, he would resign. His tactics were strongly resented by some members of the church, but his threat was nonetheless effective.⁵⁷

Cyrus A. Bartol of the West Church was one of Bellows's oldest and most intimate friends and one whose presence he particularly sought. Bartol does not fit easily into any of the usual categories of Unitarian ministers of that generation. The West Church had a strong tradition of congregational localism which reinforced Bartol's intense, even exaggerated, transcendentalist concept of religion as a purely spiritual force. To go as an official representative of the West Church was out of the question; to go unofficially was an alternative about which he could not make up his mind, and until the very end he seemed likely to stay away. But Bellows told him there were two spare rooms in his house; one was for Hedge, the other would be for Bartol even if he did not make up his mind until the last minute. Friendship at last overcame scruples, and Bartol finally did attend, stayed as a house guest of Bellows, and observed the proceedings without participating. Bellows was grateful for his presence, even though Bartol returned home still affirming that the unseen harmony of the spirit was what really mattered, not visible cooperation in human institutions.⁵⁸

Of the radicals, Octavius Brooks Frothingham presented the greatest problem, partly, one suspects, because Bellows and he were men of very different temperaments, who tended to irritate one another. Although Bellows was very likely unaware of it, Frothingham still nursed a grievance because Bellows had not attended the dedication ceremony

at his new church on December 25, 1863. The story of that earlier episode is complicated and only indirectly relevant to the New York convention. Suffice it to say that a trivial matter involving a misunderstanding on both sides had left a lasting residue.⁵⁹

Frothingham viewed the coming convention, in any event, with little satisfaction, and it seemed to Bellows that his negativism was doing damage to the cause. His attitude contrasted sharply with that of John White Chadwick, the other radical in the New York area, with whom Bellows always got along well.⁶⁰ Towards the end of February, Bellows got the impression that Frothingham did not mean to come in, and at that juncture, he rather hoped he would not.⁶¹ But Frothingham could not help but feel the pressure of opinion, and at a ministers' meeting in Boston on March 14, he surprised everyone by his conciliatory tone. Hale had expected him to come "with a stiff attack on the Convention." Instead his address was "even deprecatory in its eagerness to avoid controversy"; he even went so far as to attempt a statement of consensus for the denomination "which if you took it without knowing who wrote it—would answer for one wing almost as well as for the other." Even this high point of Frothingham's willingness to cooperate was somewhat less than wholehearted, however, for he was heard to remark to Gannett: "If you will not attack me, I will not attack you."⁶² The most that Frothingham would say in advance was that he did not intend to disrupt the proceedings:

Frothingham professes great friendliness & tells me he intends no trouble & no division—"after Convention he will withdraw *if he dont like results*"—as every body will! Still, I dont think he knows his own mind eno' to be depended [on]. I think he means well, *just now*, towards the Convention, but is capable [of] bolting, or quarrelling, or contradicting [his] purpose at 15 minutes notice—⁶³

By the middle of March, Bellows felt that representation of enough churches was assured to make the convention a success. "It is clear," he wrote to Hale, "that we shall have the weight of the Denomination in the Convention. Already the tide is turned, & is with the general ends & objects we seek."⁶⁴ His attention was now increasingly drawn to matters of detail. He had the kind of imagination that could picture precisely how he hoped things would go. He could scarcely restrain himself from writing James Freeman Clarke's keynote sermon for him, so

that the right points would be made with just the right emphasis.⁶⁵ When Hale met with a group in Boston to work on the agenda, Bellows deluged him with detailed suggestions, not all of which, by any means, were accepted.⁶⁶

Bellows had something to contribute at every point, even on the matter of local arrangements. If he dominated the proceedings, it was because he had thought through the details and had a plan, not because he expected to have his own way all the time. Indeed, his effectiveness as an organizer may be seen especially in the alert way in which he incorporated the usable ideas of others into his own plans. A. A. Livermore wrote to him to argue that a layman should preside, and to suggest the name of Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts. It was so arranged.⁶⁷ The *Christian Inquirer* suggested that the keynote sermon should be delivered on the evening before the business session opened, and that the recently vacated building of the Church of the Messiah was a better place to meet than All Souls Church. It was planned accordingly.⁶⁸

Bellows wanted a convention for the transaction of business, not a mass meeting to encourage the brethren to make speeches. This was not the way the traditional Autumnal Conventions had operated, any more than it was the way the Free Religious Association at a later date would operate. That a genuine representative body, prepared to make responsible recommendations for the benefit of the whole denomination, was something new in Unitarian experience, Bellows was well aware. He therefore sought to do what planning could do to ensure that the convention would attend to its business. But he had a very clear sense of the difference between making sure that conclusions were reached in an orderly fashion, and making sure that certain desired conclusions were reached. "I feel the importance," he wrote to Hale, "of doing nothing by *mere force of machinery* which does not *legitimately belong* to machinery!"

To carry a policy, force conclusions, or prevent serious & thotful debate is no plan of mine. Let us profoundly & conscientiously respect the spirit & antecedents of the Body in the regard we pay to the rights of minorities. I only want what is necessarily a part of arithmetic & mechanics, to go smoothly—so that the true spirit of the occasion may find easy grooves to slip in, & the heavenly steed, not jump off

the track, because the *human* harness breaks—all that honest arrangement can do, must be done beforehand.⁶⁹

In view of the hours that had gone into detailed planning, Hale could hardly keep a straight face when Gannett took him aside “to express his surprise that we had not formed a precise programme of operations!” But it was no intention of Hale’s to tell him of it “a moment before it was announced on the housetops.”⁷⁰ Mrs. Bellows, on the other hand, knew only too well what was going on, and was exhausted by it (and by a severe case of hives): “I do not hesitate to say to *you* of mature experience,” she wrote to Bellows’s sister, “that I entirely disapprove of the *high pressure* rate at which our dear Henry always keeps himself & all who are willing subjects to this rushing & driving system.”⁷¹

III

The opening event of the convention was the service of worship in Bellows’s church on Tuesday evening, April 4. “The church was crowded,” Nannie Bellows wrote to her brother, “& Lizzie Kendall & I went early to get seats. The singing was fine, & everything went off well.”⁷² James Freeman Clarke’s sermon argued that the time had come for a new “change of base” for Christianity, so that it might include all those who are practically Christians in their daily lives but who cannot accept what passes for orthodox Christianity. The spirit of the sermon was inclusive, emphasizing that a wider cooperation is possible when it is based on a concern for Christian action rather than on doctrine. Like Bellows, Clarke sought a middle ground which was neither “Creeds and Ceremonies” on the one side nor “Naturalism and Deism” on the other, but which would enable both wings to unite and to draw in others who were Liberal Christian in fact though not in affiliation.⁷³ A careful reading of the sermon reveals passages where Clarke picked up themes from Bellows’s public and private exhortations; but it was his own sermon, and not Bellows’s. “Father did not think the sermon a very able one,” Nannie Bellows reported, “but its spirit was eminently Christian & conciliatory, & both the right & left wing were pleased, & felt more amicably disposed towards each other than before its delivery.”⁷⁴

The convention assembled for its first business session on Wednesday morning at the Broadway Atheneum, formerly Dr. Osgood’s church. Governor Andrew of Massachusetts was elected president according to plan, and the Reverend E. E. Hale presented on behalf of the committee of arrangements a series of routine resolutions dealing with the organization of the work of the convention. At that point, A. A. Low of the Church of the Saviour in Brooklyn, for whom Clarke’s sermon had been too conciliatory in tone, attempted to introduce a series of resolutions which would have established for the convention a creedal basis of a very conservative Christian kind. This unanticipated turn of events seemed to Bellows to be an attempt to split the convention. Though the conservative tone of the resolutions did not bother him, to introduce a creedal basis was “contrary to the pacific spirit, which it was so important to maintain in the convention.”⁷⁵ By Bellows’s immediate intervention, the resolutions were first ruled out of order and, when introduced again later, were laid on the table until the very end of the convention, when they were referred to the Council of the conference and never heard of again. “Never shall I forget,” recalled John White Chadwick, after Bellows’s death, “the noble scorn with which at the first meeting of the Conference he brought to naught the counsels of a clique that would have foisted on us a creed of desiccated phrases that had been secretly prepared by one of the most honored citizens of our own city.”⁷⁶ Since Low was a wealthy man who carried great weight in the community, Bellows was fearful that no one else would call him to account if he did not, “& so he had to take the disagreeable business onto his own shoulders.”⁷⁷

For Bellows, the ground on which the convention should properly stand was not represented by Low’s creedalism, but by two resolutions prepared by the Business Committee, and adopted at the beginning of the afternoon session of the first day. The first declared the obligation of the Unitarian body to organize on a more comprehensive plan, “but always on principles accordant with its Congregational or independent character.” The second stated that decisions and resolutions should be understood as expressive of the opinion of the majority only,

committing in no degree those who object to them, claiming no other than a moral authority over the members of the Convention, or the Churches represented here, and are all dependent wholly for their effect upon the consent they command on their own merits.