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.”

In such a situation, in which sectarian lines were being shaken and the “trust of ecclesiastical and theological usage” had been broken up “as the ice is broken by the spring freshet,” 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

*Henry W. Bellows and the Organization of the National Conference*

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 tackled! 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.

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.

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.

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." 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 extremes 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 halterhearted 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.18 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 don’t 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.19

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 liberal & more liberal party.”18

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.4 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.20 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 philosophic nose at the routine of the organization of a parish.”21 Rationalism, or radicalism, Bellows was persuaded, “is not a working power, even at its liveliest 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.”22

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.”23

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 . . .”24 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 can’t 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 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 waffling 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 don’t 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 thoughtful Unitarians of both wings? It is not desirable that the creed should take the terms of

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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 unifying, 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 Christi-
nity 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, hu-
man 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 confessional-
ism and a free religion unfettered by inherited intellectual dogmas or
limits. What was controlling with Bellows was not Christian super-
naturalism, 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 insti-
tutions. 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 con-
demned. 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 ambi-
tious—even grandiose—as his, but they were nevertheless making
similar criticisms and suggestions. Thus in an essay read to his min-
isterial 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 an-
nual meeting of the American Unitarian Association in May, the Re-
verend 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.39 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 spokes-
man 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 particu-
larly 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 expeditiousness that had been
adopted for economical operation, the encouraging response to his spec-
aul 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 lan-
guage he went on to describe the work of Starr King had begun in Cali-
"fornia, 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 pub-
ishing 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 ma-
chinery" 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 in-
volve 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. 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.

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

We had a special meeting of the American Unitarian Association, on Tuesday & Wednesday 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; reanimate 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 Xy & 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 tact & 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.

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.” 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, 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.

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. 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. Both Bellows and Hale were helping to raise the $100,000 for the A.U.A. voted on December 7. 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.”

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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{61} A sermon delivered by Bellows to his own congregation was printed as a sort of campaign document,\textsuperscript{52} and an official invitation, followed by an “Address to the Churches,” went out early in February.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{64} 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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{66} 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 represented by some members of the church, but his threat was nonetheless effective.\textsuperscript{57}

Cyrus A. Bartol of the West Church was one of Bellows’s eldest 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.\textsuperscript{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.69

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 depreciatory 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 everybody 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 & thoughtful 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.59

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 house tops.”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

Henry W. Bellows and the Organization of the National Conference 101

The convention assembled for its first business session on Wednesday morning at the Broadway Athenæum, 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.
The subsequent actions of the convention were taken in the context of these affirmations, which were suggested in preliminary form in a letter from Bellows to Hale on March 28.78

The rest of Wednesday was devoted, as planned, to reports from the American Unitarian Association, the Western Conference, and other bodies concerned with the work of the denomination. The agenda was arranged deliberately so that the matters of permanent organization would come up on the second day. By this time, it was assumed, the convention would have discovered some sense of corporate identity, its members would have got accustomed to working together, and the laymen might have got over their initial inclination to let the ministers do all the talking.79 In a general way, this is precisely what happened, though the laymen did not take as large a part in debate as Bellows had hoped. While certain of the radicals later accused Bellows of controlling the convention in dictatorial fashion, what came out of the deliberations was clearly an expression of the will of the delegates. Governor Andrew was certainly in control of the convention from a parliamentary point of view, and Bellows and Hale were on guard against any more maneuvers of the kind Low had attempted. One of them, they had agreed, would always be on the floor of the convention when the other had to be absent at a committee meeting. But if Bellows was a strong leader of the convention, as doubtless he was, he was a leader by the consent of his followers, and it was their objectives as much as his that were achieved.

Wednesday afternoon, a committee on permanent organization was authorized, consisting of twelve delegates, with Bellows as chairman. Since crucial recommendations came out of the deliberations of this committee, more particularly with respect to the name of the new organization and the preamble of the constitution, it is unfortunate that we have no record of its discussions. There is one bit of hearsay reported by Edward C. Towne which indicates that intransigence on the part of William G. Eliot of St. Louis was one reason for the conservative wording of the preamble.80 What position Bellows took on the matter in committee is not known. Since the committee did not accept Bellows's suggestion with respect to the name of the organization—his clear preference was "The Liberal Christian Church of America"—it is plain that it did not meekly follow his bidding. In any event, in debate he

loyally and vigorously supported the recommendations of his committee.

The draft constitution and bylaws were presented on Thursday morning. The constitution was a simple document, consisting of a preamble and eight articles. It envisaged a permanent organization, to be styled the "National Conference of Unitarian Churches," to meet annually, composed of three delegates (including the minister) from each church, a council to be responsible between annual sessions, and an advisory relationship with the A.U.A. and other denominational organs, which would continue to be "the instruments of its power."81

It soon became apparent that the only really controversial issue was the degree of inclusiveness the organization was to stand for. A year later, this issue was to be debated at Syracuse in terms of a proposed revision of the preamble, which included references to the "Lord Jesus Christ" and his "kingdom," which the radicals regarded as creedal in effect. At New York, however, the question came up rather in terms of the name of the organization. When James Freeman Clarke attempted to amend the name by adding the words "and Independent" after the word "Unitarian," his desire to broaden the scope of the organization was one with which Bellows sympathized. But Bellows was a realistic negotiator, and he may well have felt that the agreements reached in committee had best be adhered to, lest the whole uneasy relationship with conservatives like Eliot come unstuck.

The laity, as it seemed to Bellows, had brought a strong conservative tone to the meeting, which proved to be a limitation on the kind of consensus that was possible. "We must not aim at the best," Bellows had written to Hale, "but at what can be successfully carried." He was prepared therefore to go no further than a broad consensus in the convention permitted. Even though he himself would have liked a more inclusive or broad-church position, he was not going to press an issue if there was a risk of stimulating "a disputatious, carping & personal spirit."82 He therefore urged Clarke to withdraw his amendment, with the understanding that the whole broad-church issue would be re-examined at the next annual session. After a number of modifications of the name were proposed without any of them gaining wide support, the article was adopted with but one dissenting vote.

The remaining articles as reported by the committee of twelve were accepted unanimously. A ninth article was then proposed by the Rev-
erend Charles G. Ames of Albany in order to state explicitly that there was no intention of excluding any church that desired to cooperate for Christian work. Once again, the intent of the proposal was one with which Bellows was in agreement, but he feared that to press the matter, given the temper of the convention, would be to “swamp the boat.” Since no acceptable wording could be worked out on the floor of the convention, the motion was finally laid on the table, even though it clearly had strong support. Final adoption of the constitution was by an overwhelming vote, perhaps as much as ten to one.83

Throughout the proceedings, Bellows sought consistently to prevent either the conservatives or the radicals from forcing an issue that would split the convention. Once an accommodation had been reached in the committee of twelve, Bellows stuck with the agreement, even on points with which he was not wholly content. The threat from A. A. Low and his conservative group was handled relatively easily, because its creedalism was unpalatable to most Unitarians, Christians and radicals alike. The problem of the radicals was more difficult, because they insisted that creedalism lurked in Christian terminology, even when anti-creedal Christians like Bellows protested that there was no intention of using the preamble as a creedal test. Bellows’s sense of frustration in trying to communicate with the radicals was such that towards the end of the convention he did lapse into language which he afterwards regretted and for which he apologized, but which the radicals never allowed to be forgotten. He objected, he said, to bodies of men who claimed to be the “peculiar champions of liberty.”

He yielded to no one in devotion to the spirit of liberty. If intolerance was to be found at all, it was among those who sneered at conservatives and thanked God that they were not such—sneered at those who wanted to conserve that which they deemed eternal truth. He belonged to that class who wanted to control the spirit of the age. He accepted none of the taunts about the disgrace of this convention. He desired the sympathy and affection of both sides, but if he had to choose between the two he frankly avowed that he would go rather with Orthodoxy in any form in which it could be stated than with those who would put Jesus Christ into comparative contempt. We have made a constitution for the purpose of holding the latter to it, and if the issue is made we shall gain ten firm, good Christians for every one we lose.84

Bellows was well pleased with the outcome of the convention. About six hundred lay and ministerial delegates had attended, representing well over three quarters of the churches. Not half a dozen ministers of importance had stayed away: “Dr. Furness, Putnam, Weiss, the two Ellises & Chandler Robbins were the only absentee of any note.” The process of organization had been accomplished in a way that represented the desires of the majority, “on a conservative preamble, but with full independence in the individual churches.” Bellows was especially pleased to discover that neither wing of the denomination was as large as some had supposed: “The Unitarian Denomination, which we had been talking of as if it were like a night-hawk all wings, turned out to be an ostrich, all body, with very insignificant wings, either right or left.” The weakness of the radicals was a surprising development; and Bellows concluded, somewhat prematurely, that the denomination had “finished up Naturalism & Transcendentalism & Parkerism.” In short, the convention “was an absolute & entire success.”85

Bellows’s satisfaction at what was accomplished, even if it fell short of his larger hopes, was widely shared throughout the denomination; but there was one conspicuous dissenting voice. Octavius Brooks Frothingham had gone to the convention reluctantly, predisposed to be disappointed. Predictably, he found what he sought. On the following Sunday, which was Palm Sunday, he preached on “The Unitarian Convention and the Times.” He accused the convention of turning away from the proclaimed goal of the Liberal Church of America to a narrower sectarianism than ever before. “The Liberal Body shrank from its own principle, and disowned the purport of its own summons.” Bellows himself came in for specific attack: the convention “clapped its hands when intellectual radicalism was denounced and spurned in intemperate language by the leading spirit of the Convention.” Like Christ deserted by the multitude immediately following the hosannas of Palm Sunday, the liberal principle was deserted at the close of the convention. “There has never been a Convention so narrow and blind and stubborn as it was.”86

Frothingham’s sermon was soon printed in the Friend of Progress, the editor of which had his own comment on the convention. It was “a
sad and humiliating disappointment. . ." Clarke's sermon was "inconsistent in substance, incoherent in arrangement, irresolute in purpose, and wild in aim." The words of the radicals had been "few, simple, calm, and sweet"; the words of their opponents were "many, forced, violent, and bitter." In sum, the convention

added more sectarianism to that which already existed; it disavowed the radicalism which its letter of invitation made boast of; it repelled the men who were more competent than any others, perhaps, to do the work it proposed and marked out; it drew the liberal body back within the limits of a local denomination, and rechristened it with an old name suggestive of dogmatism and saturated with controversial animus; and instead of the great liberal church of America, it gave us an enlarged and stereotyped edition of the American Unitarian Association.88

Other radical criticism of the convention was much more temperate, and helps to explain why it was that most of the radicals remained within the fold. Some of the most acute comments, perhaps, were made by Francis Ellingwood Abbot, who eventually did abandon the denomination, but whose disaffection is to be dated from the Syracuse meeting of the National Conference the fall of the following year. Abbot reported on the New York convention to his church in Dover, N.H., in a sermon revised for the Christian Register. The spirit of the convention, he stated, was "in a very marked degree, harmonious, decorous, and conciliatory"; remarks which were not of that character were "made the most of by the reporters." The formal basis of the new National Conference, as represented by the preamble and the use of the Unitarian name, represented a sectarian retreat from the broad vision of the Liberal Church of America which, according to Abbot, had "saddened and disappointed" many people.

He himself was hopeful, however, for he found the "principles which practically guided the action of this convention" to have been better than the sectarian name and the conservative preamble it adopted. Ultimately, those principles would prevail. The retention of the name Unitarian "was simply the result of old associations"; what really mattered was that the convention voted down by large majorities "all attempts to affix a dogmatic or theological meaning" to it. The sentiment of the convention was "unmistakably opposed to creeds of any form," and so he regarded those of his fellow radicals "who interpret the preamble as a creed, as decidedly in the wrong. . ." His objection to the preamble was not that it was a creed, but that it had the ambiguity or equivocation of a verbal compromise, when with more attention and discussion a better preamble that more faithfully represented the common ground of unity could have been worked out and adopted. "I am full of hope," he insisted, "and not one whit discouraged by the purely embryonic results of our first great conference." The first steps had been taken, and the logic of freedom implicit in the actions of the convention itself would make for better results another time.89

It was Abbot's failure to persuade the Conference to improve its faulty handiwork at the next meeting, at Syracuse in 1866, that led to his break with the denomination. Two things had happened meanwhile. One of them was that Abbot himself had encountered serious discontent and criticism in his own parish in Dover, a circumstance which may well have fostered a more uncompromising spirit on his part. The other was that the majority at Syracuse seems to have been persuaded that it was better to stick with the preamble as already adopted, since there was no assurance that any other wording would be any more widely acceptable. Both Dr. Clarke and Dr. Osgood acknowledged that Abbot's substitute wording, as proposed in 1866, might well have been adopted the year before had it been presented then; but to eliminate Christian terminology already approved would seem, rightly or wrongly, to be an abandonment of the Christian tradition. At that point, the Free Religious Association was conceived.89

One other radical response to the New York convention must be mentioned. It was the pamphlet entitled Unitarian Fellowship and Liberty, by Edward C. Towne, minister of the Medford church and a close associate of Frothingham. It was a bitter attack on the convention and the part Bellows played in it. It accused him of having assumed the role of dictator, and of making his own theological opinions the test of Christian communion. The preamble was interpreted as a creedal statement deliberately phrased by Bellows and the committee of twelve in order to drive out the radicals. At one point in the course of the debate, Thomas D. Eliot, the brother of William G. Eliot and a layman from New Bedford, proposed a restriction on the length of speeches, and the convention assented. Towne believed that this was a parliamentary device resorted to by "the managers on the platform" to prevent the radicals from having their say, and that Eliot "was their
mouthpiece.” These charges cannot be supported by any evidence thus far uncovered, and they are not easily reconciled with what we do know of the plans and intentions of “the managers on the platform.”

A curious aspect of the publication of Towne’s pamphlet is that it is dated April 27, 1866, more than a year after the events with which it deals. It does not seem to represent Towne’s initial reaction. As late as December 1865, Joseph Henry Allen wrote to Bellows: “I hope you observed the prompt & handsome way in which Towne settled the case of the man who ‘spat’ on you in the Commonwealth.” One cannot help wondering what happened to sour Towne and whether a sequence of events in the fall of 1865 may be the explanation. Towne submitted an article somewhat critical of Frederic Henry Hedge for publication in the Christian Examiner, of which Allen was then editor. Since Bellows was to assume direction of the magazine at the beginning of 1866, Allen solicited his opinion. Bellows replied that he wanted all shades of Unitarian opinion represented in the journal. He did regret that this particular article was scheduled for publication in the first issue for which he would be regarded as responsible; but he said he would not decline it, “as it is earnest, well-studied & presents legitimate considerations—which so far as they are wrong & untenable need to be met—and cannot be met until they are proposed in this public way.” Allen suggested to Towne that publication be deferred to the next following issue. But early in January, long after the article had gone to the printer, Towne withdrew it, despite Allen’s remonstrances, on the grounds that its publication would put Bellows in a wrong position. It is plausible to argue that Towne resented Allen’s handling of the matter, and exploded in all directions against the way in which Bellows was emerging as the dominant figure in the denomination.

V

Because of the strong tradition of intellectual freedom among Unitarians, the radical attack on Bellows has often been applauded. Yet the fact remains that it was Bellows, not the radicals, who realized the necessity of coming to grips with the implications for social organization posed by the development of industrial society after the Civil War. It was Bellows who made Unitarians recognize that they would have to reconstruct outmoded forms of organization if they were to survive.

It was Bellows, not the radicals, who attempted a reaffirmation of the tradition of intellectual liberty within the framework of inescapable institutional development. Bellows, the theological “conservative,” was the most important institutional innovator of that generation of Unitarians.

It was Bellows, too, who provided leadership for the mediating group within the Unitarian body, and thereby kept the denomination from plunging into a fatal schism. Because no division took place, it is all too easy to assume that no such danger existed. Yet the fear of division was demonstrably real, whether the threat was real or not. “Is there a serious movement to divide the denomination into Evangelical and Radical?” A. D. Mayo inquired of Hale. A. P. Peabody, Chandler Robbins, Gannett, Sears, and the Ellises were all thought by supporters of the convention to prefer a division; and there was a genuine feeling of relief when the outcome seemed to indicate that that danger had been averted. “It seems to me that the great gain of the meeting is that it decides the future of the Unitarian body,” wrote W. W. Newell. “It is clear that we are to have no division. . . . Holding fast to this basis, if there is to be any change in old style Unitarianism it will be gradual, not sudden and convulsing.” Bellows’s success in constructing a broad middle-ground consensus has to be weighed against his failure to satisfy the scruples of Octavius Brooks Frothingham.

For services such as these, there were not wanting men of his own generation to give him the praise that was his due. Hedge called him “our Bishop, our Metropolitan,” exercising his functions “by universal consent of the brethren.” John White Chadwick, himself a radical, declared that “almost every best thing that has been devised for the last seventeen years within the limits of the Unitarian denomination has taken its initiative from him or to his splendid advocacy owed its practical success.” And Bartol said, quite simply: “Dr. Bellows is the only leader the Unitarian body has ever had.”