MISCELLANEAE

The American anti-slavery movement in the churches before the civil war

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Between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War, the Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, considered matters of great social importance, of which opposition to slavery proved to be the most inflammable, leading in the United States to the bloodiest war of the century. The anti-slavery crusade, like other efforts to ameliorate the ills plaguing society, combined the humanitarianism of the Enlightenment with the ethical sensitivity of Pietism, and traditional Catholic preoccupation with the social order continued through Puritanism and other lively Protestant outlooks. It was especially the churches in the English-speaking world, that carried on active campaigns against slavery.

Nevertheless, economic interpretations have been so weighty among American historians that it is only recently that religious interpretations of abolitionism and the Civil War have become prominent. Henry May points out that a religious interpretation of the Civil War rests on two assertions: (1) that serious and intractable moral conflicts were important in causing the war, and (2) that in nineteenth century America such conflicts were peculiarly difficult to avoid or compromise because of the dominance of evangelical Protestantism in both sections, North and South. He insists, that the importance of the moral conflict is implied by much though not all recent writing on slavery, and is argued directly by DeVoto and Schlesinger, while Sellers points out, that religion sharpened the conflict greatly in the South.

1. The Slavery Issue to 1830

We shall first consider the slavery issue to 1830. In colonial America many including clergy men in the North and South alike had Negro and Indian slaves. But by 1808 both England and the U. S. had banned further slave trading, and in the British colonies slavery itself was abolished by the 1833 emancipation law. In the new U. S. the churches were strongly against slavery. The Mennonites were the first to protest publicly against slavery in 1888. The Quakers declared in 1776, that any of their members who did

not free their slaves would be expelled. Samuel Hopkins, a Congregational pastor in Rhode Island, condemned from his pulpit in 1769 ship-owning parishioners who were slave traders. The Methodists voted in 1784 to expel members who bought and sold slaves. Baptists of Virginia in 1789 condemned slavery as "a violent deprivation of the rights of nature and inconsistent with a republican government." Presbyterians of N.Y. and Philadelphia in 1787 called for gradual abolition of slavery. Jefferson wanted to condemn slavery in the Declaration of Independence, and Washington gave his personal slaves freedom in his will.

But if there was so much opposition to slavery already in 1800, why should a great war over the issue have been necessary in 1860? Shelton Smith points out, that two factors kept the anti-slavery question alive in America, along with a corresponding defense of slavery. One was the westward expansion of the nation, which forced the American people again and again to decide how far slavery should be allowed to extend. This factor must be connected with the increasing sectionalism after the 1820s. The other factor keeping the slavery question alive was the swelling tide of humanitarian reform, closely connected with the churches, which revealed the radical contradiction between human bondage and the professed creed of American democracy, thus stimulating a moral defense of slavery as well. This factor must be considered in close connection with the triumphant revivalist movement in the churches.

F. J. Turner shows the effect of Westward expansion upon the slavery question. The West has received the great streams of immigration from the North and from the South. The Mississippi compelled these currents to intermingle. Here it was that sectionalism first gave way under the pressure of unification. In the era of "good feeling" (early 19th cen.), Western man, including the Westernized New England man, became a new national type. Under Henry Clay the Westerners invoked the national government to break down the mountain barrier by internal improvements. Later these Western forces of aggressive nationalism and democracy took possession of the government in the person of the man who best embodied them, Andrew Jackson.

However, the next phase of Western development revealed forces of division between the Northern and Southern portions of the West. With the spread of the cotton culture went the slave system, and the great plantation. The small farmer in his log cabin raising varied crops was displaced by the planter raising cotton. In all except the mountainous areas the industrial organization of the tide-water South took possession of the Southwest, the unity of the back country was broken, and the solid South was formed. In the Northwest the was the era of railroads and canals, opening the region to the increasing stream of Middle State and New England settlement, and strengthening the opposition to slavery. The commercial connections of the Northwest were reversed by the railroad. "Debow's Review"., Southern journal, in 1852 said, "Where is New Orleans now? Enterprise has rolled back the mighty tide of the Mississippi and its thousand tributary streams,