

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 5: The Jacksonian Era – Individual Rights/Religion/Establishment/General Principles

Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (1835)¹

Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) was a prominent Presbyterian minister and seminary leader. Although the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Beecher opposed abolitionism and refused to teach African-American students. Beecher's reform causes were evangelicalism, temperance, and nativism. His anti-Catholic sermon in Boston in 1834 helped spur the burning of a convent in that city.

Beecher's *A Plea for the West* was an influential analysis of the institutions necessary to the "civil and religious prosperity" of the American frontier. Beecher insisted that proper educational institutions had to be established for the West (Ohio, Illinois and Michigan) to be fashioned in the image of New England. He saw a close connection between public education and religion. Like many Protestant Whigs, Beecher was concerned with whether the rising number of Catholic immigrants could be assimilated into republican mores. The "common schools" movement proposed a solution to this perceived crisis. Public schools, Beecher and others believed, inculcated the native-born and immigrant alike with sound republican/protestant values.

A Plea for the West equated Protestantism and republicanism. On what basis did Beecher perceive an identity between them? Why did he (and many other Whigs) believe Catholicism to be anti-republican? Beecher never considered the potential establishment issues that his proposals raised. How might Beecher respond to a contemporary American (or Leggett) who charged him with insufficient attention to the constitutionally mandated separation between church and state?

...
... [T]he conflict which is to decide the destiny of the West, will be a conflict of institutions for the education of her sons, for purposes of superstition, or evangelical light; of despotism, or liberty.

...
The thing required for the civil and religious prosperity of the West, is universal education, and moral culture, by institutions commensurate to that result—the all-pervading influence of schools, and colleges, and seminaries, and pastors, and churches. . . .

Experience has evinced, that schools and popular education, in their best estate, go not far beyond the suburbs of the city of God. All attempts to legislate prosperous colleges and schools into being without the intervening influence of religious education and moral principle, and habits of intellectual culture which spring up in alliance with evangelical institutions, have failed. Schools wane, invariably, in those towns where the evangelical ministry is neglected, and Sabbath is profaned, and the tavern supplants the worship of God. Thrift and knowledge in such places go out, while vice and irreligion come in.

...
The great experiment is now . . . whether the perpetuity of our republican institutions can be reconciled with universal suffrage. Without the education of the head and heart of the nation, they cannot be. . . .

This danger from uneducated mind is augmenting daily by the rapid influx of foreign emigrants, the greater part unacquainted with our institutions, unaccustomed to self-government, inaccessible to

¹ Excerpted from Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Truman & Smith, 1835).

education, and easily accessible to prepossession, and inveterate credulity, and intrigue, and easily embodied and wielded by sinister design. . . .

But if, upon examination, it should appear that three-fourths of the foreign emigrants whose accumulating tide is rolling in upon us, are, through the medium of their religion and priesthood, as entirely accessible to the control of the potentates of Europe as if they were an army of soldiers, enlisted and officered, and spreading over the land; then, indeed, should we have just occasion to apprehend danger to our liberties. It would be the union of church and state in the midst of us. The church and state both in Europe, and the pliant colonial church here. Her priesthood educated under the despotic governments of Catholic Europe, and dependent for their office, support and honors upon a foreign temporal prince This would, indeed, be a church and state union—another nation within the nation—the Greek in the midst of Troy.

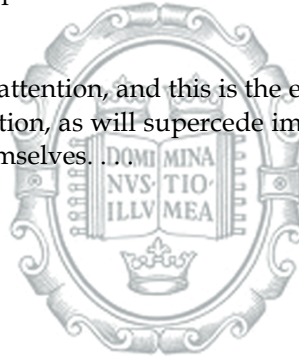
. . .

But before I proceed, to prevent misapprehension, I would say that I have no fear of the Catholics, considered simply as a religious denomination, and unallied to the church and state establishments of the European governments hostile to republican institutions.

Let the Catholics mingle with us as Americans and come with their children under the full action of our common schools and republican institutions, and the various powers of assimilation, and we are prepared cheerfully to abide the consequences. . . . It is no ecclesiastical quarrel to which we would call the attention of the American nation.

. . .

One thing more only demands attention, and this is the extension of such intellectual culture, and evangelical light to the Catholic population, as will supercede implicit confidence, and enable and incline them to read, and think, and act for themselves.



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