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Auguste Comte and Consensus Formation in American Religious Thought—Part 2: Twilight of New England Comtism

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Abstract: Auguste Comte was the most influential sociologist and philosopher of science in the Nineteenth Century. Part 1 summarized his works and analyzed reactions to them by Transcendentalists and Unitarians from 1837 until just after the Civil War. Part 2 examines in detail the post-war Transcendentalist and liberal Unitarian institutions of the Free Religious Association and the Radical Club and their different approaches to spiritual faith based on intuitionism and reliance on scientific proof. In the background to their disputes is the positivism of Auguste Comte, who served as an easy source of common criticism. But at the same time as they wrote against positivism, both intuitionists and those who relied on science were significantly influenced by Comte. Once again, as in part 1, a community of discourse was formed through the need to create social bonds at the expense of careful evaluation of the philosophy they criticized.

Keywords: Comte; positivism; intuitionism; Unitarianism; Free Religious Association; Radical Club; Francis Ellingwood Abbot; Octavius Brooks Frothingham; Thomas Wentworth Higginson

In part one, we saw how, mirroring its success in Great Britain, Comte's *Course* was initially well-received in the United States by Transcendentalists and some liberal Unitarians who viewed positivism as both the appropriate approach to scientific discovery and a way of envisioning a progressive, ameliorative humanity. At the same time and conversely, there emerged a group of critics of Comte—mainly more traditional Unitarians, but eventually many post-Unitarians and Transcendentalists—who typified his work as an expression of atheism and, consequently, otherwise of little worth. Communities of discourse were constructed based on often superficial impressions of a new and complex set of theories written in a foreign language. The Civil War period marked a watershed in the reaction against Comte due both to the wider dissemination of the *System* with its unpalatable social applications and to disruptive social forces: the accelerated threat against religion posed by technology and science, the dominance of that secular knowledge in universities, and a more bureaucratically organized society. Facing these rapid changes, more traditional intellectuals used Comte's positivism to highlight the dangers of modernity.

Part two focuses on how Unitarians, largely because of these same forces, experienced a formal split, with some of its most engaged intellectuals, including Transcendentalists, moving more aggressively toward a natural, transcendent spirituality. The concerted outcry about positivism's purported atheism might as easily have turned against this emerging group with the same accusation. As a result, part of this group's legitimizing strategy included distancing itself even further from Comte. And yet, this next community of discourse, despite its broad public opposition to Comte, was indebted to his ideas both for some general sensibilities and specific ideas.

In considering the post-Civil War intellectual milieu of eastern Massachusetts, a small organization with a lifespan of just one year still captures the popular imagination: the Metaphysical Club. Ironically, the group was dominated not by metaphysicians, but by pragmatists, some of whom (especially Peirce

and James) went on to be among America's most influential intellectuals. But a slightly earlier club, along with an offshoot association, drew far greater attendance and contemporary popular interest, and supplied much of the intellectual energy that found its way into the Metaphysical Club. These groups had widely diffused individual beliefs, but, unlike the Metaphysical Club which gathered under the banner of philosophy, their primary organizing purpose was the exploration of religion.

And when it came to religion, the most important idea of the moment was natural religion. Broadly interpreted, natural religion refers to the determination of a universal divine presence by either intuition or reason rather than by proofs found in specific sacred documents or historically-constructed tradition. Although by then natural religion had a long history in Europe and even America,¹ it was the very recent interest in other, especially Eastern, religions and in sociology that opened up investigation of a common religious spirit in humanity. It was something that early Transcendentalists, whether consciously or not, had already effectively embraced. Emerson, for example, offered his talk "Natural Religion" at least five times (Emerson 2001, vol. 2, pp. 177–95), arguing that spirituality was a human instinct untethered to historical proofs:

A religion of the simplest elements; the first duties that everywhere exist commanded by the primal sentiments, need no magnificent annunciation by ancient prophecy or special messengers attended by angles from the skies, but are born in the Indian and the Hottentot, and only need to be obeyed, in order to speak with a clearer voice, and to deliver the whole code of moral and spiritual life. (Emerson 2001, vol. 2, p. 180)

When Emerson delivered this talk in 1869, he did so in a lecture series sponsored by the Free Religion Association (FRA). By then, much of Emerson's Transcendentalist circle was gone: Margaret Fuller had died in 1850, Theodore Parker in 1860, and Henry David Thoreau in 1862; George Ripley became increasingly engaged in the literary society of New York, while Frederic Henry Hedge capitulated by joining the faculty at Harvard. And yet by the end of the Civil War, Transcendentalism as an extreme form of idealism had succeeded in winning over more liberal Unitarians, resulting in what has been called "a second cycle of American Transcendentalism" (Versluis 1993, p. 326). How these intellectuals, many affiliated with the FRA, reacted to Comte's positivism constitutes the second part of this investigation.

The FRA originated out of the long-standing tension between the more institutionally-oriented, moderate Unitarians and the most liberal, often Transcendentalist, members. At their convention in Syracuse in 1866, Unitarians voted to accept a constitution for the newly created National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches whose preamble identified them as "disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ" and whose purpose was "the cause of Christian faith and work." Liberal members, however, perhaps feeling ambushed, offered radically different language, penned by Francis Ellingwood Abbot, that "the object of Christianity is the universal diffusion of Love, Righteousness and Truth" and that there existed "perfect freedom of thought [which] is at once the right and duty of every human being . . ." (Clarke and Abbot 1875, p. 4). Unitarians who intended to build a cohesive movement based directly and solely on the historical Christian tradition decisively defeated the substitute language, and the liberals lost what they romantically called the Battle of Syracuse. "To not a few who had gone to the Convention in the larger spirit of the invitation, this action seemed alike the closing of the door of hospitality and of hope," wrote William J. Potter, one of the founders of the FRA and its third president (1882–1882) (Potter 1892, p. 8). But to some, hope had already departed and this was just an excuse to follow it, as Octavius Brooks Frothingham later makes clear: "It [the

¹ (Harrison 1990, pp. 130–72). In America, Arminians argued that every human had the innate capacity to decide right and wrong and therefore to decide individually what is a religious truth. In his 1755 Dudlean Lecture, Edward Holyoke described natural religion as "that regard to a Divine Being or God which Men arrive at, by mere Principles of natural Reason, as it is improveable, by tho't, [yes] consideration & Experience, without the help of Revelation.": "The First Sermon for the Dudlean Lecture," (p. 3, Harvard Archives); see (Cashdollar 1989, p. 140).

Battle of Syracuse] can hardly be said to have been the *cause* of it; for even previous to the ‘conference’ there existed an expectation of some larger, more comprehensive scheme of affiliation on grounds purely spiritual, with purpose purely humane” (Frothingham 1889, p. 386). In fact, the split between Unitarians and the FRA somewhat came about from the still unresolved animosity over Unitarian anathematizing of Theodore Parker in 1841 (Gohdes 1931, pp. 210–54).

The following year, many of the disenchanted liberals gathered at the Boston home of Cyrus Bartol and launched the FRA.² As David Robinson has precisely detailed, the essential principles held by most FRA members were: a belief that evolutionary biology suggested an equally evolving religious sentiment in which Christianity, or any traditional religion, was not the endpoint; an appreciation of a possible “global religion” based on the inner light in every individual; and social justice as a reflection of humanity’s growing perfectionism.³ Belief in a reified godhead, therefore, was a personal decision (Persons 1847, pp. 66–68).

And yet, the original host of the dissidents, Cyrus Bartol, declined to join. Friends attributed to him the (disingenuous—see below) excuse that he “was one of those who preferred to make a strong effort to liberalize the Unitarian body” (Cooke 1903, pp. 485–86). By the third meeting the FRA met instead at the Medford home of Edward C. Towne; Towne, along with Francis Ellingwood Abbot and William J. Potter, were considered the founders of the formal association. The first public meeting—for its purpose was to spread the word through open meetings—was held in Boston on 30 May 1867, with Emerson giving the most celebrated oratorical contribution and Thomas Wentworth Higginson offering the most felicitous phrase of “the sympathy of religions” (which letter became the title of a highly praised and widely distributed talk) (Cooke 1903, pp. 493–94). Besides regular meetings, the FRA sponsored public lectures in the spirit of the (Theodore) Parker Fraternity. Two Emerson talks on “Natural Religion” and “Immorality,” as an eyewitness recounts, “hold a prominent place in the body of his public teaching, and they embody the best of his later affirmations” (Cooke 1903, p. 494).

At the same time there was founded a somewhat kindred group: the Radical Club (sometimes called “The 13 Chestnut Street Club,” where founder John Sargent lived, although some of the meetings were held at the home of his Chestnut Street neighbor, former FRA gatherer Cyrus Bartol). Unlike the FRA, that had a high degree of organization and had chapters in several cities, this was exclusively Boston-based. Testifies member George Willis Cooke: “The Free Religious Association, the Horticultural Hall Lectures [what replaced the Parker Club] and the Radical Club were but parts of the same whole. The leaders were the same, and the same men and women belonged to them...” (Cooke 1903, p. 499).

But Cooke was overly-sentimental in his recollections of common community. For example, Charles Eliot Norton, at the time perhaps Boston’s most prominent intellectual (and first cousin to Harvard’s president) joined the FRA in 1867 as he embraced an agnosticism that he hoped would free America of all its self-limiting traditions. But he soon distanced himself when he felt the association too constraining intellectually (Butler 2007, p. 136). And FRA founder Bartol withdrew to become a host of the Radical Club.

While the FRA had a more didactic, and therefore, narrower agenda—to promote natural religion in its various manifestations—the Radical Club was designed to explore the full range of religious experiences. Cooke notes that the most stimulating times at the Radical Club were when Wendell Phillips spoke, “as a champion of Christianity of the older type, defending Calvinism, and maintaining that the ideals of the church were essential. As many of the members of the club were radical in their ideas, and some of them positively opposed to Christianity, these occasions were of an exciting nature.” Cooke adds that Julia Ward Howe, who also defended traditional Christianity rigorously, praised the Radical Club for its “catholicity” (Cooke 1903, p. 497).

² Most recently, (Robinson 2010).

³ (Robinson 2010); excellent, too, is (Kelleway n.d.).

First generation Transcendentalists, including Emerson, Bartol, Hedge, Bronson Alcott, Christopher Pearse Cranch, and James Freeman Clarke (who had expressed concern that John Fiske, hired at Harvard to teach positivism, was, in fact, teaching atheism—see part one), tended more to the Radical Club (Cooke 1903, p. 497). Emerson preferred it, not only because there were no reporters, but also because “the talk [there] was largely unpremeditated” (Frothingham 1889, p. 393). Also choosing the Radical Club were such diverse intellectuals as mathematician (and father of Charles Peirce) Benjamin Peirce, a fervently Christian thinker (Hogan 2008, p. 285), and positivist John Fiske (Cooke 1903, p. 497). Little wonder, then, that Bartol wrote in 1872 that, in contrast to the FRA, the Radical Club was “against any final wording.” Instead, the Radical Club “denies to affirm, clears the way to travel, vetoes less than it signs, and tears down to build. Its affirmation is, Spirit takes in all.” For, “All science of the understanding God escapes. No microscope or telescope will ever discover him” (Bartol 1872, pp. 110, 112, 141). Bartol is here taking a clear shot at those who relied on science to confirm belief. The Radical Club, then, may have been more inclined to see religious feeling determined through the spirit rather than demonstrated by science. Such thinkers acquired the label of intuitionists or enthusiasts.

But there wasn't just divided feelings between the two organizations. As a scholar of the FRA observes, “The tensions revealed at the organizing meeting [of the FRA] were to remain central throughout the entire history of the Association.”⁴ In his recollections on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, prominent FRA member Octavius Brooks Frothingham, himself an intuitionist, acknowledged some hostility toward those such as himself:

The noblest transcendentalists, Weiss, Johnson, Emerson, Wasson, Alcott, Bartol, adhered staunchly to its [the FRA's] grandest affirmation, though they were unable, some of them, to join the organization, partly from an aversion to all grouping of sects, and partly through personal dislike of incidental utterances they chanced to hear. They were a company of idealists; many called them enthusiasts; a few applied to them a less complimentary name. (Frothingham 1887, p. 11)

FRA co-founder William J. Potter recalled that the FRA welcomed participants who might argue rigorously for their individual religions. Yet, he also noted that “Religion being one of the phenomena of human history, the modern scientific method of study is to be applied to it as to all other phenomena of the world of man and nature” (Potter 1892, pp. 21, 22). Promoting science as the lens through which to view religion inevitably put tremendous pressure on all earlier forms of belief, whether evidence-based (biblical) Unitarianism or intuitional Transcendentalism.

In 1871, Abbot, co-founder of the FRA and influential editor of the association's weekly *Index*, delivered a public lecture entitled, “Intuitionism versus Science; or the Civil War in Free Religion.” But when he came to publish the talk in the *Index*, he changed its name to “The Intuitional and Scientific Schools of Free Religion” (Abbot 1871b, p. 116). We can well imagine what social and political considerations brought about the softening of the title, but it nevertheless indicates that Free Religionists struggled mightily with the cleavage within their group. While some, like Abbot, argued that the existence of God awaited scientific proof, others claimed they knew God existed through their own intuition. On the periodical's masthead listing its five editors there were, in fact, two highly prominent and outspoken intuitionists associated with first generational Transcendentalism: Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Frothingham. Frothingham was even the first president of the FRA (1867–1873) and Higginson its first vice-president and fourth president (1894–1899).

And yet, the same masthead gives the last word to science: “The *Index* accepts every result of science and sound learning, without seeking to harmonize it with the Bible. It recognizes no authority

⁴ (Kelleway n.d.). See, for example, (Cashdollar 1989, p. 294, n. 29).

but that of reason and right.”⁵ In critiquing intuitionism in his “Civil War” talk, Abbot defined the problem this way:

To the Intuitionist school, God and Immortality are undoubted and indubitable *facts*. These two great problems are solved. God is a fact; the only questions concern his essence, the mode of his activity, and the nature of his relations to the universe. Immortality is a fact; the only question concerns the laws and conditions of the future state . . . The Scientific school, however, finds the existence of God (that is, as a Person or intelligent, self-conscious Being) and the continued existence of man after death to be the great open questions of today. (Abbot 1871b, p. 113)

Of course, Abbot frames this asymmetrical comparison to his own rhetorical advantage: intuitionists believe in a god that Abbot leaves undefined, while, proposed in contrast, the Scientific school does not believe in an *anthropomorphic* god unless it can be determined scientifically. Abbot did, as we shall see later, flirt with the existence of a universal innate spirit much akin to a Neoplatonic or Hegelian godhead. But here, in postponing any identification of a divine force until science determines otherwise, his purpose is to back intuitionists into a corner.

Indeed, in this same article, Abbot goes on to claim that intuitionists consider only one idiosyncratic road to belief: “To settle the questions of God and Immortality by the appeal to intuition, when this appeal meets no response in myriads of the finest intellects and purest souls, is manifestly a mere assumption a favored few cannot see for all mankind” (Abbot 1871b, p. 115). In effect, intuitionism is a luxury of the elite; implied is that objective science is universal knowledge.

Within the same issue of the *Index* there appeared several critical responses to Abbot’s public “Civil War” lecture. Most notable is that by Higginson, who identified himself as one of Abbot’s intuitionist targets and asserted that:

Personally I have no doubts to personal immortality, and none as to Deity—if one may be excused from definition . . . It is very pleasant to believe in immortality; the thought warms and encourages one, and makes sorrow easier to bear . . . I do not wish to have my faith and hope and courage depend upon the result of an historical investigation, or a chemical analysis. (Higginson 1871, p. 117)

His final remark refers both to more traditional Unitarians, who depend on historical (mostly biblical) material to prove their faith, and to Abbot’s wing of the FRA which argues that only science can determine the existence of God. And yet, having criticized both alternatives to his position and asserting his intuitive belief in God and afterlife, Higginson dodges the essential question concerning his own belief, asking to be “excused from definition.” Within the FRA, neither intuitionists nor science school adherents had a firm definition of their own essential spiritual beliefs. It was at least as much a matter of what they stood against as of what they stood for. We shall later see these same dynamics at work when they responded to Comte’s positivism.

Despite intuitionism, the Association’s rhetoric clearly pronounced that the future of acquiring spiritual insight lay with science. George Willis Cooke attests that the association’s original stated purpose was “to promote the scientific study of religious truth, not to defend the legacy of theological tradition . . . ” The official mission statement was later expanded “to encourage the scientific study of man’s religious nature and history” (Cooke 1903, p. 489). And the FRA’s Constitution declared that: “The objects of this Association are to encourage the scientific study of religion and ethics, to advocate freedom in religion, to increase fellowship in spirit, and to emphasize the supremacy of practical morality in all the relations of life” (Potter 1892, Addendum, Article 2). In fact, a name originally proposed for the organization was the “Religious Science Association” (Kelleway n.d.).

⁵ *The Index* was started by Abbott in 1870 and ended in 1886, while *The Radical* was the FRA’s monthly magazine, which had begun in September 1865, even before the schism, and ended in 1873: (Cashdollar 1989, p. 494).

But that suggested name, while undoubtedly antagonizing to their own intuitionists, would also certainly have served as a declaration against the National Conference. Accused of being Arians or—worse—atheists since their founding in 1825, mainstream Unitarians now felt the additional stress of reconciling their views with contemporary science. In 1866, the very year of the “Battle of Syracuse” in which Unitarians tried to impose greater religious orthodoxy on their adherents, the anonymous lead editorial in their flagship journal, the *Christian Examiner*, decried “an alienation from public religion on the part of a very large and growing class of persons of character.” The cause of that alienation was science:

The proper Deity of Christ . . . is fast taking its place, with honest and earnest thinkers, among the mythological extravagances which, among all tribes, have tended to deify heroes, sages, and martyrs . . . It is, in short, simply impossible to be acquainted even superficially with the most advanced science, or the best philosophies of history or the latest theories of physiology and psychology, without feeling their inconsistency with the whole ground-plan of the ruling theology of Christendom.⁶

Anxious over the trend but still hoping for unity, the editorial expresses respect for such “persons of character” and “honest and earnest thinkers” who followed the conclusions of science. But the subsequent split in Unitarian ranks changed the tone of the conversation. In 1872, the Unitarian *Christian Register* called the FRA “an anti-Christian sect,” and claimed that “the [Free Religious] Association withholds full hospitality from all who do not virtually renounce Christianity when uniting with them.”⁷ The FRA’s increasing emphasis on a scientific explanation for religious beliefs undoubtedly contributed to the growing tensions. Indeed, that there were *two* separate clubs composed of lifelong acquaintances reflects both the intellectual creativity of the moment as well as the deep anxieties of the time.

Emerson, also a member of the FRA but gravitating more to the Radical Club, reflected in his Journals in Fall, 1867, that: “The tendency of the new time is toward a religious belief compatible with the expansion of science: And each new school of metaphysics, as Hegel or Comte, is not final or universal, but only an attempt to emphasize one of the irresistible corrections which new science has made necessary” (Emerson 1982, vol. 16, p. 84). That Emerson could couple Comte with Hegel shows the attention that the French philosopher commanded. Also noteworthy, the intuitionist Emerson judged the connection of science and religion to be “irresistible” and “necessary.”

In fact, ever since his 1838 Divinity School Address, Emerson had included science within his vision of the spirit: “I look for the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws . . . shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy” (Emerson 1971, p. 93). Moreover, in “A Transcendentalist Nature Religion” included in this same issue of *Religions*, Nicholas Friesner cites Emerson’s “Worship” from the 1860 collection *Conduct of Life* to demonstrate the thoroughness with which Emerson infused fact with moral power:

There will be a new church founded on moral science, at first cold and naked, a babe in a manger again, the algebra and mathematics of ethical law, the church of men to come, without shawms, or psaltery, or sackbut; but it will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters; science for symbol and illustration; it will fast enough gather beauty, music, picture, poetry.⁸

⁶ (Anonymous 1866, pp. 2, 8; cf. Turner 1985, pp. 158–59).

⁷ Quoted by (Kelleway n.d.).

⁸ (Emerson 2003, p. 52; See also (Walls 2003, p. 9)).

And yet even Emerson, when experiencing the “civil war” among his fellow travelers, may have been concerned about this rush to impose science on religion. When he addressed the FRA in 1867 with “Natural Religion,” he cautioned against a complete rejection of previous traditions:

I think we should not assail Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism, or the *Koran*, but frankly thank each for every brave and just sentence or history they have furnished us. We should not contradict or censure these well-meant, best-meant approximations, but point out the identity of their summits with every other inspiration.⁹

And, in both 1870 and 1871, at the invitation of President Eliot, Emerson gave an extended series of lectures at Harvard, “Natural History of the Intellect.” The culmination of a life-long project to understand the mind as agent (in the Neoplatonic sense), Emerson relied fundamentally on notions of the soul and intuition (Emerson 2008). Perhaps as a result of such sentiments, some FRA members questioned his relevance to their own enterprise, forcing closest friend Bronson Alcott to defend Emerson publicly: “A friend said to me today: ‘Mr. Emerson! O, Yes, a lovely man, but what has he done?’ *Who brought us here?* Who is the father, or, if not the father, the cousin, at least, of the thought that brought us here? You know who, so far as any one person is concerned . . . ”¹⁰

Of course, Emerson’s reputation transcended differences and perhaps served to reduce some of the tension. Although certainly an intuitionist, Emerson was venerated by the entire FRA. Founder William J. Potter, calling the FRA “A voice without a hand,” went on: “It puts us in most honorable company. Socrates was no more than that. Nor was Jesus very much more; nor our own Emerson. They were *individual* teachers and prophets” (Potter 1892, p. 19). And Cooke recalls: “Not all of the meetings of the Radical Club were devoted to the discussion of problems in theology and science. There were receptions to Emerson, a morning when original poems were read, and a day when Tyndall was the speaker (Cooke 1903, p. 498). Especially with the early death of Parker, Emerson, while playing only a small active role in the overall movement, was essential. He is noted at the top of the FRA’s very first announcement (Ahlstrom and Mullin 1987, p. 72) and supposedly delivered the first dollar of dues at the organizing meeting of the FRA (Persons 1847, pp. 49–50). Although preferring to attend the Radical Club, he became a lifelong vice-president of the FRA and was called “the patriarch of the Free Religionists” (Ahlstrom and Mullin 1987, p. 74). Abbot, while leading the science wing of the movement, called Emerson “the greatest legacy that God has yet bestowed on America” (Abbot 1878, p. 379).

George Willis Cooke, FRA participant and Emerson biographer, judged the FRA, “the culmination of transcendentalism, and its acceptance of intuition and self-reliance. It discarded institutional and historical religion, and accepted that of individual spiritual insight and the rational activity of the personal mind” (Cooke 1903, p. 491). And yet at the conclusion of these recollections, he offered a subtler account, explicitly recognizing the difference between intuitionism and scientism. The application of science to religion that the FRA supported ended traditional transcendentalism and enthusiasm, but, failing to fulfill its own promise, left religion in a conservative, ritualistic, and regressive state, lacking both the more recent scientific approach and Transcendentalism’s earlier intuitionist approach:

They [the FRA and Radical Club] came at the culmination of the transcendental movement and they furnished the medium of its transference to the new scientific interest that signaled the later years of the nineteenth century. That the Free Religion seemed to go into eclipse in the process of its transfer of the intellectual movement there can be no doubt, and the seeming was reality. The reaction against the scientific spirit was other than

⁹ (Emerson 2001); see (Gohdes 1931, p. 222), for the suggestion that it is a caution to his listeners. But it may already have been spoken in the original 1861 version of the speech.

¹⁰ (Anonymous 1868, pp. 77–78; Gohdes 1931, p. 232), for the suggestion.

transcendentalism, though taking many of its features . . . The tendency of science was to forbid enthusiasm, and this is widely shown in the indifference that has invaded all churches . . . But science has by no means come to the end of its influence upon religion, and any day we may look for a reaction in its favor, that will establish rational convictions in the guidance of all religious bodies. That such a change is certain to come about when ritualism and the occult have had their day, is all that the founders of the Association desired. (Cooke 1903, p. 499)

Despite Emerson's conciliatory presence, science's potential damage to traditional religious beliefs and the concomitant hope that science might settle all theological questions produced great tension. However justified they felt in removing themselves from the Unitarian movement, FRA and Radical Club members lived outside mainstream Unitarianism at a significant psychic cost. Additionally, those who had seceded were themselves divided on the promises of science in understanding religion.

Science did not immediately carry the day against either intuitionism or anthropomorphic belief. But it produced enough stress within the movement that it conditioned discourse about the most prominent theorist of science. Although Comte could never be fully pinned down on the question of whether God does not exist or just that the proof of God's existence is unattainable through science, his positivist epistemology gave scientific school adherents courage to oppose intuitionism. The second paragraph of the *Index's* statement of principles, certainly the work of Abbot, is the declaration that Christianity is transitioning to natural religion, just as paganism had passed to Christianity during the Roman Empire, although the current transition "is even more momentous." This progressive three-stage model, consciously or not, reflects Comte's positivist schema. And the FRA's fiftieth and final principle echoes the moral certainty of Comte: "Christianity is the faith of the soul's childhood; Free Religion is the faith of the soul's manhood. In the gradual growth of mankind out of Christianity into Free Religion, lies the only hope of the spiritual perfection of the individual and the spiritual unity of the race" (Abbot 1870, p. 8). On the first page of the second issue of the *Index*, there is stated a comparison between Christianity and Free Religion, also undoubtedly penned by Abbot, predicting that Free Religion "will claim absolute control over the collective life of society and the outward and inward life of the individual . . . The chief features of this system are the supremacy of science in all matters of belief, the supremacy of morality in all matters of conduct, and the supremacy of benevolence in all social and personal relations" (Abbot 1871a, p. 1). The language of absolute control, inevitable supremacy, and the rule of science is what created controversy for Comte, and Abbot's similar language undoubtedly help produce the "civil war" within the FRA.

Co-founder and guiding light of the FRA, Francis Ellingwood Abbot was the one who offered alternative language at the "Battle of Syracuse" that sparked the great division and who served as long-time editor of the *Index*. After graduating Harvard in 1855, Abbot began studying positivism at the Meadville Seminary (then in Pennsylvania) through Martineau's abridgement and translation of the *Course*. By the time he was a minister in New Hampshire during the Civil War, he was reading Comte in French and his notebooks show a deep engagement with the subject (Cashdollar 1989, p. 111, n. 54). Abbot's later life was wrapped in controversy, including being dismissed from his New Hampshire pulpit for not being specifically Christian enough in religious sentiment, and later having a very public and distasteful dispute at Harvard with Josiah Royce, in which William James sided with Royce and Charles Peirce with Abbot. Abbot spent most of his life as a highly prolific, but independent and financially struggling scholar.

Emerging from the traditional Meadville Seminary as a moderately conservative Christian, he was somewhat swept into the evangelical revival of 1857–58 (Peden 1992, p. 9). But like so many of his contemporaries, after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* appeared in 1859, Abbot was forced to recalibrate his beliefs (Ahlstrom and Mullin 1987, p. vii). His continuously evolving thoughts on philosophy and religion are complex and often heavily conditioned by his reading of Hegel. At the risk of being overly-reductive, it's possible to extract three core beliefs: (1) that "the tendency to worship is a permanent and universal element in [humanity's] constitution," and, because there must be a

unity between worshipper and the object of that worship, he personally believed that there must be a God—“an Infinite and Immanent Personality” (Abbot 1865, pp. 164–65, 169); (2) and yet, that religious meaning, including the existence of God, can only be proved by science—what he called “scientific theism” (Abbot 1867; cf. Robinson 2006); and (3) that, while positivism was important when used to interpret science and could, if probably employed, prove the existence of God, in practice Comte abused it by denying the *possible* unity of spirit and phenomena (Abbot 1866) and thus was quite wrong about and, indeed, disrespectful of religion (Abbot 1871b, p. 115). Abbot’s presence within the FRA was especially manifest in his insistence that only science could establish the worth of religious belief. It could not be determined by appealing to traditions and texts created at an earlier, non-scientific time, and, contrary to what Transcendental members of the FRA believed, it could never be determined by simply an instinct to believe.

There are some inevitable tensions in these positions. For example, Abbot denied what he claimed is the intuitionist’s proof of God’s existence, and yet he did effectively accept the existence of God. Abbot retreated to the stand that, because “anthropology is the root of theology,” it is a certain that science can and will establish the facts of religion (Abbot 1867, p. 595). But it was Comte who had originally argued that anthropology (when it matured as had sociology) would be the science of humanity, and Abbot used Comte to establish distance from evidence-based (meaning biblically-based) Unitarianism: “*Fair Hit at Unitarian Conservatism*,” he wrote in his notebooks while reading Comte.¹¹

In two articles in the *Unitarian Christian Examiner* which he published just before the formation of the FRA, Abbot was critical of, but sympathetic toward, positivism, writing in 1865: “[R]eligion presupposes the Finite Divinity of man, and the Infinite Humanity of God . . . Auguste Comte was groping after this thought when he set up his abstraction of humanity as the Supreme Being” (Abbot 1865, p. 166; A’s italics). The following year, he conceded that “[Comte’s] work is of masterly genius, and is exerting a subtle and growing influence upon the times, unequalled since the days of Kant.” His essential complaint was that: “Comtism errs conspicuously in repudiating certain facts which ought to be admitted; namely, facts of the spiritual order, which are as real to experience as any physical facts” (Abbot 1866, pp. 235, 238). Abbot continued to hold to this central disagreement with Comte, but, following the formation of the FRA, the tone of his criticisms of Comte appear to grow harsher, perhaps suggesting that he began re-positioning himself within his new discursive community.

In his “Civil War” talk, after mainly targeting intuitionists, Abbot then pivots against a common FRA foe by attacking Comte for not leaving open the questions of the existence of the divine and afterlife:

The disrespect towards religion, however, which still pervades the scientific world, has been organized into a new and most curious religion under the name of Positivism, or, as it should be called, Comtism . . . Chief among its principles is this, that phenomenon and their laws are the only proper subject of scientific investigation,—that all the study of causes, in the strict sense of the word, is futile and pernicious. That is, all thought concerning God and Immortality and the soul is sheer waste of time . . .

Consequently: “The Positive Philosophy, as pronounced by Comte, asserts that the greatest of all questions are no questions at all, but herein it violates the true spirit of science, which refuses to acknowledge the right of any to set limits on its investigations” (Abbot 1871b, p. 115). But despite his scorn for Comte’s pseudo-science, Abbot, who called himself a “positivist in theology” (Ahlstrom and Mullin 1987, p. 99), adopted the phrase coined by Comte—“the Church of Humanity”—to describe his understanding of the universal religious sentiment.¹² And as author of the “principles” of the FRA in the early issues of the *Index* (above), he echoes positivist claims. Even while attacking Comte, Abbot,

¹¹ (Cashdollar 1989, p. 290) quoting Abbot “Personal Notebook” 3: 96, Abbot Papers; A’s italics.

¹² (Ahlstrom and Mullin 1987, p. 52), from “New Wine in Old Bottles,” 26 April 1868, Abbot archives at Harvard.

who believed the most important answers come from science, naturally absorbed some of his language and, certainly, some of his concepts.

Abbot was not alone. Among the less visible and vocal members of the FRA was Joseph Henry Allen.¹³ A prominent thinker who took positivism seriously, he somewhat despaired over the lack of robust discussion among Unitarians, but equally, as he wrote a friend, he had “resigned the work [of theological discussion] to Abbot and the Radicals.”¹⁴ A provocative statement, suggesting that Allen wasn’t up for a fight against the highly aggressive Abbot. Later, while teaching at Harvard in 1882, he claimed personal knowledge that Comte was no atheist. That statement may have been a defense of Comte against those, including Abbot, who wanted to label Comte in such a way which, for most New Englanders at the time, was still an indefensible position. Allen, as did Abbot, deferred to science, but, as did Comte and even many who opposed him, he embraced the sentiment of universal spirituality, reflecting that: “step by step, the theological is supplanted by the scientific, the divine by the human view. It is in other words, a ‘religion of humanity,’ taking the place, in our generation, of a religion of dogma” (Allen 1880, p. 57). In fact, what Allen himself feared most was certainly not Comte, but rather what he called Transcendentalism’s “poetic pantheism” (Allen 1884, p. 265).

The most prominent of those whom Allen might call pantheists and Abbot called intuitionists were Frothingham and Higginson. Higginson’s response to Abbot regarding the “Civil War” talk is quoted above. But by this point Frothingham was the most famous of the intuitionists. Frothingham commanded a massive following in his Independent Liberal Church in New York and was equally influential in the Boston-based FRA. He called his own philosophy “Radicalism.”

Frothingham furiously attacked Comte for his misanthropy and for fitting Catholic practice to his *System*. Further, Comte’s Religion of Humanity “was in every important respect European” and his system had “a contempt for mankind” (Frothingham 1873, pp. 34, 91).

The phrase, “Religion of Humanity, has, unfortunately, been associated with the name and philosophy of Auguste Comte, who does not deserve credit for the main ideas it stands for. If the name was of his invention the thing was not. His leading conceptions—of the solidarity of mankind, of the grand man, and immortality of the race—were thrown out several years in advance of him. Comte elaborated them, but, as we believe, corrupted and perverted them . . . (Frothingham 1873, pp. 32–33)

Frothingham wrote these words in a book he entitled *The Religion of Humanity*, thereby accepting, as had Abbot and others, Comte’s phrase. Frothingham thus appropriates Comte’s broader cosmopolitan vision while distancing himself from Comte’s methods. Step-by-step, Frothingham takes from Comte everything but the liturgy. Drawing on Comte’s periods of history, Frothingham announces: “The theological epoch draws near its close [and with it] the whole system of so-called Christianity” (Frothingham 1875, pp. 14–15). Of course for Frothingham, the soul or individual spirit was far too ethereal to be determined by science: the soul “outruns the calculations of the mathematician, leaves time and space behind . . . ” (Frothingham 1872, pp. 250–51). Although leaving the existence of spirit unresolved, Comte, too, denied that science might ever prove its existence. And just as Comte had argued, Frothingham envisioned that, to whatever extent there is a spirit in the universe, it is composed of altruism and community: of “social sentiment, social co-operation, social harmony.” Precisely as had Comte, Frothingham believed that, “social science is the best modern teacher of theology.”¹⁵

Cosmopolitanism was essential to Comte’s *System*. He argued that, to prevent the war and social chaos which haunted his own childhood, humanity needed to eliminate national boundaries and

¹³ On his membership: (Mulhern 1980–1981, p. 39, n. 1).

¹⁴ (Mulhern 1980–1981, p. 48), quoting Allen to Russel Lant Carpenter, 12 March 1871, in the Andover-Harvard Theological Library (AHT) Allen papers.

¹⁵ (Frothingham 1866, pp. 379–80). This and several surrounding quotations are also found in (Cashdollar 1989).

embrace a single spiritual identity (above, part one). This is largely the reason for his success among England's intellectuals (especially socialist ones) and its working class, as well as among New York progressives. Something similar, without, of course, Comte's dogmatic ritualism, pervades the FRA. Recollects member William J. Potter: "[T]his talk of a Christo-centric world is only the hazy cloud of words left by a vanishing system of theory. According to the great doctrine of evolution, as Science unfolds it, the history of man is not Christo-centric, but *Cosmo-centric*" (Potter 1892, p. 27; P's italics).

Emerson had already laid that foundation in the second annual meeting of the FRA, when he proclaimed:

I submit that in sound frame of mind, we read or remember the religious sayings and oracles of other men, whether Jew or Indian, or Greek or Persian, only for friendship, only for joy in the social identity which they open to us, and that these words would have no weight with us if we had not the same conviction already. I find something stingy in the unwilling and disparaging admission of these foreign opinions—opinions from all parts of the world—by our churchmen, as if only to enhance by their dimness the superior light of Christianity. (Emerson 1903–1904, vol. 11, pp. 489–90)

Little wonder that the intuitionist Frothingham was concerned that Comte's positivism held some allure, and that others, perhaps mainstream Unitarians, might identify FRA members as positivists. "The 'Free Religionists' are for the most part graduates from the school of Transcendentalism, the very opposite of Positivism," Frothingham declared in the *Index*. And yet, he worried that:

we have been a little disturbed by the occasional intimation of alliance or sympathy between [Comte's Positivism and the Free Religious Association] . . . We may be very certain that all appearances of sympathy between [the two] are illusory; the resemblance is superficial and nominal, the antagonism is deep and ineradicable.

Protestant and Republican, Comte nevertheless constructed an order derived from Catholic liturgy and an aristocratic spirit that was intended to control what Comte believed to be the present anarchy in society; whereas in contrast, to Frothingham, the FRA's spirit:

is humane, liberal, democratic; it will have no priest, no dogma, no fixed rule of organization . . . When it speaks of the 'Religion of Humanity,' it means the religion that humanity is tending towards and trying to realize,—humanity's natural religion, not a manufactured system to which men must submit at the bidding of a 'philosopher,' but a spontaneous and full expression of the sentiments that are born of their experience, and the faiths that cheer they heart. (Frothingham 1872, p. 253)

Abbot, to the contrary, held out the possibility that someday science, as an objective enterprise, might determine that question in the affirmative. As a consequence, Abbot had nearly as little patience for members of the FRA who were intuitionists and who required no scientific proof of a divine spirit. Yet, it was this very intuitionism that ultimately prevailed for American pragmatists, not only for William James in his "Will to Believe" and his momentous *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but in Santayana's influential talk that began part one. A fellow traveler of Harvard pragmatists, Santayana praised Transcendentalism—and he has in mind Emerson and those who later became known as intuitionists—for their "systematic subjectivism"—appreciating as did Comte that scientific knowledge is not something fixed within nature, but conditioned by human construction.

Comte's larger intellectual contributions, found especially in modern sociology and economics and expressed in the quotation from Isaiah Berlin articulated at the beginning of part one, still reverberate. But his attempt to impose a social system that he believed reflected those concepts was a failure that colored the interpretation of everything else he wrote. Despite continued interest in positivism among New York progressives, as a social system the United States wasn't open to utopianism or a

liturgy based on Catholic practice; and the overall structure of his imagined society restricted personal freedom for a country that jealously guarded it (Hawkins 1938, pp. 215–25).

Comte's work did help create what David Hollinger called communities of discourse. In a post-Civil War society that was experiencing rapid advances in industrialization and the social and natural sciences, and confronting the broader social effects of the War, including evangelicalism and agnosticism, attacking positivism became a convenient avenue for addressing anxieties arising from modernity. But Comte also inspired many Boston-area intellectuals, who often used positivist language and reasoning even while opposing his complete structure, to undertake their own large-scale works on the relationship among philosophy, theology, and science. Indeed, there exists a vast amount of writings by FRA and Radical Club authors on these subjects; the current study merely skims the surface of their early expressions. And in these oppositional ventures, they moved their community closer to the pragmatism that would soon dominate American philosophical and social thought.

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Abbreviation

CE = The Christian Examiner

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