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Mixed Feelings: Stephen Colwell, Christian Sensibility, and the American State, 1841–61

ABSTRACT: Stephen Colwell argued that a high tariff could produce a moral political economy in an industrializing United States. He suggested that by providing industrial workers with wages higher than the international market would allow, the policy acted on Christian sensibility and its charge to protect the weak. Yet Colwell could not decide on exactly how the tariff would do so, and his struggle revealed complexity and tension within an important element of the American statebuilding project. He moved from a vision of a robust state protecting workers against predatory merchants to a definition of the tariff as an implement of a circumscribed, associative state that relied on manufacturers to act as its partners. Realizing that they might decline to protect workers by passing the tariff’s profits along as higher wages, he admitted that the state relied on industrialists’ goodwill to make the measure effective.

Stephen Colwell (1800–71) became wealthy as an ironmaker in antebellum Pennsylvania. Active in the Whig Party and Presbyterian Church (Old School), he wrote a series of articles and books in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War in which he asked evangelical Protestants to live by the Golden Rule: “love thy neighbor as thyself.” He told readers that their activities could help Christianity fulfill its rightful role as what he called “the appointed protector of humanity.”1 While Colwell urged them to take part in private charitable activities, he insisted that this work also included a political component: Christians might protect humanity by supporting the high tariff.2 Daniel Walker Howe has

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1 Stephen Colwell, Politics for American Christians: A Word upon Our Example as a Nation, Our Labour, Our Trade, Elections, Education, and Congressional Legislation (Philadelphia, 1852), 35.
2 Historians who discuss Colwell have often overlooked his protectionism while describing him as a moralist critic of market capitalism and early advocate of the Social Gospel, and those who note

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noted that many evangelical Whigs understood issues of public policy, including temperance, abolitionism, and the treatment of the insane and Native Americans, in broadly religious, humanitarian terms and as questions of personal morality and self-control. Other scholars have counted the tariff among this number. Colwell promoted the tariff in these terms, but in doing so he also addressed his own misgivings about the state’s role and efficacy in American society, developing two seemingly conflicting explanations of how the policy would protect vulnerable wage earners.

Colwell described the tariff as the solution to the emerging problem of industrial poverty from a perspective that brought evangelical Protestantism together with the Scottish Enlightenment’s emphasis on sensibility. Historians have discussed sensibility, in part, as a distaste for pain and suffering, accompanied by a feeling of benevolence or sympathy for the unfortunate in their sway. When expressed in actions, it often sought to ameliorate the cruel treatment of animals, children, the disabled, and the poor, largely through voluntary philanthropic activity. Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith promoted the belief that human beings naturally perceived and sought to relieve suffering and, as they were able to control their base passions, found pleasure in doing so. Nations marked by humane sentiments might call themselves progressive and civilized.


Theologians, increasingly describing God as a benevolent entity, echoed Ferguson and Smith’s vision of individuals’ innate capacity for sympathy and benevolence. Works of fiction often gave expression to sensibility in Colwell’s period. Literary critics have argued that many titles relied on authors and readers’ common understanding of a hierarchical social structure in which they defined themselves as independent and capable while describing the beneficiaries of sympathetic overtures as unable to defend themselves. In the words of one, sentimental charity and reform efforts often became “the sympathy of the empowered for the disempowered, the ‘strong’ for the ‘weak,’ the fully human for the dehumanized.” Overt sentimentalism could become an object of fun in early nineteenth-century Britain, but in the United States it thrived in the context of religious revivals and reform movements, providing, in the words of one historian, “much of the moral orientation of nineteenth-century middle class culture” in the United States.

The ironmaker built his case for the tariff on one of American protectionists’ fundamental propositions. By 1840 many had begun to argue that high duties afforded American workers higher wages than their European competitors. Many scholars’ accounts have documented how such protectionists as Henry C. Carey went on to argue that tariff-enhanced wages allowed free laborers to accumulate capital and exercise social mobility: Abraham Lincoln’s well-known “right to rise.” Colwell arrived at a very different conclusion, telling his readers that industrial workers should not expect to experience social mobility. Tariff-supported high wages would prevent them from sliding into a condition of absolute poverty and the


suffering that it brought, but they would remain a permanent class of wage earners.

A trip to the United Kingdom in the late 1830s inspired Colwell’s protectionist appeal. He saw for himself the dreadful conditions in which many British workers labored and lived. Returning to the United States, he knew that declining American tariffs exposed his own manufacturing interests to competition from these workers’ employers. In order to meet this challenge, American manufacturers might reduce their workers to the condition of those in Britain or become uncompetitive in the international marketplace. To make matters worse, free trade advocates in Britain and the United States had seemingly secured the moral high ground by describing their policy as a Christian expression of peace and goodwill while deriding the tariff as unadulterated selfishness. With these concerns in mind, Colwell used the sentimental language of the weak and the strong to develop a protectionist argument for prosperous northern evangelical Protestants like himself, who stood to benefit from a tariff promoting American industrial development but also believed themselves humane.

American protectionism already rested on a discussion of strength and weakness in the international realm. It often described an industrialized Great Britain as strong and the United States and its manufacturers as relatively weak. Superior capital and technological know-how allowed British industrialists to undersell Americans in the marketplace, and an unrestricted international trade threatened to spread their dangerous variety of industrialism to the United States. Colwell built on this by describing an unregulated national marketplace and society as a lawless state, a realm in which some economically and politically strong individuals’ uncontrolled passions subjected the weak to the type of suffering he had observed in the United Kingdom. In this light, laissez-faire political economy and the policy of free trade became expressions of insensibility and even cruelty. Colwell told his readers that if they would support the tariff in the realm of electoral politics, they might show themselves to be another species of the strong, possessed of Christian sensibility, who used state policy to protect the weak among them. A vote for the tariff was an expression of personal morality.

11 Francis Lieber, Some Truths Worth Remembering, Given, as a Recapitulation, in a Farewell Lecture to the Class of Political Economy of 1849 (n.p., 1849), 6; cf. Davenport, 79.

12 In this regard, Colwell’s protectionist appeal represented an example of what historians have often described as the middle and upper classes’ tendency to perceive their actions to promote their
Colwell’s adopted hometown of Philadelphia influenced his work in two important ways. He wrote in what was then the nation’s most Presbyterian city and the hub of the denomination’s intellectual life. In 1837, more than twenty Presbyterian congregations made their homes in the Philadelphia metropolitan area, as did the church’s General Assembly and Board of Publication. In that year, the Presbytery of Philadelphia’s prominence became clear when its adjudication of the doctrinal controversy between Old School and New School factions divided the national church. Philadelphia also became the United States’ center of protectionist politics in this period. As New York City took the lead in the nation’s financial and commercial life, Philadelphia emerged as its preeminent manufacturing community. Prominent in the city since the early republic, Colwell’s iron industry served as a hothouse for high-tariff views. It experienced periods of rapid growth and decline, which local ironmasters overwhelmingly attributed to the presence—or absence—of high duties. Other local industrialists, including manufacturers of textiles and proprietors of nearby anthracite coal mines, who sold a large volume of their product to ironmakers, became vigorous tariff proponents as well. One

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own material interests as enlightened or humane. Many have described this as a process of self-deception or self-evasion in this period. See William Muraskin, “The Social-Control Theory in American History: A Critique,” Journal of Social History 9 (1976): 559–69. Muraskin quotes Arnold Hauser, who saw ideology as “self-deception—never simply lies and deceit. It obscures truth in order not so much to mislead others as to maintain and increase the self-confidence of those who express and benefit from such deception” (566). See also Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women (New Haven, CT, 1982), xiv, for a historical discussion of self-deception or self-evasion; Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York, 1976), 12, also emphasizes self-evasion. David Brion Davis explores this tendency in regard to British abolitionism in The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823 (Ithaca, NY, 1975), 354–55, 466. Colwell expanded on this ideological dynamic in an attempt to produce political support for a federal policy.


observer reported that the issue had become “irresistible” in Philadelphia by 1844, and in many cases even candidates for the lowliest of local offices ardently proclaimed their devotion to protection.19

Colwell’s protectionism made him what two political scientists have recently recognized as a type of state builder, situated outside the federal government itself, concerned principally with constructing “emotional appeals and ideological frames” for expanded federal activity.20 In addition to promoting the tariff as an expression of humane Christian sentiments, Colwell’s argument sought to situate the policy between laissez-faire and European socialism, and he engaged in a protracted attempt to imagine and describe just what type of state the tariff symbolized. In one voice, he concluded that a robust federal government would use the policy to protect the weak against the strong in American society. The tariff’s guarantee of higher wages would make sure that American employers did not follow their British competitors in pushing workers’ remuneration to the bare minimum. Deciding that this proposition ran afoul of his own desire for limited government, as well as his faith’s emphasis on individual action, he returned to the idea that the measure enabled the strong themselves to protect the weak. This required Colwell to distinguish between two varieties of what he identified as the strong members of society: rapacious merchants who advocated free trade and manufacturers like himself, who sought a high tariff. He never acknowledged the irony apparent in identifying the same manufacturers whom he described as weak in the face of British competition as possessing strength that made them responsible for vulnerable workers. As the tariff promoted manufacturers’ stability and success by shielding them from foreign competition, he reasoned, it enabled them to pay wages that delivered their workers from poverty. Colwell came to call this arrangement “social economy,” in contrast to political economy’s adamantly individualist outlook.21 Colwell clearly identified his own interests, and those of his fellow Philadelphia manufacturers, with the cause of humanity, but he was intellectually honest enough that he eventually

19 Ibid., 160, 218.
21 Colwell, Politics for American Christians, 34.
found himself unable to believe that the tariff would in fact provide workers with higher wages than the market would ordinarily allow. Sensing that protected manufacturers might well choose to keep the policy’s implicit subsidy for themselves by letting the market set wage rates, he turned his rhetorical skills to the task of persuading them to pay workers enough to maintain what he described as a Christian civilization. Setting aside his fellow protectionists’ faith that a tariff-protected economy automatically produced progressively higher wages, Colwell made the policy’s ability to protect vulnerable workers contingent upon individual manufacturers’ personal self-control.22

Colwell’s protectionism represented a variety of a sentimental political vision that, according to Elizabeth B. Clark, called on the state “to provide special safeguards for the downtrodden” in this period.23 While Clark examined abolitionists’ use of this argument to bring the federal government to the aid of slaves, Susan Pearson has explored how reformers used sensibility to develop special protections for animals and children.24 Yet Colwell’s ideology differed from these in one crucial respect. Abolitionists and advocates of child and animal protection often mixed sentimental language with calls to recognize suffering people’s or creatures’ rights, but Colwell instead emphasized more privileged and accomplished Americans’ Christian duty to assist industrial workers. Colwell’s call to support the tariff thus encouraged his readers to perceive federal action to benefit industrial wage workers not as an autonomous state’s act of justice, but rather as a result of their own rectitude and, in many cases, the administration of their own businesses.

Like Pearson’s reformers, Colwell came to use sentimental language and beliefs to describe the tariff as the work of a circumscribed American

22 Colwell’s personal appeal to businessmen was not unreasonable in his context. Although corporate enterprise had begun to emerge in the antebellum American economy, Colwell’s native Philadelphia remained a stronghold of proprietary capitalism, in which individuals or families often found success administering small to medium-sized manufacturing concerns, especially in the textile industries (see Scranton, Proprietary Capitalism). For additional examples of proprietary enterprise in Philadelphia and a number of other cities located in the mid-Atlantic and New England regions in this period, see Walter Licht, Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century (Baltimore, 1995).


state.  

His case shows that even a prominent advocate of federal intervention in the American political economy ultimately criticized and rejected his own argument for enabling an overly assertive government. In this light, he presented a more palatable alternative in terms that several scholars have used to discuss a nineteenth-century "associative" state that often used private organizations, including business concerns, to extend its reach and influence. However, as Colwell realized that the tariff would not likely provide the federal government with increased capacity for addressing the problem of industrial wage labor, he foreshadowed a recent critique of the notion that these public-private partnerships demonstrated the American state's hidden strength. A state relying on private business concerns to do its will left itself open to the likelihood that its partners would turn the arrangement to their own advantage, at the expense of the policy's ostensible goals.

An Ironmaster Abroad

In the decades before the Civil War, Stephen Colwell became one of Philadelphia's leading manufacturers, churchmen, and philanthropists. Born in Brooke County, Virginia (now West Virginia), in 1800, he grad-

25 Pearson has gone on to show that animal and child advocates expanded government power under the auspices of such private organizations as anticruelty societies, allowing Americans to continue to believe that, even in the context of increased state activity, "they remained a people committed to liberty and voluntarism above all else." See Pearson, _The Rights of the Defenseless_ (2011), 19–20.

26 The term "associative" stems from Ellis Hawley's discussion of an associative state in twentieth-century America, in which secretary of commerce Herbert Hoover sought to bring private organizations like trade and professional associations into partnership with the federal government. See Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an 'Associative State,'" 1921–1928," _Journal of American History_ 61 (1974): 117. Brian Balogh has more recently explored the broader nineteenth-century origins of an associative political vision that originated in Americans' antistatist political culture and preference for a federal government that, while active, remained inconspicuous. In pursuing this strategy, early statebuilders often developed partnerships with nongovernmental organizations "instead of more overt, bureaucratic, and visible interventions into the political economy." See Balogh's _A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America_ (New York, 2009), 379. Balogh defines the tariff as a part of this general associative strategy in that it represented an inconspicuous means of collecting revenue, but he overlooks the degree to which protectionists like Colwell described private business firms as the federal government's partners in social policy (153). See also William J. Novak, "The Myth of the 'Weak' American State," _American Historical Review_ 113 (2008): 769–70; and Gary Gerstle, _Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government_ (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 108–18. Novak suggests that the period's partnerships between the federal government and private entities provide examples of a purportedly weak state's real capacity (769).

27 Gerstle, _Liberty and Coercion_, concludes that partnerships with private businesses undercut state policy goals as often as they helped to realize them (118).
uated from college, passed the bar, and practiced law in Steubenville, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before arriving in Philadelphia in 1836. There he married the daughter of a prominent ironmaker with works at Weymouth, New Jersey, and near Philadelphia at Conshohocken, Pennsylvania. After a period of service at the Weymouth facility, Colwell assumed control at Conshohocken, where he became a well-known member of the Pennsylvania ironmaking community. He later expanded his activities by founding Colwell and Co., devoted to the “casting of iron water mains of unusual size, which previously had to be imported from Scotland.”

A founding member of the American Iron Association in 1855, Colwell served as a director of the Camden and Atlantic, Pennsylvania Central, and Reading Railroads as well. He also assumed a leading lay role in the Presbyterian Church, where he served as president of the board of trustees of the church’s general assembly and as a member of the denomination’s board of education. In addition, Colwell provided financial support to the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton Theological Seminaries, on whose boards of trustees he also served. He bequeathed to the former institution his personal library of some six thousand books and pamphlets broadly related to the subject of political economy. At the latter institution, his posthumous gift founded the Stephen Colwell Chair in Christian Ethics.

Sometime shortly after his arrival in Philadelphia and marriage, Colwell embarked on a European tour with an eye toward gathering information about new techniques that might help the family firm. Upon his return to the United States, he published discussions of what he had seen overseas, but he ignored all technical and administrative issues of making iron. Instead, he focused on the society that he saw there. Colwell’s visit to Great Britain made the strongest impression on him by far. In a series of three articles published in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton

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Review in 1841 and 1842, he used his own observations to describe the social problems evident in that nation. Colwell acknowledged that many Americans perceived Britain’s industrial society to be the world’s most civilized but argued that behind this impression there lay the misery of the British working classes, which was evident “to those only who are willing to contemplate all that is dreadful in human suffering, all that is touching in human wretchedness, all that is loathsome in human degradation,” or, in a word, individuals possessed of sensibility.\(^3\)

Colwell described a scene in which fully half of the residents of Great Britain existed in abject poverty. He observed that in modern Britain, rural agricultural workers had been and were still being driven from the land into cities where, as potential industrial workers, they soon found themselves “entirely at the mercy of the manufacturer.”\(^3\) “Wailings of misery, cries of hunger, and deep murmurings of discontent” filled the air.\(^4\) British humanitarians’ efforts to improve the material conditions of the poor had largely failed, driving them to turn their attention overseas to Christian evangelism and the evils of slavery.\(^5\) Among the more fortunate classes, indifference to suffering, and even outright cruelty, took root. Colwell reported that these Britons widely regarded the poor not as fellow citizens or even human beings but as a nuisance to dispose of—or at least remove from sight. He concluded that the plight of the British working class “must fill the heart of any man open to the feelings of humanity” with “the most painful emotions” and “unutterable disgust.” Amazingly, such a state of affairs existed “in a Protestant country, in which all men are by law required to be religious, in the nineteenth century, when the light of revelation and the light of science is streaming abroad over the whole earth!”\(^6\)

Turning to a potential remedy for Britain’s failings, Colwell took pains to emphasize that men could not force themselves, by law or otherwise, into equality of possession. As long as human beings possessed differ-
ent mental and physical abilities, personal habits, and circumstances and selfishness informed the human heart, it remained an impossibility. At the same time, Colwell denounced the pronouncements of those political economists who condemned all government interference in matters pertaining to the distribution of wealth and the protection of industry and who asserted that such matters were better left to the market's workings. He proposed another path. Dismissing Malthus's dire vision, he maintained that Great Britain did not face a crisis of scarce resources: “It is the policy of the country which presses upon the poor.” In this context, “the poor, the unwary, the ignorant, [and] the unfortunate claim the interference of government,” in the form of laws “preventing them from being excluded from the benefits of the social system.”

Turning his discussion to the United States, Colwell warned Americans that Britain's social reality could soon be their future. The nation had already embarked on the course of industrialization that had produced so much misery in the United Kingdom. Aware that many remained fearful of industrialization's social costs, he carefully reminded his readers that he did not propose the abandonment of manufacturing in America. Rather, in a discussion of what the federal government should do with James Smithson’s unexpected, rather vague bequest, which eventually founded the Smithsonian Institution, Colwell proposed that appointed scholars provide American public men with a knowledge of history and politics that they might use to correct errors in their nation's legislation. A specific example quickly came to mind. Colwell took note of the German states’ commercial union, which promoted internal trade among its members while using tariffs to check foreign powers’ advances on their shared market.

The Position of Industry

Colwell returned to the tariff issue in 1849. No organization advising the federal government on trade policy had taken shape, so the manufacturer set out to make a case for protection himself. American tariff pro-

37 Ibid., 128.
40 Ibid., 114.
42 Ibid., 373–74, 401–2, 379.
ponents maneuvered in a political context marked by declining duties. Free trade advocates contended that the tariff represented rank self-interest and their own policy Christianity and civilization. John McVickar of Columbia College concluded that to forbid trade among nations was a very unwise thing, “but it is also a very wicked thing, for it is contrary to the will of GOD.” In 1831 the Virginian Thomas Dew insisted that international commerce served as the “parent of civilization,” and that merchants, in pursuing their interests, became the “civilizer(s) of the world.” Thus, free trade represented “the doctrine of Christianity and of enlightened philanthropy.”

Yet behind this brave face, American free traders faced a serious problem. Although leading British political economists recommended free trade as the only policy leading to economic growth, many forecast a future marked by increasing scarcity and diminishing returns, which would produce abject poverty for many individuals. Influential clerics within the Church of England advised that such inequality reflected God’s design and provided the afflicted with a blessing in disguise: an opportunity to improve themselves. Many American Christians found this vision unsettling, and McVickar and like-minded intellectuals sought to reconcile British political economy with their faith. They advised that the economic system that Adam Smith had described was so perfect in its organization and functions that it could only have been God’s plan. The United States’ geographical scope and abundant natural resources largely exempted it from British fears of scarcity and decline. Following the policy of free trade, the United States could become a high civilization marked by the greatest possible division of labor and creation of wealth. Studiously ignoring questions of individual ethics and morality, advocates of free trade defined its moral influence as its promotion of international comity and right action.

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48 Ibid., 98.
49 Ibid., 54, 56.
50 Ibid., 60, 82–83.
Colwell attacked free traders at their weakest points: the condition of the poor and free-trade advocates’ role in creating it. He described an unregulated marketplace as a dangerous realm, reminding his readers that they should understand that businessmen sought only to purchase as cheaply as possible, at the expense of producers, and sell as dearly as possible, to the detriment of their customers. If such “intense and grinding” selfishness ruled economic life, he observed, it only stood to reason that state policy should limit its grasp. Colwell quickly qualified his indictment of the market, however, singling out for particular censure the workings of international trade and its champions. Free traders, interpreting “the maxim that every thing is lawful in war” to mean that “every thing was lawful in trade,” only exacerbated the market’s excesses by encouraging speculation and overtrading. Seemingly civilized nations heeding their advice had given rise to “hosts of men, who, without mere scruple,” preyed upon the simple, the unsuspicious, the unwary, and the ignorant, and deprived them, remorselessly, of their meager means. “Thousands—nay, millions—are every few years crushed into beggary by the ruthless operations of trade,” he maintained.51

Colwell’s remarks broadly identified free trade beliefs and commerce itself as the handiwork of human beings utterly lacking in sympathy for others’ distress. “Without scruples,” “remorseless,” and “ruthless,” British manufacturers, American merchants, and other free traders believed and acted as they did because of their utter lack of sensibility or self-control. Much like men relied on their higher faculties to control their own base motives, he suggested, society relied on the state to regulate “that play of evil passions and principles” that emerged so readily in men facing the temptations of trade.52 Although this position seemingly called for the action of an energetic state, it also implied that market actors untouched by international commerce might be able to control their base passions, cultivate sensibility, and build a humane industrial order.

Colwell’s attacks on merchants suggested that he wrote as an industrialist addressing an audience largely made up of fellow manufacturers and those who supported their cause. He went on to make his position still clearer, arguing that “industry is the parent of commerce; the latter

but distributes what the former produces.” Nevertheless, industrialists like Colwell faced difficult prospects. At the same time that he described free trade and international commerce crushing workers into beggary, Colwell emphasized their dire consequences for American manufacturers and the relationship between the two phenomena. In an 1850 memorial to Congress, Colwell and his cosigners from a Philadelphia ironmasters’ convention asked “not for monopoly; [but] for that security against ruinous fluctuations . . . indispensable to the success of industry.” They explained that well-capitalized British manufacturers, who benefited from cheap labor (paid less than half of their American counterparts), created these fluctuations when they periodically released large quantities of iron on the market at extremely low prices in hopes of driving their American competitors from the field. Colwell noted that most American manufacturers produced a large amount of goods every year, obliging them to make frequent sales in order to meet their regular expenses. Few had capital sufficient to hold unsold product even a year; “their goods must go, be the price what it may.” In this context, international competition led American manufacturers to contribute to their workers’ misfortune by cutting wages. The memorial’s signers noted that “humanity protests against the whole scheme, as a step backwards, and as shocking to the Christian spirit of the age.”

Amid these debates, a number of American protectionists identified manufacturing as a pillar of social welfare. In response to early fears that the introduction of industry in America would bring poverty and political upheaval, the prominent Whig politician Edward Everett in 1830 concluded that the investors building textile mills at Lowell, Massachusetts (under an earlier regime of higher tariffs), had foreseen industrialism’s dangers and corrected for them. To Everett, Lowell represented the rise of a “progressive Christian civilization.” Another author, writing six years later, saluted the rise of “the moral manufacturer” and noted “the present happy condition of the manufacturing districts.” A third tariff proponent

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53 Ibid., 4.
55 Colwell, Some Aid to a Clear Perception, 24.
58 George S. White, Memoir of Samuel Slater, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1836), 113, 120.
in 1850 declared that “industry is the living fountain of welfare, public and private.”

Colwell agreed, and in this light he described how the tariff might promote wage workers’ well-being. He argued that “the labor of the people should be the care of the State,” by which he meant the federal government, but he laid out a decidedly associative vision of that government’s workings. Because industry provided a large portion of the population with a means of earning a living, “the arm of the law should be thrown round the scene of this effort for mutual happiness.” Tariff-protected manufacturers would pay the high wages that firms facing withering foreign competition could not: “That policy must be best, which most promotes the comfort and happiness of the mass of the people—and those ends are best secured by that policy which furnishes labor to all, and a regular market.”

Ultimately, Colwell placed his protectionist appeal in a broader context. Although he did not directly invoke Everett’s concept of a progressive civilization built on manufacturing, he made his purpose clear when he noted that with the rise of the tariff overseas, “Industry has raised her head, and has secured acknowledgment as a separate and important interest in the world; as the proper patron of commerce; as the only adequate guarantee of independence, comfort, and social well-being... The advantages of this policy have been so appreciated by the people of modern times,” he concluded triumphantly, “that they can never be driven back to the customs and privations of the dark ages.”

An Age of Mercy

In 1851 Colwell turned his immediate focus to an explicitly Christian assessment of the growing humanitarian problems of industrial labor that he had first introduced in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review. Originally published anonymously, New Themes for the Protestant Clergy produced a sensation in northern evangelical Protestant circles perhaps best understood by a review of its subtitle: “Creeds without Charity; Theology without Humanity; and Protestantism without Christianity.”

59 Willard Phillips, Propositions Concerning Protection and Free Trade (Boston, 1850), 5.
60 Colwell, Some Aid to a Clear Perception, iii, 20, 30.
the American clergy’s inattention to poverty and suffering in their midst in blunt terms, the work quickly provoked a response. Offended ministers and their supporters produced a volley of criticism and abuse, and Colwell’s identity as the work’s author soon became known. Some called him an unbeliever, others a socialist.\footnote{Samuel A. Allibone, \textit{New Themes Condemned: or, Thirty Opinions upon “New Themes” and Its “Reviewer”} (Philadelphia, 1853), 69.}

Within his larger discussion of ministers’ failings, Colwell provided a conflicted vision of society and politics. He argued that in modern times at least two-thirds of the human race had “become more or less dependent on the other third,” who enjoyed greater talents or accidental advantages. In recent years, the rise of a market economy had often allowed this “happy third” not only to live upon the labor of their dependents but “at will to prey upon them, and reduce them to absolute or virtual servitude.”\footnote{Colwell, \textit{New Themes for the Protestant Clergy}, 270.}

Christians could not continue to ignore the matter of poverty without danger of being charged “as recreant to the cause of humanity.” He continued, “the world now believes that the religion, announced by the Author and Finisher of our faith, embraces HUMANITY as well as DIVINITY in its range.” Colwell chose first to review changing practices in the care of the insane to illustrate his point. Only a few years prior, well-intentioned people had committed grievous cruelties against the deranged. By the time he wrote, however, kindness had become the most-respected treatment for madness: “The age of cruelty is giving way to that of mercy.”\footnote{Ibid, xiii.} Industrial poverty likewise presented believers with an opportunity to respond to what Colwell dubbed “the Christian social problem.”\footnote{Ibid., 244.}

The manufacturer argued that Christians seeking to realize a state of social economy should practice charity, which he described as “the overflowing of kindly affections . . . which prompt us to fly uncalled to the help of the miserable.” It was still very unusual, he continued, “to find a soul so dead as to be insensible to kindness.”\footnote{Ibid., 134–35, 201.} Colwell made his appeal to an audience of his peers. “The rich man is not bound to divide his estate with his neighbor who may be in want,” he wrote, “for the poor man may be utterly incapable of managing property. He is bound to relieve him, to the extent that love may dictate, necessity require, and prudence prescribe.” Christianity would lead wealthy industrialists to aid the poor.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{63} Samuel A. Allibone, \textit{New Themes Condemned: or, Thirty Opinions upon “New Themes” and Its “Reviewer”} (Philadelphia, 1853), 69.\textsuperscript{64} Colwell, \textit{New Themes for the Protestant Clergy}, 270.\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, xiii.\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 244.\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 134–35, 201.}
“The Christian scheme is to regenerate the man,” he concluded, “to inspire him with new tastes, new feelings, new aims, and, by making better men change the oppressor into the benefactor.”

Colwell then returned to matters of state policy. He began by again denouncing free trade as benefiting American merchants, thus giving a small group of men large power, “which it would be contrary to all our knowledge of human nature if they do not fatally abuse.” He then carefully linked the tariff to humanitarian Christianity. Reminding his readers of conditions in free-trade Great Britain, he explained that the nation’s “wicked neglect of the poor” was no accident. Rather, the state kept millions in utter poverty and dependence so that British manufacturers might produce goods at prices low enough to command markets around the world. Worse yet, clergymen and intellectuals had constructed “a system of philosophy” specifically admonishing Christians to resist the urge to help the poor. Deep within the work’s notes, Colwell challenged Herbert Spencer’s argument against the relief of poverty. Spencer, he wrote, presented “the man of power and the man without; the man of wealth and the pauper,” proposing that each should enjoy “the most perfect liberty consistent with their not touching each other. . . . Its principle is the least possible restriction, the fewest possible enactments; the weak must be left to their weakness, the strong must be trusted with their strength, and unprotected man must not look for favor, and government must resolve itself into the lowest possible agent of nonintervention.” By contrast, American Christians should raise the poor from what he called the “political degradation” of their nation’s present low-tariff policy by rejecting both free trade and its intellectual supports. Without mentioning the tariff in so many words, he concluded that “the amelioration sought implies neither revolution, bloodshed, nor robbery: it demands adequate remuneration for labour: it implies that the bones and sinews of the people must not be sacrificed to that infatuation for foreign commerce which subjects them to the competition of the whole world.”

Colwell’s oblique allusion to the tariff escaped some readers. A review of New Themes published in the New Englander and Yale Review rued “the

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68 Ibid., 172, 250–51.
69 Ibid., 242, 370–71, 168.
70 Ibid., 149.
71 Ibid., 150.
72 Ibid., 370–71.
73 Ibid., 168.
vagueness and indefiniteness of its recommendations. . . . We cannot tell what our author would have Christians do.”

Still, it found at least one receptive ear among the ministers whom *New Themes* addressed. Reverend William Henry Ruffner of Philadelphia served as Colwell’s great champion during the controversy that followed the work’s publication. He also reiterated the ironmaker’s call to improve the well-being of the poor through private charity as well as a Christian politics producing “legislation which will secure to the great multitudes of workers employment at just and remunerative wages.” Occupying a pulpit in a city that devoted a sizeable portion of its public life to tariff matters, Ruffner immediately recognized Colwell’s reference to the policy.

*Protectors of Humanity*

For the remainder of the 1850s, Colwell attempted to assemble his several arguments into a single protectionist appeal. *New Themes for the Protestant Clergy* had emphasized American evangelical Protestants’ duty to relieve the poor and suggested that the tariff provided an opportunity to do so. The work had made Colwell’s hierarchical view of society explicit, effectively narrowing his intended audience to more prosperous Christians. It had also adopted a new language for describing the rich and the poor. Although Colwell had regularly described those not finding material well-being from an industrial market economy as the unfortunate and the simple, *New Themes* referred to them as the weak and the more prosperous as the strong.

In 1852’s *Politics for American Christians*, Colwell again urged his readers to apply their faith to politics. If Christianity regenerated the man, it left the man “to regenerate the State.” “No Christian can rightfully separate his religion from his politics, [or] from his business” he reasoned.

Although Christian morality represented “the real basis of our civilization,” it had yet to exert its full influence on American political and social institutions, “that these in their turn may exert their full power in promoting the highest interests of humanity.”

77 Ibid., iii.
78 Ibid., 42, 36.
the “the multitudes who are least able to protect themselves,” the industri-alist maintained that Christians could protect humanity most effectively “by well-directed efforts to assure to the laborer the due reward of his labor.”79 Colwell struggled to describe how the tariff would protect vulnerable workers. In a remarkable passage, he juxtaposed two quite different conceptions of the measure as a Christian public policy. Beginning on familiar ground, he reminded his readers that a sympathetic Christian surveying the laboring masses understood that men possessed unequal talents of mind and body. He continued, arguing that the Christian therefore “rejoices to see them united in communities or nations, that the weak may be protected against the strong, and the simple against the cunning.” He then pivoted to provide another description of protecting the weak, noting that, “in the race of life many must fall behind. If these are not upheld and carried onward by their stronger associates, they must sink under the burdens of life.”80

Colwell’s confusing assertions reflected his two larger lines of reasoning on behalf of the tariff. The first strand of Politics for American Christians’ argument reiterated his earlier vision of a marketplace characterized by employers’ singular self-interest, mitigated only by the tariff and the resulting higher wages. In enacting this policy, the state properly intervened between employers and their workers. To expose “the poor laborer to the unchecked hand of the merchant or manufacturer is to abandon him, . . . to give him up unprotected to those whose interest it is to oppress and enslave” him, he concluded.81

Colwell’s second argument suggested that the strong should protect the weak without state intervention. But if the stronger parties in American society had shown themselves to be a predatory force, how could he expect them to protect the individuals and groups that they also victimized? Clearly, Colwell wished to convey a more complex meaning than his choice of words allowed. In subsequent pages, he immediately referred to the distinction he had already drawn between two groups inhabiting society’s “happy third”: manufacturers and merchants. Offering no further discussion of any woe caused by rapacious manufacturers’ unchecked hands, he identified merchants as all producers’ chief oppressors. Free trade theorists assumed that if international commerce developed with no taxes, duties,
or restraints, American merchants “would be all-sufficient friends of the producers,” he observed. “But as merchants make their gains by charging their own price” for their goods, he continued, “they are the very parties to whom the interests of labor should not be entrusted.”

If merchants represented a predatory element among society’s stronger classes, manufacturers could do much good and serve as the federal government’s partners in social policy. A tariff making British manufactured goods uncompetitive in the American market would raise workers’ wages by insuring “a fair field for industry and enterprise.”

Colwell’s argument gave his readers several reasons to throw their political support behind the tariff. He suggested that although industrialization had apparently caused poverty among wage laborers in the United States, its architects and beneficiaries were not to blame. Because a powerful Great Britain and the American merchants abetting it bore responsibility, American protectionists could solve matters of industrial poverty by supporting a policy that in many cases promoted their material interests. Colwell also assured his readers that the masses benefiting from the policy’s high wages would feel that they had become “the chosen objects of Christian care.” Sure that they had brought the poor to feel Christian sympathy, the tariff’s prosperous proponents could rest assured that they had met their faith’s responsibilities in the political realm. They could look toward the future with confidence that their sympathetic religious beliefs and actions would restrain and guide American industrial capitalism toward a humane, Christian maturity.

**Oppressors and Benefactors**

Colwell offered his final discussion of the tariff as an instrument of evangelical Christians’ humane sentiments with *The Claims of Labor and Their Precedence to the Claims of Free Trade* (1861). In it, he assailed *laissez-faire* and unrestricted international commerce in broad terms: “Unrestrained liberty is the principle of savage life; that of civilized life is the due restraint of individual freedom. The principle of liberty pushed too far in reference to the institutions of civilization dissolves the whole fabric

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82 Ibid., 27.
83 Ibid., 24.
85 Stephen Colwell, *The Claims of Labor and Their Precedence to the Claims of Free Trade* (Philadelphia, 1861), 39, 13, 47.
and carries people back to barbarism.” Yet it remained difficult to explain how, specifically, the tariff represented the will of a humane Christianity. He wrestled with the paradox of his two seemingly conflicting arguments for how a federal government informed by Christian faith might protect the weak. In one voice he maintained that the tariff represented the intervention of a robust state, suggesting that “in the same way that men in society must be protected from each other; the various classes must also be protected from each other.” The state, he reiterated, must use the tariff “to intervene between the employer and his dependent as in any case of justice between man and man.”

At the same time, Colwell developed his second line of argument more fully. If tariff protection turned away from laissez-faire, it would also stand in sharp contrast to the efforts of “Socialists, Communists, Utopists or enthusiasts” whose false speculations had failed to solve the great problems of labor and cast discredit on other efforts to do so. In this voice he argued that the state’s activities promoting the well-being of laborers “must be . . . in the circle within which its special authority is effectual.” The enduring settlement of the labor question belonged to the domain of morality and Christianity as much as that of government. In this vein, Colwell produced a description of associative political-economic arrangements that he by this point called “social industry,” which did “more to quicken the movements of industry and fill the channels of commerce than all the theories of wealth, or money, or commerce, of political economy.” “No Government can employ any considerable proportion of its population,” he reasoned, “but every Government can be careful to open and extend the avenues of industry. It may not enter upon, but it can point out and promote the career of labor!”

Although the mention of abundance perhaps hinted at a life of upward mobility for American workers, Colwell quickly put that idea to rest. American industrial laborers would remain a wage-earning class. “The masses who labor under established social and political arrangements, are like horses saddled and bridled or harnessed for work,” he argued. The employer required a bridle as well. Only Christianity, acting upon human wisdom, affection, and institutions, taught of mutual responsibilities. As

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86 Ibid., 39.
87 Ibid., 13, 47.
88 Ibid., 12, 4, 5.
89 Ibid., 51.
industry and civilization developed, Americans faced an unavoidable obligation “to develop the bearing of Christianity upon the new order of things, and the new relations which spring up.” As a case in point, tariff-protected manufacturers would conduct their businesses so as to place workers “under Christian safeguards, under the protection of the great law of Christian charity.”

The manufacturer built both of his models of how the tariff would protect the weak on the assumption that the policy provided workers with higher wages. But as he used The Claims of Labor to examine how the policy facilitated the rise of social industry, he became less sure of his central premise. Having called upon tariff-protected manufacturers to set employees’ wages on the principle of charity, Colwell pointedly worried that they might fail to do so, and he asked other Americans to hold them to their implicit responsibility. He noted, “this appeal is not only made to all employers as to a question of wages between them and their laborers, it is made to all men of power, wealth, wisdom and intelligence, to urge upon them their responsibilities in reference to the compensation which is due to those who give the toil of their lives to the benefit of society.”

If Colwell’s first vision of the tariff protecting the weak against the strong relied on a strong state to control dangerous parties, his second understanding of the policy counted on manufacturers’ self-control. If protected manufacturers might choose to keep the bounty produced in the absence of foreign competition for themselves, then only Christian employers truly embracing their social responsibility would provide workers with high wages. Social industry’s fate ultimately relied on the same uncertain dynamic of intensive persuasion and Christian conversion that informed individuals’ voluntary charitable behavior, which Colwell had earlier described as making better men.

Colwell’s attempt to align the tariff with Christian sensibility reflected the religious controversy taking place within his denomination, which in turn illuminates his political concerns. In 1839 American Presbyterians divided themselves into two factions: Old School and New School. Members of the Old School confessed their belief in the traditional

\[^{90}\text{Ibid., } 23–24.\]
\[^{91}\text{Ibid., } 18.\]
\[^{92}\text{The economist Stephen Meardon has described this period’s discussion of the tariff as a religious controversy. Although he examines evangelical Protestants endorsing free trade, Meardon’s larger observation puts Stephen Colwell’s complex, seemingly contradictory, protectionism in its proper context. See Meardon, } \text{“From Religious Revivals to Tariff Rancor,” } 265–67.\]
Calvinist doctrine of human beings’ innate sinfulness, maintained that the Holy Spirit’s intervention played the preeminent role in securing an individual’s religious conversion, and largely opposed the period’s enthusiastic revivals and reform efforts, public and private. By contrast, New School Presbyterians understood religious conversion as an act of free will representing, in part, an individual’s progress from self-love toward loving one’s neighbor as oneself. They also founded and promoted new organizations devoted to proselytizing and benevolence, which charged the established Protestant church with ignoring the world’s miseries and published Christian literature of a decidedly humanitarian, sentimental flavor.

Colwell’s later work presented his two arguments for how the tariff might protect the weak in these theological terms, respectively. The Old School Presbyterian in him maintained that businessmen, who were innate sinners like everyone else, naturally took advantage of workers willing to accept low wages rather than starve and concluded that only an assertive state could prevent the misery sure to follow. Ultimately rejecting this argument, his second appeal acknowledged aspects of his own faith that had strayed beyond the boundaries of his native Old School orthodoxy: his humanitarian sensibility, his belief that Christians should promote sensibility in politics, and his hope that individuals could in fact choose their spiritual course in life. Colwell had long maintained that the tariff automatically produced high wages, but he came to realize that his associative argument for the measure relied on wealthy industrialists, including members of his reading public, to experience real progress from self-love toward loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Manufacturers would have to set aside their sinful natures in order to pay high wages. Unable to shake his worry that industrialists might in fact fail to do this, he admitted that the federal government could only protect the poor and weak if manufacturers acted as good Christians.

**Conclusion**

Eulogies following Colwell’s death in 1871 suggest that the manufacturer’s protectionist works found a considerable audience but only mixed persuasive success. Denominational publications noting the passing of a

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93 Balmer and Fitzmier, 47–49.
prominent layman and philanthropist acknowledged Colwell’s religious perspective on matters of trade policy but largely failed to recognize, much less endorse, his protectionism. The Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review, bearing the name of the seminary to which Colwell had advanced generous donations and on the board of directors of which he served, noted his death in its inaugural publication of January 1872. Reverend Charles A. Aiken, professor of divinity at the seminary, said no more about the tariff than to salute Colwell’s attempts to develop “a Christian Social Science,” while another contributor vaguely noted what Colwell “conceived to be Political Economy’s relations to Christianity.”

Leading tariff advocates, however, embraced Colwell’s appeal to Christian sensibility. Industrialist Henry C. Carey, who had invested part of his publishing fortune in Pennsylvania coal lands, echoed his deceased friend’s indictment of laissez-faire and free trade as “miserable selfishness.” Their tenets pointed “in the direction of giving increased power to the rich and strong, while throwing responsibility on the shoulders of the poor and weak.” The fortunate classes had too often rejected “the duties enjoined in the second table of the law, as it is summarized by the Great Teacher.” By contrast, Carey emphasized, Colwell’s humanitarian sympathies informed a call to imagine and support the tariff as a “system of philosophic benevolence,” a doctrine of “mercy . . . with a resulting economic policy of protection to productive industry, leading to the highest human welfare.” The Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers, speaking for another industry vulnerable to low-wage British competition, saluted the industrialist as the acknowledged head of the iron interests in Pennsylvania at the time of his protectionist writings but went on to conclude that “he investigated industrial questions, not in the light of interest, but in the light of philanthropy.”

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97 Carey, A Memoir of Stephen Colwell, 20.

98 Ibid., 19.

99 Ibid., 25.

This evidence, however limited, suggests that Colwell's rhetoric appealed to individuals already predisposed to favor the high tariff for reasons including economic interest. From his perspective, the assumption that the policy produced high wages rebutted free traders' contentions that it represented manufacturers' naked selfishness. Indeed, Christians supporting the tariff could tell themselves that they had taken action to address the growing problem of poverty among industrial wage workers. Tariff opponents usually responded by arguing that the measure did not actually produce higher wages that improved workers' living conditions, an objection that Colwell acknowledged in his detailed discussion of how, exactly, the state would use the tariff to protect the weak. Carey and his fellow advocates of high duties ignored Colwell's conflicted inner dialogue, however, and made his sentimental protectionism an ideology that could help them to understand their pursuit of economic self-interest in a positive moral light.

Colwell certainly provided Carey and other fellow protectionists with reason to understand his work in such terms. It represented a considerable departure from the appeals to free labor that many accounts of nineteenth-century protectionism have made familiar. While tariff proponents often argued that the high wages that the policy ostensibly fostered allowed white, male industrial wage workers to exercise social mobility, Colwell insisted that tariffs simply protected a permanent class against a descent into poverty. Although the manufacturer noted that poverty could result by accident or bad luck, his ideology ultimately grouped these workers with the slaves, children, and animals that other reformers identified as requiring state protection. These reformers' rhetoric in support of state activity mixed sentimental beliefs with liberal references to the rights of the downtrodden, but Colwell described the tariff as charity, and he went so far as to characterize his readers' advocacy of and votes for the measure as acts of mercy. In his argument, workers' rights mattered little. Indeed, he cast the policy as nothing so much as a discretionary expression of his readers' enlightened consciences, something that they should provide but might also retract at will. Promoting state activity, Colwell gave little weight to the role of the state itself.

Casting his two potential visions of a protective state in the sentimental language of the weak and the strong, Colwell produced accounts that relied on opposing conceptions of those occupying positions of strength. In the same work that he used to rehearse an argument defining successful
businessmen as marauding capitalists whom only the state could control, he decided that he could not abide an openly active state and sought to rehabilitate manufacturers by describing them as the federal government’s partners in securing workers’ well-being. As he pursued this second line of reasoning to its conclusion, Colwell flinched, however. He could not bring himself to believe that industrialists benefiting from the tariff would pay the high wages that he once suggested the policy automatically produced. Although the industrialist never unreservedly endorsed either of his potential visions of the state in the American political economy, the degree to which he agonized over the likelihood that manufacturers would in fact pay higher wages and the fact that he called on Christians to do so suggest that he strongly preferred the latter in the end.

By insisting that manufacturers who benefited from the tariff could use this state largesse to help address the plight of industrial wage workers, Colwell linked one of the nineteenth century’s most significant federal policies with a type of state-building activity that historians have recently described as extending the federal government’s reach and effectiveness by building partnerships with nongovernmental entities. Scholars have gone on to disagree about the extent to which such partnerships represented the activities of a strong state or those of a government seeking to circumvent an antistatist political culture in an ad hoc and often ineffective manner. When Colwell cast the tariff’s success or failure in addressing the social question as a matter of partner industrialists’ individual faith and morality, he perceived a state hobbled by human frailty. Even one of the associative state’s earliest advocates recognized that it resembled nothing so much as an arrangement that rose or fell on the goodwill of its partners.

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