

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “An Oppressive Insensibility”: Disestablishment, Clerical Infirmary, and the Origins of the Manual Labor Movement

Christopher J. Stokum

Independent Scholar  
Email: [cstokum@bu.edu](mailto:cstokum@bu.edu)

In the contested spiritual economy of the early nineteenth century, recently disestablished American clergymen consolidated themselves in theological seminaries. Members of the dominant New England Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministries, these seminarians organized a defensive front against itinerant, populist rivals by intensifying their curricula, proscribing physical exertion as a distraction from study, and shielding clerical students from popular influence. Yet critical voices from within the seminaries soon reported that unrelenting study damaged students' bodily health and alienated the clergy from a laity on whom their educational funding now depended. Accompanying such critiques were proposals for an alternative pedagogy that gained its fullest expression in the manual labor school, where physical vigor was enshrined as a complement to theological training and where barriers separating clergy from laity were minimized. By situating the infirmities that seminarians logged in memoirs and exposés alongside their efforts to reform the seminary system, this article argues that the graduate clergy mustered a coherent, forceful response to the crisis in spiritual leadership that disestablishment precipitated. The article presents clerical elites not as casualties of democratization or as agents of capital, but as self-aware and self-interested economic actors in the reordering of American religious authority after disestablishment.

**Keywords:** disestablishment; seminaries; manual labor; disease; markets; early American republic

Beside Noah Williston's writing desk there hung a shelf on which he cut his pipe tobacco down to size. By the time his nephew, Lyman Beecher, visited Williston's West Haven, Connecticut, farm in 1791, the elder preacher had nearly sawed the shelf in two. Williston was an ardent Congregationalist and an aging revolutionary who had once narrowly escaped being bayoneted when he fractured his leg vaulting over a wall with Hessian mercenaries in pursuit.<sup>1</sup> It evidently took nicotine's chemical goading to keep him seated at his desk. Whenever possible, he preferred to escape the sedentary labors of the ministerial office. Beecher's uncle preached twice on the

<sup>1</sup>Works Progress Administration Writers' Program, *History of West Haven, Connecticut* (West Haven, Conn.: Church Press, 1940), 69.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Society of Church History. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Sabbath, officiated funerals, issued quarterly sacramental lectures, and cultivated his fields. Among colonial ministers, such a blended work life would have been unexceptional.<sup>2</sup>

Lyman Beecher's days as a young preacher were of a more nineteenth-century sort. As a youth, he had discovered that he greater talent for building conceptual "castles in the air" than he had for tilling rows. He spent the summer of his sixteenth year marveling at his uncle's prodigious pipe smoking and then devoted the next seven years to preparation for the ministry. So much close study without the ballast of physical exercise—or tobacco, which never enthralled Beecher as it had his uncle—took its toll. While roving Connecticut and upstate New York as a circuit preacher in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Beecher frequented doctors in search of a cure for the "oppressive insensibility" that dulled his senses, darkened his moods, and inclined him to retreat from public life. "I feel very much like a *fool*," he confessed to his wife in 1810, "and if I were to go into company much at such times I presume I should act like one." None of the "eminent physician[s]" whom he visited in that age of medical superstitions and faddish cures agreed on the cause of his condition. Their prescriptions ranged from hot springs and induced vomiting to the avoidance of hot springs at all costs, stranding Beecher in a state of ministerial paralysis.<sup>3</sup>

This article investigates the linked transformations in occupational economy, ministerial education, and clerical-lay relations that separated Williston and Beecher. Despite their disagreements, Beecher's doctors agreed that his ailments had their origins in his seminary training, an intensive educative process that relatively few clergymen of Williston's pre-disestablishment generation had undertaken.<sup>4</sup> Between 1800 and 1840, the abolition of state patronage for established churches forced ministers to compete on an open spiritual marketplace for congregants and financial support. The previously established Protestant elite responded, in part, by founding more than fifty theological seminaries, obviating older, informal approaches to ministerial training and erecting defensive barriers to competition. Yet the expansion of the seminary system also unbridled Protestantism's most world-denying impulses. Seminarians seeking to "walk by faith, not by sight," as the apostle Paul had counselled, soon claimed that they were unable to see or walk, their eyes and legs the casualties of overstudy, neglect, and atrophy.<sup>5</sup> For Beecher's generation of aspiring ministers, the seminary system functioned as a centrifuge to separate the life of the mind from the labors of the body. Its architects dismissed the perceptible world as a base diversion of the unregenerate, and they doubted that knowledge of it might be meaningfully brought to bear on intellectual or spiritual pursuits. They deepened the Augustinian distinction between "heavenly things" and "earthly things," the

<sup>2</sup>Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher, Vol. I*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1864/1961), 21–22. Here and throughout, I use the terms 'preacher,' 'minister,' and 'clergyman' interchangeably—in part, to avoid wading into sectarian disagreement over the requirements for ordination, but more essentially, because the American clergy has never invited tidy classification. For a more detailed terminological discussion, see E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 2. For a wider survey of the economic activities of the typical colonial pastor, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1988), 31–32.

<sup>3</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography, Vol. I*, 17, 54, 189, 92; Elaine G. Breslaw, *Lotions, Potions, Pills, and Magic: Health Care in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 96–112.

<sup>4</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography, Vol. I*, 54, 92.

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Edwards was fond of citing the 2 Corinthians 5:7 advice to "walk by faith, not by sight" in his calls for congregants to dissociate the spiritual from the sensual portions of their being. See Jonathan Edwards, *True Saints, when Absent from the Body, are Present with the Lord* (s.l., 1747).

latter of which, John Calvin had once argued, were “of no avail for acquiring spiritual wisdom” and could therefore be discarded as so many needless diversions.<sup>6</sup>

Popular backlash to the graduate clergy’s aloofness was not long in coming. In the press, critics deplored the rise of a “bookworm class” that was “so wedded to abstract reflection, and [. . .] so little accustomed to be occupied or amused with the objects of the senses, that nothing but metaphysical truths and problems ha[d] power to fix [its] thoughts.”<sup>7</sup> Congregants freed from mandatory church taxes took their financial support to ministries that were less indifferent to lay life, producing a funding deficit for clerical education and salary in the previously established churches. Once a formidable institutional force in New England religious life, the graduate clergy’s grip on public religion appeared to be weakening.

Yet the ill health and funding gaps that nineteenth-century seminarians reported stoked a reactionary yearning for intense feeling and uninhibited action that prompted some theological students to overhaul the seminary system from within. Beecher was one among a frustrated cadre of young religionists who declined to treat the mind, body, and spirit as inherently separate or separable faculties. Instead, Beecher and his cohort regarded them as mutually constitutive components of what one contributor to the *Quarterly Christian Spectator* termed a “compound being—an assemblage of contiguous and related organs [. . .] as the brain, lungs, stomach, muscles, nerves, [and] organs of sense.”<sup>8</sup> No longer able to remain tucked behind their desks, ex-seminarians honed their spiritualized conception of the body through practical reforms that incorporated physical exertion and productive industry into ministerial training. After 1820, their haphazard reforms matured into fully fledged educational institutions: manual labor colleges, where theological training and physical exercise were systematically combined and where members of the working class were invited to learn and labor alongside the seminary elite.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, “sedentary disease”—dyspepsia, myopia, melancholy, numbness, and other maladies that were regularly attributed to the scholarly life—had beset bookish types at least since Plato, who warned in his *Timaeus* that “when the mind [. . .] applies itself too ardently to learning and research, it completely enervates and destroys the body.”<sup>10</sup> Still, the aches and pains of desk work impressed a subset of early nineteenth-century seminarians not as ordinary occupational hazards but as symptoms of a crisis in spiritual authority. The solution required bucking prominent theological seminaries, challenging denominational leadership, and erecting alternative institutions. Why some members of the graduate clergy should have so willingly estranged their peers remains mysterious so long as their changes of mind are

<sup>6</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, Book II*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960/2006), 272; John Calvin *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1957), 83.

<sup>7</sup>“Dyspeptic Hours: A Bookish Man,” *The Christian Spectator* 2 (June 1828), 297.

<sup>8</sup>“Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” *The Quarterly Christian Spectator* 5, no. 3. (Sept. 1833), 383.

<sup>9</sup>Ex-seminarians’ embrace of physical culture and traditional craft skill might be considered part of what Michael Newbury has called “a much broader cultural anxiety about the expansion of nonmanual work and material nonproductivity.” Michael Newbury, “Healthful Employment: Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Middle-Class Fitness,” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Dec. 1995), 681–714; Rebecca Noel, “‘No wonder they are sick, and die of study’: European fears for the scholarly body and health in New England schools before Horace Mann,” *Pedagogica Historica* 54, nos. 1/2 (Feb.–Apr. 2018), 134–154.

<sup>10</sup>Plato, *Timaeus* 87E–88.

analyzed apart from concurrent changes in clerical labor. Between Noah Williston's time in the pulpit and Lyman Beecher's battles with sedentary disease, the cancellation of state patronage for churches had made the previously established clergy materially dependent on public esteem—the patronage of the people, so to speak—precisely as seminaries' professional chauvinism and disdain for manual labor earned them popular disapproval.<sup>11</sup> More and more, market pressures forced members of the clergy to choose between the integrity of clerical training and their denominations' financial sustainability.

The “oppressive insensibility” that Beecher and others endured therefore carried both literal and figurative meanings. While like-minded seminarians complained, at times, of a straightforward deterioration of vision and sensation through neglect and misuse, they were also vexed by the graduate clergy's detachment from public life. These ministers' “insensibility” to the texture of lay experience threatened to be “oppressive” in the strictest sense: it would drive them down from a position of relative autonomy into the general population of working Americans. By placing mind and body on equal footing and imitating lay habits and manners, the seminaries' internal critics sought to relax the strained relationship between the educated clergy and the untutored laity, thereby reinforcing the graduate clergy's financial base. Moreover, by mobilizing the labor power of penurious students on behalf of the previously established clergy, the manual labor movement furnished learned ministers with a durable basis of institutional support that extended far into a hinterland that had fallen under the influence of their itinerant, populist competitors.

This article situates the graduate clergy's panic over the reported epidemic of sedentary disease and their efforts to craft more healthful and popular alternatives in the context of dislocations to the early nineteenth-century religious economy. By adding labor to timeworn narratives of religious history, it acknowledges, as Shari Rabin has observed, that “ministers not only serve and struggle on behalf of workers: they *are* workers.”<sup>12</sup> In presenting disestablishment and the subsequent controversies over clerical education as formative moments in the creation of a new category of economic actors—the formerly established, now competitive clergy—we arrive at an interpretation of the early nineteenth-century post-Puritan clergy that acknowledges their reformist and institution-building campaigns to preserve traditional structures of authority.

---

<sup>11</sup>Literary historians have recently returned to the topic of literary patronage to better understand how fluctuations in authors' sources of financial support can apply or loosen constraints on their professional output. Such studies provide a useful template to the historian analyzing similar dynamics in religious economies. See Paul J. Korshin, “Types of Eighteenth-Century Literary Patronage,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1974), 453–473; Dustin Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650–1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); and David Dowling, *Capital Letters: Authorship in the Antebellum Literary Marketplace* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>Shari Rabin, “Working Jews: *Hazanim* and the Labor of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Religion and American Culture* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2015), 179. Scholarship that confronts the interaction of religion and capitalism includes Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); Rebecca Kobrin, ed., *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Robert Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Mark A. Noll, ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

One twice-told story of antebellum Protestantism casts formerly established churches as institutions under siege by a democratic vanguard—an incursion, it has been argued, that resulted in the decline of post-Puritanism and the consolidation of evangelical populism.<sup>13</sup> More recent scholarship has complicated this picture by piecing back together the administrative systems and organizing bodies that restricted access to authority even within the populist faiths, while other work has highlighted the inertial presence of Congregationalist and Presbyterian hegemony long after the purported populist revolt.<sup>14</sup> This article extends the case for enduring post-Puritan hegemony by underscoring the active role that Congregationalist and Presbyterian seminarians took in pinpointing their own vulnerabilities, developing correctives, and thereby maintaining ascendancy. It locates crucial agitators within the ranks of the disestablished churches—internal reformers whose egalitarian overtures and critiques of theological training did not so much undermine as stabilize the elite graduate clergy’s overall position in a period when clergymen could no longer afford to keep separate from their congregations.

### I. The Seminary System and “the Art of Sitting Still”

Before the construction of the seminary system, a delicate compromise had balanced Protestant skepticism regarding the somatic facets of religious experience against the practical demands of the ministerial office. Martin Luther had admonished his followers to “let go of everything that the eyes and sense might present,” and the New England divine Jonathan Edwards warned in 1738 that the “mass of flesh and blood” housing the earth-dwelling spirit introduced sundry “clogs and hindrances” through the senses and blocked the human being from gaining admission to the realm of the spirit.<sup>15</sup> In practice, however, Protestants’ asceticism was milder than their rhetoric. Tasked with ministering to a laity that was embodied and sensual by nature—and saddled, as they were, with sensate bodies of their own—most Protestant clergymen contented themselves with instrumentalizing sensation in the service of a spiritual agenda. John Calvin noted that the tongue and mouth were perfectly formed to sing God’s praises, and Melancthon made a habit of attending human dissections at the University of Wittenberg on a hunch that a record of former spiritual states would be imprinted upon the cadaver’s organs like growth rings in a tree.<sup>16</sup> In British North America, the clergy forged a similar synthesis of this- and otherworldliness. Congregations

<sup>13</sup>Kyle T. Bulthuis, *Four Steeples Over the City Streets: Religion and Society in New York’s Early Republic Congregations* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 77, 97–99; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 137–138; and Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness Against Sin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 16–17.

<sup>14</sup>Shelby M. Balik, *Rally the Scattered Believers: Northern New England’s Religious Geography* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 2–10; Jon Butler, “Why Revolutionary America Wasn’t ‘A Christian Nation,’” *Religion and the New Republic* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 189–190.

<sup>15</sup>Luther trans. and quoted in Jacob M. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief and Practice in Germany* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 106; Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Living in the Light of God’s Love* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1738/1852), 489.

<sup>16</sup>Charles H. Parker, “Diseased Bodies, Defiled Souls: Corporeality and Religious Difference in the Reformation,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (Winter 2015), 1271–1272.

remained wary of “hireling priests”: religious freelancers for whom the pulpit and the paycheck were their only links to the surrounding parish. Most congregations preferred a minister who would not only deliver sermons but also run a farm, practice a trade, or maintain some other material stake in the community that he served.<sup>17</sup> For ministers like Noah Williston, “farmer’s life and farmer’s fare” broke up the monotony of intellection while also thickening the bonds of trust between the clergy and the laity.<sup>18</sup> Through the end of the eighteenth century, the Protestant clergy generally regarded the body as an unavoidable locus of religious experience that, when kept in check, might furnish valuable clues about an individual’s spiritual disposition and ingratiate the cultivated cleric with the average layperson.<sup>19</sup>

In the United States, disestablishment revealed the extent to which some Protestant clergymen’s willingness to roll up their sleeves and labor alongside the laity rested on the reassurance of state patronage. As state by American state withdrew funding from its dominant churches in the years following national independence, formerly established ministers began to regard their worldly attachments as professional liabilities. Subsistence farms that had once anchored ministers in communities now seemed to erode the distinction between the laity and the ministers, who could no longer derive their authority from state favor. Although national territorial expansion and westward migration increased gross demand for clergymen, the previously established churches were at a sharp disadvantage in contests over frontier pulpits. Congregationalists and Presbyterians struggled to explain why the laity should continue to sponsor seminary students rather than entrusting their souls to the Methodist or Baptist ministries, which did not require their clergymen to undertake costly college training. By snapping the lines of patronage that had suspended established ministers above the colonial economic fray, disestablishment plunged the elite Protestant clergy into a roiling spiritual marketplace of competition and exchange that threatened their special occupational status.<sup>20</sup>

These clergymen were disheartened to learn that legal disestablishment was often accompanied by a vigorous anticlericalism. “It was a time of great depression and suffering,” Lyman Beecher later recalled. “The odium thrown upon the ministry was inconceivable.”<sup>21</sup> Formalist denominations experienced disestablishment and anticlericalism the most violently. The Congregationalist and Presbyterian clergy—uniformly white, male, and mostly hailing from the upper echelons of New England society—so accented church governance and ecclesiology that their denominational monikers

<sup>17</sup>Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 34, 76.

<sup>18</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, 38.

<sup>19</sup>In recent decades, some historians have noted that conventional analyses of Protestant views on materiality and sensuality uncritically reproduce certain pieces of Protestant propaganda. See Baum, *Reformation of the Senses*; Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Parker, “Diseased Bodies, Defiled Souls,” 1268–1273; and Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Penguin, 2016). On the matter of trust, both thick and thin, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 136–137.

<sup>20</sup>David F. Allmendinger, Jr., “The Strangeness of the American Education Society: Indigent Students and the New Charity, 1815–1840,” *History of Education Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1971), 4–6; Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 80–83; Carl H. Esbeck and Jonathan J. Den Hartog, eds. *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States, 1776–1833* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019), 15.

<sup>21</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, 344.

referenced their internal systems of organization. To maintain consistency in thought and exclusivity in religious leadership, they reserved ecclesiastical duties for a formally educated clergy that was expensive to train and prone to indifference and even frank hostility toward popular religious expressions. But disestablishment levied a heavy penalty for alienating the laity. Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers lost critical ground to the more affordable training, dynamic sermonizing, accommodating theology, and egalitarian ethos of the Methodist, Baptist, and Universalist traditions. Determined to uphold an unexpurgated theology, the formalists hemorrhaged confessors and, with them, funding for theological students.<sup>22</sup>

Soon, embattled clergymen could be heard calling for the creation of educational institutions that would “increas[e] the number of *learned* and *able* Defenders of the gospel of Christ” who would be equipped “to unlock the treasures of divine knowledge” while guarding the laity “against religious error”—such as, for instance, throwing odium upon the graduate ministry.<sup>23</sup> Benevolent organizations like the American Education Society (AES) convened to subsidize the cost of seminary training and take the shine off of Methodism, Baptism, and, as an agent for one charitable group summarized, all “the various ways which [were] open to young men, of getting into the ministry, without a regular course of classical study.”<sup>24</sup> Fearing that ministers would be absorbed into the commercial economy as yet another set of contenders in free-market bloodsport, the clergy erected a cloistered seminary system in which to gather their ranks while washing their hands of the outside world’s grittier preoccupations.

Andover Theological Seminary was among the first institutions to comprehensively respond to the reordered religious landscape, and it set the tone for many of the seminaries that would follow. Founded in 1808 by Congregationalists who were moved to act by the 1805 Unitarian “takeover” of Harvard, Andover was supposed to smooth Congregationalism’s hewn edges to prevent more splinter groups from further jeopardizing denominational unity. The seminary offered a full suite of theological training that encompassed ancient languages, exegetics, and church doctrine.<sup>25</sup> In his address at Andover’s opening ceremonies, Yale College President Timothy Dwight saluted the school for developing “a system of theological instruction more extended and complete than has been heretofore presented.”<sup>26</sup> Not to be outdone by their rivals, Harvard’s Unitarians established their own theological seminary in 1811. Presbyterians founded training academies at the College of New Jersey and New York City’s Auburn in 1812 and 1818, respectively. The Episcopal Church opened its General Seminary in New York in 1819, and, in 1825, Congregationalists saw fit to

<sup>22</sup>The distinction between formalist and anti-formalist denominations is made in Curtis D. Johnson, *Redeeming America: Evangelicals and the Road to Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 20–21; and Jay Riley Chase, *An Unpredictable Gospel, American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Esbeck and Hartog, eds. *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent*, 16.

<sup>23</sup>*The Constitution and Associate Statutes of the Theological Seminary at Andover* (Andover, MA: Flagg and Gould, 1817), 27.

<sup>24</sup>*Fourth Report of the Directors of the American Society for Educating Pious Youth for the Gospel Ministry* (Andover, MA: Flagg and Gould, 1819), 17.

<sup>25</sup>Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 25–27, 76; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>26</sup>Timothy Dwight, “Introductory Address,” *The Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine United* 1, no. 10 (Mar. 1809), 459.

found a second seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, to contain the spillover from Andover. By 1840, thirteen denominations operated more than fifty theological seminaries in seventeen states and the District of Columbia.<sup>27</sup> “So rapidly and unceasingly [advanced] the march of discovery,” remarked the Congregationalist Theodore Dwight Weld, “that one [had] to apply whip and spur to keep up with the times.”<sup>28</sup>

Whip and spur were not long in coming. A behavioral code—or what Samuel Miller, Princeton Theological Seminary’s chief intellectual architect, termed “a style of manners”—coalesced to help seminarians satisfy increasingly rigorous educational requirements.<sup>29</sup> Seasoned ministers penned and reissued etiquette manuals that transmitted to their younger colleagues “those manners which become the *Christian Gentleman*; which naturally flow from the meekness, gentleness, purity, and benevolence of our holy Religion.”<sup>30</sup> Students were advised to read with erect posture, to refrain from propping their feet up on their desks, and to practice self-control, dutifulness, and candor. Unremitting study was especially encouraged. John Mason’s *Student and Pastor* insisted that any more than six hours of sleep per night was a “luxury” and announced that “the business of a student is, to be so employed, as to be continually making some valuable accessions to his own intellectual furniture.”<sup>31</sup> Samuel Miller praised “the art of sitting still” and warned that, if his students “[would] not consent to apply [themselves] to the acquisition of knowledge, *laboriously, patiently, and indefatigably*, [then they would] never attain much.” He looked forward to a rising generation of scholars who were so “addicted to a sedentary employment” that they would read and write with “UNWEARIED INDUSTRY,” without requiring a crutch like Noah Williston’s tobacco or developing nervous tics as seemingly innocuous as fiddling with a drawer pull as they studied. Miller compiled a list of unbecoming habits: picking one’s teeth, cleaning one’s nails, coughing, laughing, yawning, slouching, combing one’s hair, clearing one’s throat, blowing one’s nose (and then examining the contents of one’s handkerchief), cracking one’s knuckles, tugging at one’s watch chain, placing one’s elbows on one’s desk. Each of the offending behaviors joined a physical dimension to otherwise intangible thought patterns and spiritual states. More than mere prudishness, Miller’s prohibition of autonomic stress responses was part and parcel with his and his colleagues’ desire to limit the presence of everyday “earthly things” in professional clerical training.<sup>32</sup>

Guides to the scholarly life were hardly the invention of nineteenth-century seminarians. Cotton Mather’s *Manuductio ad ministerium*, which had been a standby of ministerial training since its 1726 publication, included a punishing list of recommended readings and urged the clerical student to “place [him]self in the *Circumstances* of a *Dying Person*; [his] *Breath* failing, [his] *Throat* rattling, [his] *Eyes* with a dim Cloud, and [his] *Hands* with a damp Sweat upon them.” By “Such a *Numbring* [*sic*] of [his]

<sup>27</sup>Natalie A. Naylor, “The Theological Seminary in the Configuration of American Higher Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1977), 20; William Warren Sweet, “The Rise of Theological Schools in America,” *Church History* 6, no. 3 (Sept. 1937), 260–266.

<sup>28</sup>Theodore Dwight Weld, “Manual Labor Schools,” *Hudson Observer and Telegraph* (Oct. 18, 1832).

<sup>29</sup>Samuel Miller, *Letters on clerical manners and habits; addressed to a student of the theological seminary, at Princeton, N.J.* (New York: 1827), 31.

<sup>30</sup>Miller, *Letters on clerical manners and habits*, 19.

<sup>31</sup>The Boston bookseller and politician Samuel Turell Armstrong collected the most popular handbooks in an edited volume, *The Young Minister’s Companion*, in 1813. For Mason citations, see Samuel T. Armstrong, ed., *The Young Minister’s Companion* (Boston: 1813), 9–10.

<sup>32</sup>Miller, *Letters on clerical manners and habits*, 85, 256, 269.

Days,” Mather fancied that the seminarian could be terrorized into spending the remainder of his worldly existence preparing for a spiritual eternity.<sup>33</sup> As early as 1701, the Congregationalist Samuel Willard had drafted his *Brief Directions to a Young Scholar Designing the Ministry*, in which he advised that would-be ministers spend a portion of each day engaged in “a careful eyeing of the Scripture,” during which they were to reread a brief selection of scripture in both its original and translated versions until it was committed to memory.<sup>34</sup>

Still, the advice literature that early nineteenth-century seminarians issued was notable for its profusion and its popularity. Six original handbooks appeared between 1827 and 1843, and dozens more colonial texts were dusted off and republished.<sup>35</sup> Competition for intellectual authority from both within and beyond the clergy required that ministers acquire not only specialty knowledge but also a new demeanor that communicated spiritual loftiness and professional expertise. “Ought the manners of a clergyman perceptibly to *differ* from those of a well-bred man of a secular profession?” one scholars’ guide inquired; “I think they *ought*.”<sup>36</sup> In a democratizing moment, when the educated clergy faced threats from untrained ministers and an emboldened laity, the spectacle of expert knowledge conveyed in an “elevated style” was meant to distinguish the ministers from the masses.<sup>37</sup>

## II. Sedentary Disease

Seminarians who drew inspiration from Samuel Willard might have paid closer attention to his biography. After publishing his *Brief Directions to a Young Scholar* in 1701, Willard devoted his energies to his *Compleat Body of Divinity*, perhaps the most inclusive—if not the most original—volume of systematic theology to issue from Puritan America. So much “careful eyeing” of “dark and difficult” scriptures brought unintended consequences. Willard’s eyesight deteriorated precipitously after 1700, and reading became a laborious and time-consuming ordeal. In his sixties and serving as acting president of Harvard College, Willard spent hours in his study scrutinizing texts that blurred and swam in his abbreviated field of vision. In April of 1707, while taking a meal at his desk to avoid interrupting his work, he slipped into delirium. Willard suffered through a summer of wrenching headaches, indigestion, and convulsions, once complaining to his protégé, Samuel Sewell, of “a great pain in [his] head, and sickness at his stomach.” While lunching in September of the same year, he cut his finger on an oyster, retreated to his study, endured a seizure, and expired.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Cotton Mather, *Manuductio ad ministerium: directions for a candidate of the ministry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1726/1938), 28–91, 2.

<sup>34</sup>Samuel Willard, *Brief Directions to a Young Scholar Designing the Ministry of the Study of Divinity* (s.l., 1735), 2.

<sup>35</sup>David F. Allmendinger, Jr., “The Dangers of Ante-Bellum Student Life,” *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1973), 77; Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 120.

<sup>36</sup>Miller, *Letters on clerical manners and habits*, 35.

<sup>37</sup>The phrase “elevated style” is attributed to an anonymous minister in Charles G. Finney, *Autobiography* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1876/1908), 88–89.

<sup>38</sup>George William Dollar, “The Life and Works of Samuel Willard,” unpublished Ph.D. (Boston: Boston University, 1960), 1–10, 37–42, 109–116; John Langdon Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: University Bookstore, 1881), 22–23; Ernest Benson Lowrie, *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 2–3, 13–15, 20–21; Seymour Van Dyken, *Samuel Willard, 1640–1707*:

In his effort to ensure that his *Body* of theology would be *Compleat*, Willard more or less completely wrecked his body. With the rise of the seminary system during the early nineteenth century, ailments of the sort that had hastened Willard to his end a century earlier became the bugbears of many more aspiring ministers. After Andover's 1808 opening, unprecedented numbers of students pursued post-graduate professional training, sometimes far from the watchful eyes of their home communities and frequently in numbers too great for their health to be closely monitored by academic officials.<sup>39</sup> An 1830 survey estimated that overstudy had claimed the lives of more than 120 seminarians each year since Andover's founding—a mortality rate that, if accurate, would account for 2,000 casualties in the span of just 22 years.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Gallaudet, an Andover graduate, guessed that between three-fourths and nine-tenths of "diligent students impair[ed] their health by insufficient exercise."<sup>41</sup> John Frost confirmed that Presbyterians fared no better, with "at least one fourth of those who pass through a course of education for the learned professions, sink[ing] into a premature grave, or drag[ging] out a miserable and comparatively useless life, under a broken constitution."<sup>42</sup>

The financial arrangements that had replaced the colonial network of state-sponsored churches contributed to the sense of urgency around student health. As state patronage dried up and Protestant factions began directly competing for lay donations, popular opinion of the ministry became a deciding factor in a given denomination's ability to raise funds for clerical education. Sedentary disease made the seminarian a poor investment. In 1829, the AES conceded that at least thirty of its beneficiaries moldered in "early graves." Other scholarship recipients, the AES report continued, "fell victims of disease before their preparatory studies were completed," and "nearly as many more [failed] to enter the ministry in consequence of a loss of health." By conservative estimates, the AES had doled out more than five thousand dollars for the education of men and boys who would never join the ministry.<sup>43</sup> Benevolent organizations' track record of losing on investments hampered their fundraising efforts and forced groups like the AES to scale back their scholarship funds. In 1831, the Presbyterian church attributed its "paucity of beneficiaries" to "disappointed public expectation[s]" and the perception among former donors that "gratuitous aid" was being redistributed upward from cash-strapped congregants to academic loungers.<sup>44</sup> The Episcopal church likewise linked its reduced donations to a dip in donor

---

*Preacher of Orthodoxy in an Era of Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 28–29, 31–34, 181–186; and Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1652–1730* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1879), 193.

<sup>39</sup>Allmendinger, "The Strangeness of the American Education Society," 3, 19; Allmendinger, "The Dangers of Ante-Bellum Student Life," 77–79.

<sup>40</sup>"Review of the Report of the Manual Labor Academy of Pennsylvania," *American Annals of Education and Instruction, and Journal of Literary Institutions* 1, no. 6 (Aug. 1830), 364.

<sup>41</sup>Gallaudet quoted in William Cogswell, *Letters to Young Men Preparing for the Christian Ministry* (Boston, MA: Perkins & Marvin, 1837), 173. Rebecca Noel's article "No wonder they are sick, and die of study" assembles a genealogy of European and American medical discourses surrounding scholarly disease and notes their increased sense of urgency following school expansion on p. 136.

<sup>42</sup>John Frost, *An Oration, Delivered at Middlebury, before the Associated Alumni of the College, on the Evening of Commencement* (Utica, NY: Hastings & Tracy, 1829), 7–8.

<sup>43</sup>"Notice of the publication of the Thirteenth Report of the Board of Directors of the American Education Society," *Quarterly Register and Journal of the American Education Society* (Aug. 1829), 18.

<sup>44</sup>"Report of the Board of Education, to the General Assembly, May 1831," *Missionary Reporter & Education Register of the Missionary & Education Boards of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (June 1831), 342–343.

confidence. Such dismal figures, the AES concluded, “afford[ed] melancholy proof that something should be done to render studious habits less injurious.”<sup>45</sup> The less diplomatic Franceway Cossitt, a Kentucky-based Episcopalian and a survivor of New York’s General Seminary, condemned the typical theological seminary as “a manufactory of invalids, and the slaughter-house of cultivated talent.”<sup>46</sup>

There was a polemical edge to these reports on sedentary disease that calls into question the accuracy of their figures. Their authors crafted anecdotal and statistical portraits of clerical training that tidily confirmed what many opponents of established religion already suspected: state support for organized religion was incompatible with a republican culture requiring manly self-reliance and civic engagement. As anti-Catholic sentiment swelled in the early nineteenth century, established religion also came to be associated with un-American popery, further besmirching the graduate clergy as having regressed into virtual Catholicism.<sup>47</sup> Raising an alarm over sedentary disease reassured readers that the seminary system’s internal critics had little intention of reviving establishment or the dissipated religious aristocracy that it had evidently subsidized. Disgruntled seminarians did not merely record their infirmities in private; they edited them for publication in popular memoirs and exposés, crunched numbers for AES reports’ staggering statistics, and excoriated traditionalists for permitting such an injurious system to continue. By feigning to pull back the curtain on the seminary system’s abuses and regressions, critical seminarians absolved themselves for having participated in it, demonstrated their capacity for hard (if misapplied) work, and improved their ability to negotiate favorable relationships with and fundraise among the laity.

Sedentary disease was purported to be an institutional problem, but like the elevated style, it was most clearly demonstrated on the granular level of manners, sensations, and individual maladies. When he entered Andover’s preparatory department in 1819, Theodore Dwight Weld subjected himself to a stringent course of study. Each morning, he awoke before sunrise to pray in his room before hurrying to chapel at seven. After taking a meager breakfast, he studied from eight o’clock until noon and then again, after lunch, from one thirty until three. Recitations, prayers, and another two hours of study—in total, approximately seven and a half hours of reading—filled the rest of the day. As one prescient classmate of Weld’s moaned, “I have [books] around me to frighten a very timid man out of his senses.” For more than a year, Weld squinted at dense treatises by candlelight until, he claimed, his eyes became too inflamed for him to read. Doctors recommended that Weld refrain from physical exertion, studying, and direct exposure to sunlight for a period of seven years, and even then, they feared, his eyesight might never be restored.<sup>48</sup>

Uninterrupted study was also reported to enfeeble younger students who were anxious to earn their places at the country’s most prestigious theological colleges. While acquainting himself with the day’s leading religious controversies in preparation to enter into Vermont’s Middlebury College, the Congregationalist John Jay Shipherd found that his eyesight was quickly failing. At the same time, he developed the chronic dyspepsia that would plague him for the remainder of his life. Desperate for gastric relief and able to

<sup>45</sup>“The Fourteenth Annual Report of the Society for Educating Pious Young Men for the Ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church,” *Episcopal Reader* 9, no. 40 (Dec. 31, 1831), 158.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted in Edward W. Knight, “Manual Labor Schools in the South,” *The Southern Atlantic Quarterly*, no. 16 (1917), 214.

<sup>47</sup>Esbeck and Hartog, eds. *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent*, 14–16.

<sup>48</sup>Henry K. Rowe, *History of Andover Theological Seminary* (Newton, MA: Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, 1933), 29–31.

perceive only the most basic shapes and colors, he mistook a vial of saltpeter for one of Epsom salt and gulped a heaping spoonful. Instead of settling his stomach, Shipherd nearly poisoned himself.<sup>49</sup> When one Andover student complained that “the opportunity to kill oneself with study [was] rather too good” at theological seminaries, he scarcely could have had a more literal example in mind.<sup>50</sup>

Moneyed men like Shipherd had ample resources to keep them afloat while they convalesced. For indigent students, the academic program at theological seminaries was even more onerous. After graduating from Middlebury in 1819, Beriah Green matriculated at Andover’s post-graduate seminary. He went broke in less than a year and accepted a tutorship at Andover’s preparatory department. In another era, fusing ministerial education with paid work in the community would have been the norm, but the academic demands that seminaries placed upon their students had become so exaggerated as to require Green’s undivided attention. He rose early, studied late, and paid not an iota of thought to his health. He later recalled that his “every nerve was strained. [He] did not pause to inquire whether [he] was well or sick—sinking or rising.” Green soon found it necessary to “[bid] adieu to [his] books” except “through the eyes of a friend” and to altogether “[give] up the labor of continuous, close thinking.”<sup>51</sup>

As theological students presented the pattern of sense death, indigestion, and depression that they claimed afflicted them, they questioned the wisdom behind the seminary system’s exclusive attendance to “heavenly things.” The famed evangelist Charles Grandison Finney reported that he was “solemnly impressed with the conviction, that the schools are to a great extent spoiling the ministers.”<sup>52</sup> Lyman Beecher maintained that “the old way was healthier” insofar as informal apprenticeships and blended work lives had offset mental exertion with manual labor.<sup>53</sup> To their detractors, seminaries stank of curdled piety and squandered potential. The trustees of Allegheny College argued that the seminary system had revived, under the guise of Protestantism, the medieval monastery in which “literary men turned monks, divorced themselves from useful and practical life, and ended their days in cloisters, where they became sluggards and dozed away a life that might, with activity, have been rendered useful to the world.”<sup>54</sup>

With testimonials of sedentary disease accumulating, seminarians groped about for the core of their critique. Most of them settled on the virtue of usefulness, and they charged the seminary system with roundly subverting it. “Usefulness” was a capacious term that, with its web of sacred and secular connotations, could pull together a number of critical perspectives. Republican ideologues maintained that people had a duty to be useful to their communities and their country—an obligation to act disinterestedly by turning their personal gifts to the public weal while reigning in their selfish impulses.<sup>55</sup> Millennialists, who expected that Christ’s second coming would occur in the near

<sup>49</sup>Finney, *Autobiography*, 230-1; Robert Samuel Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1943), 58–62.

<sup>50</sup>Rowe, *History of Andover Theological Seminary*, 29–31.

<sup>51</sup>Theodore Dwight Weld, *First annual report of the society for promoting manual labor in literary institutions* (New York: S. W. Benedict, 1833), 112.

<sup>52</sup>Finney, *Autobiography*, 88.

<sup>53</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, 22.

<sup>54</sup>*Report of a Committee of the Trustees of Allegheny College* (Meadville, PA: Jos. C. G. Kennedy, 1833), 4.

<sup>55</sup>As Gordon S. Wood has argued, “republics demanded far more morally from their citizens than monarchies did of their subjects.” They “had to hold themselves together from the bottom up” by depending “on the moral virtue of their citizens, on their capacity for self-sacrifice and impartiality of judgment.”

future, added that the time was ripe for the establishment of a social order that was not merely just but also divine. In the spiritualized sense of “usefulness,” then, a person also had a duty to “strive to spread a knowledge of [. . .] salvation to the ends of the earth,” as the Congregationalist minister Nathan Strong phrased it.<sup>56</sup> In practice, the sacred and secular meanings of “usefulness” mingled. When critics complained that students’ “views of usefulness [began] to be limited” from the moment that they entered the seminary, they targeted a dereliction of duties that was both civic and spiritual.<sup>57</sup> In its monkish withdrawal from public life and its tendency to neutralize promising young evangelists with insensibility and injury, the seminary system chipped away at each of the many faces of usefulness.<sup>58</sup>

Usefulness was also a gendered category, and it supplied critics with a compelling line of attack on the perceived effeminacy of seminary graduates.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the demanding environs of farms and manufactories, where young men were thought to learn moral resolve and self-control, seminaries were all “tenderness and seclusion.”<sup>60</sup> Students emerged from seminaries with nervous dispositions, detuned senses, and delicate limbs that rendered them “utterly unfit for any manly enterprise or employment.” Privacy, febricity, insensibility, daintiness—in the republican imaginary, these were traits most commonly associated with women. Seminaries struggled to refute claims that they were in the business of “*unsex[ing]*. . . literary men” or replacing virile Americans with “a sickly and effeminate race—the miserable abortions of physical degeneracy—the mere apologists of all that which characterizes *manhood*.”<sup>61</sup> This was the era of the “self-made man,” untutored rustics like the evangelical egalitarian Parker Pillsbury, who, according to one admirer, had “literally hewn out his own place among men” with his “stalwart arms” and indomitable spirit.<sup>62</sup> Erudite but enervated, seminarians excelled at raising “castles in the air.” The critics charged that proper men would have known how to build foundations under them.

---

See Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the American Republic, 1789–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7–8.

<sup>56</sup>Nathan Strong, *A Sermon at the Ordination of the Rev. Thomas Robbins* (Hartford, Conn., 1803), 15. Strong is analyzed in terms of nineteenth-century millennialism in Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215.

<sup>57</sup>“Review of the Report of the Manual Labor Academy of Pennsylvania,” 365.

<sup>58</sup>Daniel T. Rodgers’s meditation on the idea of “utility” in American political discourse clarifies Americans’ complex relationship with usefulness. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17–44.

<sup>59</sup>Since nervous conditions were dissociated from demonic possession and medicalized in the early modern period, their description and diagnosis has been reliably gendered. For the medicalization of hysteria and the diagnosis of religious enthusiasm, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 28–31, 256. David G. Schuster, *Neurasthenic Nation: America’s Search for Health, Happiness, and Comfort, 1869–1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 85–112, includes a thoughtful analysis of the gender politics surrounding Victorian neurasthenia diagnoses.

<sup>60</sup>Philip Lindsley, *The Works of Philip Lindsley, D. D. Vol. I: Educational Discourses* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1859), 39.

<sup>61</sup>Weld, *First annual report of the society for promoting manual labor in literary institutions*, 32–33, 108; Eric Burns, *The Smoke of the Gods*, 100–102, 214; “Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” 380–381.

<sup>62</sup>Stacey W. Robertson, *Parker Pillsbury: Radical Abolitionist, Male Feminist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 11.

### III. A Healthful Faith

To the seminary system's malcontents, it appeared that the only way to resuscitate the ministry was to eliminate those barriers that separated "heavenly things" from "earthly things." This meant shrinking the distance between the habits of the clergy and those of the laity, but the gap was wider than most reformers anticipated. Even when ex-seminarians managed to avoid boring lay audiences with sententious moralizing and logic-chopping (an academic habit of mind that the normally plain-spoken Beriah Green caricatured as "*deducing consequences from premises by rigid and irresistible ratiocination*"), their manner of presentation was off-putting enough. Seminaries had gambled that "elegance, composition, and dignity in style" would preserve the prestige of the ministerial office when it was no longer partnered with the state. Yet the elevated style did not go over well outside of seminary walls. Green cautioned that "there is nothing common people hate more heartily than the lofty airs and imposing strut of the self-complacent student." Seminarians' presence alone had a chilling effect on congregants, as if a sedentary disease were somehow contagious: "If [the seminarian] approaches them," Green continued, "their blood flows back upon their hearts, just as if with naked feet they had trodden on a serpent."<sup>63</sup> Finney shared Green's distrust of seminary slicks. "Men are not fools," he reminded his peers. "They have no solid respect for a man that will go into the pulpit and preach smooth things. They cordially despise it in their inmost souls."<sup>64</sup> Even Beecher, who had more fondness for the elevated style than did most internal critics of the seminary system, admitted that Finney's populist approach suited an age of social fluidity and democratic eloquence better than gemlike homilies. Disestablishment and democratization had, in Beecher's view, spelled the end of the clergy of "shoe-buckles, and cocked hats, and gold-headed canes." What Americans wanted now was a more down-to-earth type whom they could easily embrace as one of their own.<sup>65</sup>

As desensitization and illness thwarted their efforts at spiritual vivification, intellectual cultivation, and evangelical outreach, seminarians had begun to question whether the material and immaterial realms were really as separate as Calvin and his inheritors had sometimes maintained. Lyman Beecher finally managed to banish his melancholy and "oppressive insensibility" through such banal means as regular exercise and a healthy diet, and he came to believe that "the gloomy frames of sincerely pious men" were more often indicators of poor health, bad food, and understimulation than they were markers of some congenital sensitivity to the divine.<sup>66</sup> For his part, Beriah Green took solace in the chopping block, where he spent hours splitting logs, resting his eyes, and titillating his nerves.<sup>67</sup>

In time, this recourse to physicality and sensuality became common enough among ailing seminarians to require a theological defense. By representing the mind, body, and soul not as strange bedfellows but as component parts of an organic, divinely created

<sup>63</sup>Beriah Green, "Christian Education" (1833), in *The Miscellaneous Writings of Beriah Green* (Whitestown, NY: Oneida Institute, 1841), 237.

<sup>64</sup>Finney, *Autobiography*, 93.

<sup>65</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, 253. In his autobiography, George Washington Gale similarly describes "the old-fashioned clerical costume" that was in vogue among seminarians as comprising "a broad skirted coat, and vest corresponding, small clothes, with buckles on [the] shoes, and a wig as white as milk, with a cocked hat." See George Washington Gale, *Autobiography* (New York, 1853/1964), 78.

<sup>66</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, 47.

<sup>67</sup>Milton C. Sernett, *Abolition's Axe: Beriah Green, Oneida Institute, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 8–9.

whole, ex-seminarians developed a religious justification for the program of combined mental and physical education that Beecher and Green had worked out in the wood yard. Under the new schema, the sensate body shed its associations with animal passions and all-too-human excesses and was reappointed as a worthy tabernacle of the Holy Spirit. Neglecting the body became tantamount to neglecting the mind and soul. Critics of the seminary system distanced themselves from the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace and instead cautioned that a book-numbered brain and desensitized body could distract from and “may even repress or misdirect, for a time, the tendencies of grace.”<sup>68</sup> The trustees of Maryland’s Germantown Academy pilloried the “studio-sedentary habit” for blighting “modern Christianity” with “the effects of a diseased body on the mind,” symptoms of which included “demureness, sickness, gloom,” and all manner of unspecified “eccentricities.”<sup>69</sup>

As they lit the fires of revivalism in magazines and on the circuit, critics of the seminary system burned away the foggy abstractions of cloistered scholars and popularized their image of “man as he [was].”<sup>70</sup> They presented the human person as “a compound being,” an “assemblage” that was as “complicated in his character” as Christ had been—fully human and fully divine; in the world but not merely of it. Contributors to the *Quarterly Christian Spectator* observed that humanity had a “three-fold nature as an animal, intellectual and affective being,” and Creed Fulton remarked on “how marvelously the Great Author of our being [had] joined matter and spirit together in the form of man.”<sup>71</sup> The trustees of the Germantown Academy agreed: “When thought shall need no brains and nearly four hundred organs of motion cease to constitute the principal portions of the human body,” they scoffed, “then may the student dispense with muscular exertion.” A withered frame, they went on, “constrained” the “natural and spontaneous action” of the “animal power,” forces and fluids which were believed in the nineteenth century to link spirit to flesh.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup>“Character and Genius of Cowper,” *The Quarterly Christian Spectator* 5, no. 4 (Dec. 1833), 586.

<sup>69</sup>“Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” 382. My analysis challenges the narrative of medical history presented in Charles E. Rosenberg’s *The Cholera Years*. In characterizing the paradigm shift in American medicine that he located in the middle nineteenth century, Rosenberg has written that “whereas ministers in 1832 urged morality upon their congregants as a guarantor of health, their forward-looking counterparts in 1866 endorsed sanitary reform as a necessary prerequisite to moral improvement.” My research indicates that “positivistic” theories, ones that made moral rectitude a product of physical well-being, were in circulation earlier than Rosenberg indicates—and that they were quite popular among the evangelical leadership. See Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962/1987), 5.

<sup>70</sup>The appeal to “man as he is” was a favorite rhetorical device among ex-seminarians. The phrase appears, for example, in “Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” 382–383; Green, “Standard of Reformation,” 338–340; and Beriah Green, *Four Sermons, Preached in the Chapel of the Western Reserve College, Cleveland* (s.l., 1833), 13.

<sup>71</sup>“Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” 382–383; Amicus, “Wake Forest Institute,” *The Biblical Recorder* no. 8 (1838), 172; and Creed Fulton, “Address on the Subject of a Manual Labor College” (Abingdon, VA: 1836), 10.

<sup>72</sup>“Review of the Report of the Manual Labor Academy of Pennsylvania,” 368–370; “Notice of publication of the Thirteenth Report of the Board of Directors of the American Education Society, *Quarterly Register and Journal of the American Education Society* (Aug. 1829), 19. Jackson Lears’s recent scholarship investigates the role played by the concept of “animal spirits” in American economic and cultural life. See Lears, “Animal Spirits and the Vitalist Currents in Modernity,” *The Hedgehog Review* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2017). Ann Taves also treats animal spirits in Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 28, 40.

The gist of such arguments was that God had not erred when he coupled matter and spirit, human and divine. Knowledge of earthly things was something more than a “clog” or a “hindrance.”<sup>73</sup> Just as the saved soul and trained mind could endow the body with a holy charge, so could the body ventilate a stifled mind with fresh experiences and provide the instruments with which the soul might assess and improve the sensible world. One contributor to the *Quarterly Christian Spectator* wove together the threads. Ex-seminarians’ rejection of monasticism, their aversion to useless flights of fancy and perceived effeminacy, and their craving for more energetic, sensual forms of piety came together in an ominous sketch of the two futures that lay open to the clerical profession:

Shall he who makes a practical principle of such monastic dogmas, who lives as though his corporeal functions were given him only to be contemned [*sic*] and abused, or as if he were an ethereal [*sic*] and disembodied spirit;—shall he who makes such dreams his rule of conduct, escape the punishment due such exhibitions of folly and transcendentalism, and demanded by violated law? Rather, shall he not be deprived of the invigorating influence of that which he so much despises, and left to his *visions* of unearthly bliss, to quaff the nectar of imagined felicity; while the substantial realities of health and vigorous faculties are reserved for such as are contented to view things as they are, to exercise their powers according to the dictates of conscience, of reason and nature, and to act well the part which belongs to them in their *true* relations?<sup>74</sup>

The message was simple enough. If they were to salvage the ministry, American clergymen would have to come to terms with the “*true* relations” of the world. “The mind,” one minister insisted, would remain “eased up in a material body” regardless of whether seminarians admitted as much. It was time for the clergy to face facts.<sup>75</sup>

#### IV. The Manual Labor School

The comprehensive conception of mind and body that the seminary system’s critics formulated lent itself to certain political interpretations. The line of thinking went something like this: if a healthy body were a necessary condition for a healthy mind and spirit, then it stood to reason that the finest religious sentiments and moral feelings would adorn the most physically fit Americans. The suggestion that there existed a close, mutualistic connection between body and spirit inspired some of the seminary system’s most prominent detractors to endorse a class-levelling program of social equality. The Congregationalist Nathaniel Peabody Rogers extolled workers’ naturally “refined and delicate taste” and their “freedom from all superciliousness and self-worship.” The pariahs of Rogers social hierarchy were not those with dirty hands but those who hid “*dirtiness* of spirit” behind a veneer of “uppishness” and an elevated style. “I like washed hands—,” he conceded, “but not these ‘dainty fingers.’”<sup>76</sup> A number of ex-seminarians joined Rogers in suggesting that untutored laborers enjoyed direct access to “things as they [were],” their nerves vibrating with the sense data of

<sup>73</sup>Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 489.

<sup>74</sup>“Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” 389.

<sup>75</sup>Fulton, “Address on the Subject of a Manual Labor College,” 10.

<sup>76</sup>Nathaniel P. Rogers, “Aristocracy,” in *A Collection from the Miscellaneous Writings of Nathaniel Peabody Rogers* (Boston, MA: Benjamin B. Mussey, 1849), 318.

“substantial realities.”<sup>77</sup> The Rhode Island Restorationist Adin Ballou announced his intention to raise “the dignity of the awl and lapstone” to his rightful place as “the vital relation [. . .] between faith and works, theory and practice, fundamental principles and right action, belief and life.”<sup>78</sup> These and other calls to celebrate the lay laborer reflected the enhanced power of lay donations and the requirement that ministers cultivate popular favor in order to maintain a steady income. It was time, Ballou and his associates suggested, for the laity to receive its due as the church’s main spiritual and financial engine.

On the other end of the spectrum from the virtuous worker was the parasitic intellectual aristocracy that theological seminaries turned out. In a response to one of Brown University President Francis Wayland’s hand-wringing defenses of slavery, Nathaniel Rogers imagined Wayland—an Andover alumnus and a co-founder of Newton Theological Institute—shut up in his “princely abode” in Providence, “with his gown and green spectacles on,” weaving together gossamer strands of “*real, sham*, university logic” into a “spider’s web essay, to prove that the people of this country were under no obligation whatever to abolish slavery [. . .], and that abolitionists were a pack of mad-caps.”<sup>79</sup> Adin Ballou blamed the seminaries for transforming the ministerial calling into a status-conscious career with “complicated attachments” to money that tempted clergymen to abandon their “independent convictions, principles, and aims” in the vain pursuit of “respectability and renown.”<sup>80</sup> Time and again, it turned out that soft hands were capable of dealing the harshest blows, whereas “hard hands ma[d]e soft hearts.”<sup>81</sup> A calloused palm came to both signify and produce an exfoliated, morally sensitive spirit.<sup>82</sup> Early modern Protestants had reconciled themselves with their own physicality by treating the body as an archive of sin and virtue. Ex-seminarians made the relationship bilateral by proposing that what the body did or did not sense might not only signify but also produce spiritual states, just as what virtues one’s soul did or did not contain might produce physical states.

The levelling rhetoric that sprouted from ex-seminarians’ symbiotic model of mind and body reached its fullest expression in manual labor colleges, which attempted to broker the permanent reconciliation of mind and body through “the union of study with labor.”<sup>83</sup> Enrolled students were invited and in some cases required to reduce or eliminate their tuition liability by working in the fields and small manufactories that

<sup>77</sup>“Promotion of Health in Literary Institutions,” 389.

<sup>78</sup>Adin Ballou, *Autobiography* (Lowell, MA: Vox Populi, 1896), 14–15, 318.

<sup>79</sup>Rogers, *Miscellaneous Writings*, 317–320, 199.

<sup>80</sup>Ballou, *Autobiography*, 41.

<sup>81</sup>“Another Manual Labor School,” *Religious Intelligencer* 13, no. 32 (Jan. 3, 1829), 508.

<sup>82</sup>The view that dirt could signify moral elevation was a variation on what Constance Classen has recognized as a bottom-up reevaluation of “the sensory values propagated by the dominant social group.” Whereas Classen has attended to moments in which, for instance, the working class upended traditional hierarchies of sense associations to contrast “clean-living” workers with the “filthy” rich, in the case under discussion, ex-seminarians and some luminaries of the working class united to preserve existing sense-class associations—a “clean” gentry and “dirty” workers—while revising their moral value, such that filth could be a sign of virtue and cleanliness an indicator of vice. Classen quoted in David Howes, “Can These Dry Bones Live? An Anthropological Approach to the History of the Senses,” *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (Sept. 2008), 450.

<sup>83</sup>“Union of Study with Labor,” *Quarterly Register and Journal of the American Education Society* (Nov. 1829), 115. As Jonathan Glickstein has observed, “the principle of symbiotic” or “balanced faculties” was the manual labor college’s most unique and lasting contribution to antebellum labor debates. See Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, 80–81.

the schools maintained. After 1820, leading voices of seminary critique—including Lyman Beecher, Theodore Dwight Weld, Beriah Green, John Jay Shipherd, Thomas Gallaudet, John Frost, and Charles Finney—assembled a network of manual labor colleges. By 1830, more than thirty colleges had adopted the system in part or in full, and at least two hundred aspiring ministers were enrolled at institutions that exacted some form of manual labor from their students.<sup>84</sup> In making bodily exertion an essential component of ministerial training, the manual labor system's promoters hoped to renegotiate the relationship between the laity and the clergy to be free of its former animosities, jealousies, and dependencies. "In institutions where some daily labour is required of all the pupils," remarked one supporter, "the odium attached to manual industry is entirely removed," as was the odium attached to the graduate ministry.<sup>85</sup>

The system was purported to be just as effective at helping laborers cultivate their native moral virtues. Temperance, feminism, and especially abolitionism could be grafted onto manual laborism to extend its appeal beyond those who had a vested interest in seminary reform or affordable schooling. Manual laborism's emphasis on physical well-being as a factor in spiritual health could, in the right hands, bleed into the notion that human bodies were instruments of the divine—worldly tools that had to be kept free of contaminating liquors and unrestrained by arbitrary hierarchies of race or gender. Within a few years, some manual laborites would extend the argument to include non-human animals and take up vegetarianism; others would come to regard debt as a restriction on the free exercise of conscience and push for its immediate forgiveness. Manual laborite colleges quickly distinguished themselves as incubators for most stripes of antebellum radicalism. "Such a motley company!" one alumnus exclaimed as he observed the moral ferment around him. "In that whirl there was a fascination."<sup>86</sup>

Laborers and radical reformers inclined toward practical action in a way that ex-seminarians, to their embarrassment, seemed to congenitally lack. Ex-seminarians had identified the flaws in traditional clerical training, but—notwithstanding their fumbling reform efforts at Yale and Andover—they had done little to remedy the situation. With a corps of workers and activists at the graduate clergy's disposal, manual labor schools went up rapidly, averaging three new colleges per year throughout the late 1820s and early 1830s. The result was a national network of theological schools that extended Congregationalism and Presbyterianism into hinterlands where unschooled itinerants had previously dominated.

The manual labor school's ability to convert physical industry into higher education inspired one New York farmer to exclaim that there was no longer anything "to prevent the house of every farmer from becoming a seminary, and the agriculturalists of our country, the most learned of any class of community."<sup>87</sup> In response to the funding crisis that the clerical profession faced post-disestablishment, the manual labor system decreased overhead while increasing donations. Students labor cut costs while also removing the genteel affectations that irritated the laity and limited bequests. The

<sup>84a</sup> "Review of the Report of the Manual Labor Academy of Pennsylvania," 366–367; Paul Goodman, "The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 1993), 363.

<sup>85</sup> "Remarks on Manual Labor Schools," *Missionary Reporter & Education Register of the Missionary & Education Boards of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (June 1, 1830), 166.

<sup>86</sup> Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, *Men and Events of Forty Years* (Boston, MA: D. Lothrop, 1891), 30–31.

<sup>87</sup> "Education of Farmers," *Genesee Farmer & Gardener's Journal* 1, no. 50 (Dec. 17, 1831), 394.

manual labor graduate would enter field ministry strong and hale, having “learned to assimilate himself to those around him; to conform to their manners and customs as much as conscientiously he could;—to understand and take an interest in their employments.”<sup>88</sup> Manual labor colleges addressed the linked issues of sedentary disease, genteel disdain, and decreased lay donations by associating well-being and usefulness with spiritual rectitude. Hard work that had once been thought to distract a young person from spiritual matters now became an important qualification for joining the ministry. The system’s backers predicted that, as more and more schools adopted the model, Americans would “in time know of no such distinction as the laboring, and the upper classes. All will be laborers; all will be students.”<sup>89</sup> Another promoter put it more simply when he exuded that at manual labor schools, ministers would learn to “become all things to all men.”<sup>90</sup>

Some working-class observers remained unconvinced. One workingman in New York denounced manual labor schools as a conspiracy of enterprising “Church and State men” who had appropriated the language of working-class populism to launch a new bid for steady patronage, “as completely disguised as any harlequin at a masquerade.”<sup>91</sup> Another wrote off manual labor schools as “another scheme of the orthodox, for robbing the people of their money for their own exclusive benefit.”<sup>92</sup> The most penetrating critiques turned on the suspicion that manual labor colleges continued to redistribute wealth upward from the laity to a genteel clergy, as church taxes once had done. Unlike traditional seminarians, however, manual labor schools concealed the transaction by blurring the material distinctions between the laboring and learned classes. “Our families want our money, our poor want it,” one skeptic reminded his readers—and yet families with little to spare were being duped into donating their labor and savings to the maintenance of a clerical elite on the false promise of class abolition.<sup>93</sup> “You *common* people must give a portion of your hard earnings to further enrich our Colleges,” another commentator imagined manual labor school proponents to be saying—“and if you will not grumble about it we will condescend to talk kindly to you.”<sup>94</sup> The ecclesiastical monopoly, it seemed, had not been unsettled. Shrouded in equalizing rhetoric, it had merely become more difficult to identify.

There was some truth to the accusations. As president of Ohio’s Lane Seminary, Lyman Beecher had quietly campaigned against the enrollment of too many penurious students, fearing that an open admissions policy would introduce radical politics and stretch the college’s resources thin.<sup>95</sup> In fact, most manual labor colleges only ever supported a slim handful of indigent youths. Those that amassed economically diverse student bodies often struggled to supply their students with enough work to significantly reduce their bills—earning, in not a few cases, the bitter disappointment of students who had believed that their ability to work would be their ticket to upward mobility.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>88</sup>“Preaching to Preachers—No. 1,” *Presbyterian* 3, no. 44 (Oct. 30, 1833), 173.

<sup>89</sup>“Manual Labor Schools,” *New England Farmer & Horticultural Journal* 12, no. 2 (July 24, 1833), 11.

<sup>90</sup>“Preaching to Preachers,” 173.

<sup>91</sup>“Church and State Masquerade,” *Workingman’s Advocate* 2, no. 11 (Oct. 30, 1830).

<sup>92</sup>*Workingman’s Advocate* 2, no. 48 (July 16, 1831).

<sup>93</sup>“Candor,” *Workingman’s Advocate* 2, no. 45 (June 25, 1831).

<sup>94</sup>“Who Are Aristocrats?,” *New London Political Observer*, reprinted in *Workingman’s Advocate* 2, no. 45 (June 25, 1831).

<sup>95</sup>Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, 241–245; Abzug, *Passionate Liberator*, 141.

<sup>96</sup>Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 530–531; *Connecticut Courant* LXIX, no. 3575 (July 29, 1833), 1–2; and “Manual Labor Schools,” *American Quarterly* no. 1 (Aug. 1833), 31–33.

The colleges' community relations were often even more irregular. Most large manual labor schools employed a rotating cast of "practical farmers" who were brought on to oversee the schools' agricultural operations. Almost without exception, however, these farmers resigned when it became clear that the learned ex-seminarians who employed them were not inclined to take advice from unschooled rustics. Disdainful of practical know-how, manual labor college administrators sunk their endowments in agricultural follies that, like silk cultivation or sugar-beet farming, were prized more for the moral challenge they posed to slave-grown cotton and sugarcane than they were for their suitability to local soil and climate conditions.<sup>97</sup>

Manual labor school officials likewise sought to sacralize the work of their neighbors by handing down strict moral regulations on industry. Under the leadership of John Jay Shipherd, Oberlin College pressured local farmers to civilize their traditional agricultural practices by enclosing their livestock. In 1837, a special committee on "Hens and Hogs" resolved that "no good Citizens, no sincere Christian will suffer his hogs to run at Large." Locals who refused to pen their animals would be ejected from the church and "permitted to Continue their association unmolested with the Animals they so Democratically Cherish."<sup>98</sup> Claiming that those who worked with their hands had untapped reservoirs of virtue could, in some cases, be a roundabout way of suggesting that laborers were falling short of their potential. There was still a barnyard democracy. Manual labor schools presumed to help the laity stand on two legs under the supervision of a reinvigorated graduate clergy.

## V. Conclusion

Taken together, the manual labor college's contradictions—its overtures to a classless utopia and its scorn for laborers; its democratic rhetoric and its elite student demographics; its pastoral pretensions and its costly agricultural missteps—raise the question of how we should understand the relationship between the seminary system's internal critics and the laity whom they courted for financial support and labor power. Some historians of religion have argued that manual laborites and other seminarians who rejected the theological seminary's disengagement from this-worldly affairs laid the foundations of nineteenth-century anti-capitalism. By dismantling the mind-body dualism that subordinated toiling employees to thinking managers, these reformers are thought to have made it possible to imagine radical alternatives to the industrial division of labor. Other historians have countered that those educated clergymen who fled traditional theological seminaries and founded manual labor schools defused righteous social unrest by replacing oppositional notions of class with sentimental claptrap about fruitful unions and intergroup harmonies.<sup>99</sup> One paradigmatic approach finds evidence

<sup>97</sup>Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 647–656; Carol Faulkner, "The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820–1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 377–405; and Michelle Craig McDonald, "Consuming with a Conscience: The Free Produce Movement in Early America," in *Shopping for Change: Consumer Activism and the Possibilities of Purchasing Power*, ed. Louis Hyman and Joseph Tohill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 17–28.

<sup>98</sup>Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 555–556; Nancy Sue Hutton, "'I am going to do it': The Complex Question of Action in Theology and Science in the Life of America's First Woman Minister, Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825–1921)," unpublished Ph.D. (Boston: Harvard Divinity School, 2015), 103–104.

<sup>99</sup>Studies highlighting manual labor schools' support for moral reform and anti-capitalist agitation include Herbert G. Lull, "The Manual Labor Movement in the United States," *Manual Training*

of democratization in the manual labor movement; the other discerns top-down social control. Each endeavors to settle whether disestablished religionists acted, on balance, for or against workers.

But in the omnivorous market economy that arose after disestablishment, educated ministers did not merely preach to or about market actors. They *were* market actors, and through their ministries, they advanced complex material interests of their own. On this view, the manual labor college is only of secondary import as an outward-facing enterprise, irrespective of whether it was geared in one moment or another toward mass liberation or pacification. To its authors, the movement was most instrumental as a solution to the occupational crisis that disestablishment had largely precipitated. As one keen observer of “clerical politics” remarked in 1831, it had gone almost unnoticed that some enterprising members of the American clergy had successfully “adapted themselves to [disestablishment’s] new condition of circumstances” with little loss of wealth or status. On the pretense of coming down to earth, advocates of the manual labor movement had abandoned the theological seminary and its elevated style only “in order to preserve their ascendancy.”<sup>100</sup> This article has tried to countenance how the antebellum period’s imperiled clerical elite, by admitting its own feebleness and soliciting the aid of laboring-class students, constructed a new institutional basis for authority in a reordered religious economy.

**Christopher J. Stokum** is a public historian currently working with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission at Eckley Miners’ Village in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. from Boston University’s American and New England Studies Program.

---

*Magazine* 15, no. 5 (June 1914), 381; Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 134; and Paul Goodman, “The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism,” 360–364, 380. For more critical assessments of the manual labor system’s tendency to stabilize rather than disrupt existing class relations, see Robert Abzug, *Passionate Liberator*, 67; Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, 78–82; and Stephen P. Rice, *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 72, 95.

<sup>100</sup>“Clerical Politics,” *Workingman’s Advocate* 3, no. 16 (Dec. 3, 1831), 4.

**Cite this article:** Stokum, Christopher J. “‘An Oppressive Insensibility’: Disestablishment, Clerical Infirmity, and the Origins of the Manual Labor Movement.” *Church History* 91, no. 4 (December 2022): 803–823. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640722002797>.