John Bascom and the Origins of the Wisconsin Idea

Introduction

The state of Wisconsin in the Progressive Era gained national attention. That period of American history generally references the years from about 1901 to 1918. At all levels of government new initiatives occurred. Urban reformers attacked city "machines" and imposed civil service requirements for public employment. They provided for public regulations of utilities and took new measures to improve the health and safety of the citizenry. State legislatures wrote new laws for protecting the environment. They intervened in business and labor issues. In quest of a better democracy they wrote constitutional provisions for the initiative, the referendum, and the recall; several states extended the suffrage to women. Three presidents of the Progressive Era—Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson—turned their attention to what the American public judged the most crucial issue for national reform: the power of trusts and corporations. Congressional action added that subject to the list of reform priorities.

Wisconsin acted energetically in many of these areas. It took the lead in several of them. Its prominence in progressive reforms brought visitors to the state to observe the pioneering efforts that made Wisconsin appear as a locus of innovative legislation. Political leaders from around the country also wanted to learn from the new departures undertaken by Governors Robert M. La Follette and Francis McGovern. But Wisconsin was winning recognition in another way, too—by the role of its university, located a short walk from the capitol building in Madison. Soon the term the "Wisconsin Idea" was gaining currency. This connection above all intrigued observers. University president Charles Richard Van Hise made himself an ambassador to the Wisconsin public to explain the value to the state that would come from the research of the university's faculty. Here he made a starkly utilitarian appeal. New knowledge coming from the laboratories and field studies of academic scientists had direct applicability

to agriculture and industry all over the state, he assured. Studies in plant fertilizers or in plant hybrids, for example, enhance the productivity of Wisconsin farms. Hence derived one of the epithets associated with the Wisconsin Idea: "the boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the State." Hence also the moniker the "service university."

The Wisconsin Idea also has a political reference. It describes the role of university experts who assisted state legislators in making laws in an overall effort better to serve the public. Charles McCarthy ran the Legislative Reference Library, created by the state legislature in 1901. It made available a wealth of information for this purpose, much of it the academic research of university experts, but it also saw a wide use by the general populace. McCarthy also coined the label "Wisconsin Idea" in 1912. His book of that title elaborated in much detail the legislative history of Wisconsin progressivism. The state gained national attention as the "laboratory of democracy" for its prominence in path-breaking progressive reforms.

The Wisconsin Idea had yet another standard: academic freedom and the open pursuit of new knowledge. The board of regents in 1894 issued what became a nationally famous pronunciation defending the "fearless" pursuit of truth as an essential purpose of the university. That ideal had a visible public defender in President Van Hise. All of these directions and ideals underscored the wide recognition gained by the University of Wisconsin. In 1908 President Charles William Eliot of Harvard called it the most important state university in the United States. That same year the influential journalist Lincoln Steffens told Van Hise: "When you stop to look beyond your own state you must find no little personal satisfaction in the thought that you are leading not only your neighbors but the whole round world."

This study goes to the deeper roots of the Wisconsin Idea. It examines the Wisconsin Idea as just that, an intellectual entity. It locates its conceptual beginnings in the life and thought of the man who inspired it and who lived to see its realization in the intellectual careers of his successors at the university and in the state government. John Bascom served as university president from 1874 to 1887. He was a rare kind of individual, a deep thinker—metaphysician, theologian, moral philosopher, enthusiast of science—who brought this cerebral life into the political and social issues of his day. He championed temperance; he wrote and spoke for coeducation and women's suffrage; he took up the cause of workers' rights, including unionization and the strike. No other president of any large American university had such a record.

John Bascom wrote prodigiously. This study does not endeavor to review all aspects of his thinking. It approaches his abundant works selectively, with the intention to learn how Bascom first conceptualized the Wisconsin Idea. But that

purpose follows no narrow trajectory. It will take the history back to Bascom's early philosophical life and his encounter with several intellectual currents, most importantly German philosophical idealism. The great "Copernican revolution" wrought by Immanuel Kant in Germany had significant extensions to the United States, especially to the American transcendentalists—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, and others. Bascom had admiration for all of them. His own path took him to Auburn Theological Seminary because Laurens Perseus Hickok, America's most prominent post-Kantian philosopher, had located there.

Bascom also rooted his thinking in liberal Protestant theology. Christian principles and Christian ethics underscore all his thinking, and they supplied Bascom his reformist program in the categories mentioned. Bascom from his youth had recoiled from the harsh tenets of Calvinism; he could see them in the father he never knew and in the emotional travail of the mother who embraced them. At Andover Theological Seminary, Bascom came under the influence of two major principals of Protestant Liberalism—Moses Stuart and Edwards Amasa Park. From there Bascom entered into the manifold disputations that marked a great era in American religious thought. It flourished in the religious periodicals that Bascom read and to which he contributed. This literature represented the best in American scholarship in these decades before the emergence of the modern American university. Bascom also offered his ideas, especially his reformist politics, in more popular outlets, like the *Independent*, a weekly magazine of news and opinion.

A third intellectual influence entered into Bascom's thinking: evolution. He loved science. He held in awe the natural world around him, and he marveled at the applications of science in the age's wonderful creations, down to the ingenious inventions so visible in the industrial age in which he lived. Bascom joined the expanding group of religious liberals in the late nineteenth century who wanted to integrate science into theology. Evolution provided them their best opportunity. For Bascom, evolution signified the reality of change. All things are in flux. Bascom believed that this truth has special importance for religion. It discredited religious orthodoxy, rigid creedal formulations, and all efforts to make religion a matter of inflexible dogma or scriptural literalism. To that end Bascom also called for the open-ended pursuit of truth, whether in religion or in social thought. He wanted the quest for new truths above all to mark the spirit of the university. His ideals anticipate the famous reference to the "fearless sifting and winnowing" of ideas made by the UW Board of Regents in the 1894 statement.

John Bascom made a creative synthesis of these intellectual systems and from them forged the beginning of the Wisconsin Idea. The story that follows

takes this history deeply into the lively contest of ideas in the nineteenth century. Herein lies Bascom's special achievement, in moving from an immersion in these heady subjects out into institutional leadership at a major state university. And this intellectual effort extended beyond the published word. It entered Bascom's classrooms and his informal meetings with students, from which enthusiasts like Robert La Follette and Charles Van Hise gave it significant extensions.

Bascom saw much of the challenge before American higher education in philosophical terms and came down for idealism in the Tappan mode in preference to the common sense mode of Wayland. By the time he was teaching at Wisconsin, Bascom had grown more critical of the Scottish thinkers, especially

10. *Discourse Delivered by Henry P. Tappan on the Occasion of His Inauguration as Chancellor of the University of Michigan, December 21st, 1852* (n.p., n.d.); Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, eds., "Henry P. Tappan on University Education, 1851," in *American Higher Education*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 1:491; Howard H. Peckham, *The Making of the University of Michigan, 1817–1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 36; Marsden, *Soul of the University*, 109.

11. Hofstadter and Smith, "Tappan," 1:492, 493, 495; Perry, *Tappan*, 214 (longer quotation).

12. Perry, *Tappan*, 213; Hofstadter and Smith, "Tappan," 1:492; Henry P. Tappan, "Soul-Growth," *Christian Parlor Magazine*, May 1, 1849, 51.

Reid. True, they had done yeoman service in upending the skepticism of Berkeley and Hume, but at some expense of larger truth. "The dogmatic assertion of common sense was put in the place of complete analysis," Bascom wrote. Making the mind's great faculties the function of common sense, he explained, yielded to "dogmatic assertion." Certainly the Scottish thinkers had no business making the Reason a function of common sense, for that operation confined our knowledge to the domain of perceptions and the objects to which they attach. Bascom and the idealists wanted more from philosophy. They wanted a bolder play of intuitions, a more confident speculation, a larger intellectual reach. The Scottish methodology worked in tepid fashion, Bascom complained; it still rested too strongly in the Lockean empirical mode. "The sensationalism of Locke," Bascom asserted, "cast a cold, benumbing shadow on many forms of belief that were striving to escape it."[13]

Bascom addressed this subject, using more common parlance, in a baccalaureate sermon, "Common Sense and Spiritual Insight." We owe much to "common sense," he said. "Common sense stands for shrewd, sagacious, fox-like power." It's a great endowment if one has it. Business supplies its natural outlet, and so does politics, because in these activities "the cunning touch" yields advantages. Bascom did not dismiss the value of this asset for the common good or for sound philanthropic work that aids social progress. Common sense, however, too often gives us only a microscopic view of things. We need more, and here Bascom made the contrast with "spiritual insight," the gift of Reason. That faculty enlarges our vision, brings the parts into a whole, and above all perceives those invisible forces—spiritual and moral—that thrive in and rule physical nature. "The man of simple common sense," Bascom said, "knows nothing of these forces." In the end, he believed, spiritual insight has more practical value than common sense, because it envisions the larger needs of the human community. So "true statesmanship . . . requires also the rarer, much larger gift of insight." Had spiritual insight prevailed over common sense, Bascom asserted, we would have ended slavery much sooner than we did. He urged his audience to apply the same vision toward the social ills of the day: the plight of the poor, the toll of liquor, the inordinate power of money. Ultimately, Bascom said, we need both qualities of mind. "We must be able to unite and harmonize these two things, spiritual insight and practical sagacity."[14]

13. John Bascom, *An Historical Interpretation of Philosophy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), 292–94.

14. John Bascom, *Common Sense and Spiritual Insight* [Baccalaureate Sermon] (Milwaukee: Cramer, Aikens & Cramer, 1886), 4–7.

Bascom's address had large implications for university education. In 1881, in the pages of the *North American Review*, he had taken on the subject of "Atheism in Colleges." Like others, Bascom saw the question in terms of philosophy, and he led with an attack, once more, on the empiricist tradition. He began his essay with a glance at the British universities, which both Wayland and Tappan believed the American colleges had too long emulated. Bascom claimed that they were in far worse condition intellectually than the American. That country's long tradition of philosophical empiricism had prepared the way for a bad situation there, he believed. "A philosophy of sensationalism, materialism, skepticism, and agnosticism," Bascom wrote, "has formed the deepest and strongest current of English speculation. Atheism is the necessary upshot of such a line of thought." "The English mind," Bascom warned, "has striven to draw the supply of its spiritual life so long out of the dry roots of sensationalism." We have a rather direct path then, he asserted, from Locke and Joseph Priestley, to John Tyndall, Thomas Huxley, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer. The long and bad effects, Bascom asserted, registered empiricism's disparagement of rational thought, by which Bascom meant the idealist's sense of Reason, denoting the mind and its expansive powers that provide "avenues to the spiritual world."[15]

American higher education, Bascom stated, faced many intellectual challenges. It could not meet them, though, through a course of reaction. "No regression and no resentment" against modern ideas will do. Religious dogma will not suffice. The small colleges could retrench in their old sectarian ways, Bascom said, but the large-scale university, open to avenues of new knowledge, could not. And in these colleges, Bascom noted, even in the late date of 1881, the Scottish philosophy still enjoys its vogue. To be sure, Bascom allowed, it stands in "dogmatic opposition" to English sensationalism and positivism, but it comes out of the same empiricist workshop. Thus, he said, "it does not fully trust or give clear explanation of those rational powers by which mind rises beyond the world of sensible impressions into that of spiritual truths." The Scottish philosophy, then, affords only "a temporary support to faith." Ultimately, the American universities will win or lose the battle on the grounds of philosophy. "The evil is intellectual," Bascom affirmed, "and admits only of an intellectual remedy." Philosophy is key.[16]

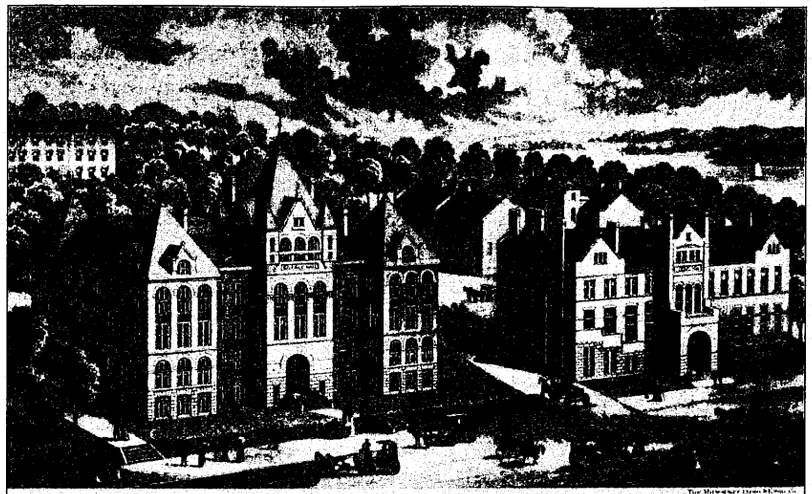
15. John Bascom, "Atheism in Colleges," *North American Review* 132 (January 1881), 32–33, 35.

16. Bascom, "Atheism," 34 (first quotation), 35–39. On this subject see also, John Bascom, "The Degeneracy of Empirical Philosophy," *Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine* 15 (April 1881), 342–50.

As Bascom pressed this matter he gave much attention also to science and religion, a main focus of his "new theology." The whole new course of higher education in the United States would reflect the responses to the questions posed by that relationship, he believed. Protestant liberalism everywhere embraced an opening to science. Amid the attempts at reconciliation, Bascom maintained the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, but always emphasizing their interrelationship. He would say many times over, as he did in his book *Natural Theology*, that science always informs our understanding of God, and guides us in a progressive revelation. Bascom wrote this book from his classroom lectures at Wisconsin, and it served afterward as a text for his classes. "Science," he said, "is constantly subserving [a] great purpose; it compels us to reshape our conceptions of the divine nature, and give them more fulness and proportion."[17] On the other hand, an erroneous understanding of science, he believed, threatens to lead us wholly astray. Bascom had never relented in his war against positivism. Ultimately, he asserted, one had to have clearly in view the distinctions between the natural and the supernatural. Error went in two directions: in confusions that followed from merging their identities, and in the misconceptions of a theological dualism so sharp as to contain these realities in separate spheres. The new theology understood the world in terms of the dynamic interrelationships of the natural and the supernatural, above all in their evolutionary patterns of interaction.

Bascom fought to make these points in his Wisconsin classroom and beyond. Thus in 1883 he assumed the public podium and gave his baccalaureate address on the subject of "The Natural and the Supernatural." The seniors in the audience would have found his remarks very familiar. Bascom had made the major points in more detailed outline previously, in 1876, in his publication of *A Philosophy of Religion*. In all places Bascom emphasized that a sound philosophy of religion depended greatly on a correct understanding of science. He always wondered at the technological marvels of his day and called science "the great, distinguishing good of our time." In fact, Bascom charged that often the great threat to religion really came from religion's most dogged defenders; they betrayed it by intellectual inflexibility and closed thinking. Theology must pay attention to science, he affirmed. At the outset of *Philosophy of Religion*, his first book written as president at Wisconsin, he said that he wanted to speak for those religious-minded people who felt the need to reopen old questions, to give Reason more room in which to work, and to engage in "freer, bolder, more critical" approaches to the faith. The quest will lead into philosophy,

17. John Bascom, *Natural Theology* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1880), 80.


NEW SCIENCE HALL, CHEMICAL LABORATORY & MACHINE SHOP.
STATE UNIVERSITY, MADISON.

New Science Hall, 1887. (Wisconsin Historical Society, WHi-3604)

Bascom asserted. Philosophy underlies religion and "we wish to see exactly what that philosophy is which underlies religion."[18]

First, he would dispense with the positivists. We can study nature, he said, and perceive fact after fact. We can accumulate a large composite of data from the rich sensory life of the world. These "slow-plodding steps of empirical inquiry" supply the facts that fill the mind and build knowledge. But we cannot stop there, Bascom urged. And the best scientific thinking knows why. Here the president posited two considerations. First, he said, modern science has advanced to where it sees beyond mere data. The advanced knowledge and new theories

18. Bascom, *Natural Theology*, v; idem, *A Philosophy of Religion, or The Rational Grounds of Religious Belief* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1876), ix, 3, 13. Bascom requested the construction of a new science hall upon his arrival to the presidency. One was built, and when it burned a second followed, in 1887. Science expanded significantly in the UW curriculum and even to the point that Bascom believed it had too much emphasis. Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin: A History, 1848–1925*, 2 vols. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949), 1: 311–12, 321–22, 362–63. The authors write: "It was clear that by 1887 the University of Wisconsin had become a center of scientific investigation that could not be overlooked in any evaluation of the scientific resources of the nation" (1:362).

are showing us that nature discloses more than sensory manifestations; it reveals an underlying reality of forces and powers. We can no longer regard material things as static, inert, passive. This age of the atom demonstrates that invisible, active, occult realities describe nature in its true and ultimate condition. "The deadest things thus contain the liveliest energies," Bascom wrote. He used terms like "supersensual substratum," "inscrutable force," and "inexplicable to the senses" in convening this large, invisible reality. The old static view of nature and the universe, inheritance of the Enlightenment, now yields to a more dynamic representation. "The analogy of a building is seen to fail, and that of a living organism takes its place." That reference led Bascom to attribute to this hidden world a spiritual presence, an intelligence, an "omniscient power." Modern science delivers us to a new and firmer foundation for theological thinking, he assured.[19]

But Bascom feared that religion itself failed to exercise this intellectual outreach as much as science also failed. He went public with a statement in the *Independent*, addressing the question "What Is the Trouble with Religion?" Some people, Bascom wrote, say that nothing is wrong with religion, and that we should have no trouble if everyone simply accepted the established truths that religion has given us. Were religion that simple, Bascom replied, the problem would not exist. But this view casts religion too narrowly. Bascom insisted that we have multiple means of approaching religion, which, like a large mountain, can be assailed from many sides. "The spiritual world," Bascom wrote, "is a large world and a strange one to the feet of men; and it cannot be known by traveling along a single, defined path." He also hastened to characterize religion as "a living experience." He likened it to a fine art; "it is a peculiar and high experience into which the soul half sees, half feels its way." Religion, like science, Bascom believed, must loosen the reins of the vision that drives it. His remarks in the *Independent* concurred with a large project that had been engaging him for some time, for he had concluded that Christianity in America needed a "new theology."[20]

19. Bascom, *Natural Theology*, 97–98; idem, *Philosophy of Religion*, 98–102, 109–10.

20. John Bascom, "What Is the Trouble with Religion?," *Independent*, June 16, 1881, 3. D. H. Meyer, in his study of American moral philosophy, credits Bascom with helping to break from the idea of fixed moral truth, secure in its independent ontological status. He finds a key passage in the textbook Bascom wrote at Madison: "As controlling circumstances are always changing, as social life is ever unfolding, the moral law never remains the same for any considerable period, and is hardly twice alike in its application. . . . An absolute and unchanging right in action is illusory." Meyer, *Instructed Conscience*, 128; John Bascom, *Ethics or Science of Duty* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1879), 354.

The "New Theology" became a mantra of the liberal theology movement in the post–Civil War period, the era in American religious history that Sydney Ahlstrom called "The Golden Age of Protestant Liberalism."[21] Bascom introduced his New Theology formally in his baccalaureate address at Madison in 1884 and had the address reprinted in the *Christian Union*. (A year earlier, theologian Theodore Munger of Andover Theological Seminary had titled an essay "The New Theology," in his book *The Freedom of Faith*.) Bascom outlined key points that he expanded in other places and ultimately into his book of 1891, which has this name. Bascom, as did much of the liberal movement, gave considerable attention to Reason and revelation. Partisans of one or the other in the churches, Bascom noted, had quarreled bitterly over the primacy each side favored in Christian theology. But Bascom judged the dispute unecessary; Reason and revelation, he proclaimed, "culminate at one point; are gathered up in the same clear and serene light." Bascom, however, effected this union only by severely diminishing the weight of "Revelation" as understood by the conservative theologians, that is, as the revealed word of God in scripture. For true revelation really signifies Reason. "Reason," Bascom, explained, "stands for all our powers of knowledge in their full, harmonious, successful action." Revelation does not constitute something distinct from Reason; it is Reason. Bascom, however, gave Reason all the trump cards over Revelation. "Revelation so far as it is not addressed to reason, or grasped by reason, is not Revelation."[22]

The New Theology had yet more to offer. For Bascom it signified a God in history, whose governance occurred procedurally, in progression, and in an unfolding revelation. Bascom, however, did not speak merely of a gradual disclosure of a remote inspiration. A God in history meant for him a God in the world. Progression bore along with it renovation, reconstruction, social amelioration, and advancement toward the earthly Kingdom of God. Bascom thus asserted that "the new theology does not separate itself from this work of regeneration in society as we actually find it." Here for Bascom and many other liberals theology found its fullest application in the Social Gospel. The work of improving the world gathered hope from the idea of God's progressive manifestation in human history. A theology of immanence became normative to the new liberalism. But for Bascom, one new idea especially gave the imprimatur of science to this new theology, the idea he called "the great thought of our time": evolution. Evolution brought everything together for Bascom. It assisted

21. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), chap. 46.

22. John Bascom, "The New Theology," *Christian Union* 30 (July 10, 1884), 37.

him crucially in solidifying his world view but also in deriving the social agenda that marked his career at Wisconsin. And it underscored the curricular purposes of higher education in the state, the new education, as Bascom was presenting it. Thus Bascom could write passionately at the end of his address to the Wisconsin students: "We seem to see the kingdom of heaven coming along these very lines of union between scientific research and religious insight; man and God, nature and the supernatural working together for a perfect individual and social life, redeeming the present and by it marching victoriously into the future." Of course, that promise also depended on a correct understanding of evolution.[23]

The idea of evolution gave liberal Protestantism new leverage in the later nineteenth century. By its appropriation the liberal theists found a ready means of accommodating modern science. Evolution also gave new and compelling expression to Christian ideas about the unity of creation. It gave inspiration to those liberals who saw their faith active in the world, advancing Christian ideas of benevolence and social improvement. And, to many in this group, evolution suggested a teleological promise that God had designs for the realization of the earthly kingdom.[24] Consider some of the publications that emerged from the new preoccupation with evolution: Minot J. Savage, *The Religion of Evolution* (1876); Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (1885); Lyman Abbott, *The Evolution of Christianity* (1892) and his *The Theology of an Evolutionist* (1897); James McCosh, *The Religious Aspect of Evolution* (1890); George Harris, *Moral Evolution* (1896), and Bascom's own *Evolution and Religion* (1897).

An earlier chapter reviewed Bascom's first encounter with Charles Darwin's thesis. When he took up the subject again some eight years later, Bascom had reason to think that a facile theistic accommodation of Darwin had placed Christian thinking at risk. Bascom said that he wrote his textbook *Natural Theology* in order to make clarifications and corrections concerning evolution. Darwinism and other naturalistic versions of the idea, Bascom feared, were having the effect of turning attention back to creation and away from divine intervention. But such a shift, he protested, deprives evolution of its sustaining harmony, its wholeness, those features that we find not so much in an original deed but in an ongoing activity and oversight that takes in all the vast and impressive data that science supplies. Bascom here sounded a major theme in Liberal Protestantism's

23. Bascom, "New Theology," 37–38.

24. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 299–30.

endorsement of evolution.[25] Focused on that process, he also assured, we must not allow evolution to lapse into merely physical laws. Some kind of progressive deism, such as a theory that would posit all the future history of earth and man in some original nebula, gives in fact only a mechanical rendering of evolution.[26]

Bascom believed that evolution enhanced theism, but only when seen through the mind of philosophical idealism. The empiricist may see design, but only in each work as a separate creation. Theologian William Paley described a man finding a watch and from its intricate parts posits a watchmaker. But evolution, Bascom argued, affords a vastly more magnificent view of things, of design, expansive in scope, but also reflecting ongoing work over immense stretches of time. And throughout we see patterns and forms perpetuated, modified, but withal showing a unity, even across species transformed over millennia. These broad relations, Bascom affirmed, "disclose the lines of rational construction." And for Bascom, furthermore, no other doctrine or theory could better illustrate the dynamics of the two great realities of life: the physical and the spiritual. Bascom said that in the past, human error lay in exaggerating the supernatural; today error lies in exaggeration of the natural at the expense of the other. Evolution, however, perfectly restores the balance. Now we see the world as the critical interplay of the two forces, and we no longer perpetuate the rigid dualism that has led us astray.[27]

Bascom's contribution here gave further visibility to the significant intellectual role he was playing at the University of Wisconsin. He made that institution a citadel of Protestant liberal theology among the universities of the United

25. Or, as Henry Ward Beecher put it cryptically: "Design by wholesale is grander than design by retail." James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwinism in Great Britain and America, 1870–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 221. Bascom's former student Washington Gladden subscribed enthusiastically to evolution as the new and sure foundation of religion. He offered an immanentist conception of divine reality "by which all these fragments are knit together in unity." Science, Gladden asserted, was supplying a surer foundation for religious understanding "far more firm and broad than that on which men rested their souls in what were known as the ages of faith." Dorrien, *Making of Theology*, 317.

26. Bascom, *Natural Theology*, 125–26; idem, "Philosophical Results of a Denial of Miracles," *Princeton Review*, n.s., 8 (July–December 1881), 88.

27. Bascom, *Natural Theology*, 147–48, 190–91, 194–99; idem, *The Natural and the Supernatural* [Baccalaureate Sermon] (Milwaukee: Cramer, Aikens & Cramer, 1883), 15.

States and the most important location of evolutionary theism among the state universities of the nation. Bascom did even more. He addressed religion, and he examined Christianity in all its many parts. He gave attention to subjects such as "inspiration," "interpretation," "miracles," "atonement," "sin," and "immortality," in far greater breadth and substance than any of his presidential peers. His writings in these subjects offer intriguing material and impose on this author the question of how much attention to give them. The brief review that concludes this chapter represents a selective reading and one that looks for clues to the next chapter, that is, Bascom's version of the Social Gospel, his early formulation of the Wisconsin Idea, and the reform politics of the later nineteenth century.

For at least three reasons Bascom wanted to take up matters of Christian belief. For one, he never believed that natural theology sufficed in itself to describe the life of true religion, or all of its intellectual content. Too often the God drawn from nature looks like nature, he said. That God, author of physical laws, submits to physical laws. Then the Divine Mind, put in back of the natural regime, becomes superfluous to it. Bascom would insist on seeing God as a personality and a being of supernatural powers. No other God can inspire true devotion as opposed to mere appreciation. Religion, furthermore, needs the rituals of worship, Bascom believed, as appropriate to a God so experienced. But the God of natural theism, Bascom feared, does not yield a God to be prayed to.[28]

Second, Bascom wanted to bring important aspects of Christian theology under review, and to revise them. He castigated the doctrine of vicarious atonement, the notion of Jesus's taking on all the sins of humankind, because, he said, it corrupted and diminished the true process of redemption. That process, Bascom said, leads through a slow course of repentance and regeneration. It not only requires of us careful nurture of our inner spiritual nature, but roots us in an organic life that includes the world outside, in short, society. Redemption demands our reorientation toward "living forces." God does, to be sure, work for the redemption of the race, but never by divine fiat. In vicarious atonement, Bascom objected, "a single achieved result is substituted for a living, ongoing, organic process." That process rebuilds the world, it fights against the evils in it, it looks for moral amelioration; in short, it builds the earthly Kingdom of Heaven. One can anticipate readily here that Bascom's strenuous faulting of vicarious atonement had much to do with his own effort to define and apply a

28. Bascom, *Natural Theology*, 228–30.

social gospel. Thus, he insisted, this errant doctrine "contravenes the work of God in the world."[29]

And third, John Bascom did believe in miracles, and wished to make the case for them. The idea won an easy acceptance in his thinking, for good philosophy pointed right to it. In fact, there was really nothing miraculous about a miracle at all, he believed. By this term, he said, we mean the intervention of a higher power in nature, with results that do not fall within the strict chain of physical forces. A miracle, Bascom wrote, "is but a disclosure of the supernatural beyond its ordinary limits." The act registers the work of those other forces not within our sight, not accessible by our sensory faculties. He called it "an overbearing power before which the laws and forces of nature give ground." We may label the phenomenon an intervention, a disruption, or a transcending of natural law, but it always signifies the essential nature of reality itself, as dually constituted by the natural and the supernatural. "If we include mind as well as matter in nature," Bascom wrote, "we then have in nature two laws, one of necessity and one of liberty." Bascom did not discuss the miracles of scripture. He felt no need to, though he did acknowledge that some reports of them reflected an age too much given to the supernatural. Bascom wished only to show to the modern intellect the ontological reasonableness of miracles. On that truth, Christianity secured its own credibility, he insisted. Christianity, from the early New Testament and in its understanding of the Incarnation, speaks most authentically to a correct philosophy, Bascom maintained. Writing in his *Philosophy of Religion* he spoke in a way that carried a conviction that he first embraced in his study with Laurens Hickok: "Christianity stands or falls through philosophy, a philosophy of liberty and spiritual intuitions."[30]

In his own effort to enlarge the meaning of a social gospel, and to give his version an application especially suited to a changing America, Bascom added a new ingredient: the state university. Religion, as observed in the last chapter, still occupied a substantial place in American higher education. Bascom never doubted that religion should have such a place. But he also carefully articulated how the large debate about the new curriculum and the new scholarly purposes of the university would not only secure a religious substance to its academic work, but also, in the case of the public university, serve a larger social, reformist purpose.

Like Henry P. Tappan before him and like others in his own time, Bascom had to refute charges that the state university embodies a secular culture and a standard of scientific neutrality that make it irreligious and amoral. Rivalries

24. Bascom, *Seat of Sin*, 14, 14n, 16; idem, "Functions of the State," 4; idem, *Christian State*, 20.

between the new state universities and the older religious colleges fueled these charges of "infidelity" and challenged presidents and other defenders of the state schools to show otherwise. Bascom came to Wisconsin from a struggling, small college, and yet one far better off than literally hundreds of similar schools, most of them with Protestant denominational affiliations. He believed he knew firsthand the academic deficiencies of these places and would engage in no sentimentality such as now President Garfield had done in celebrating Mark Hopkins and the log. Again he used the baccalaureate sermon as his bully pulpit. The colleges serve a useful purpose, especially to their sponsoring religious groups, Bascom allowed, but they "drag on in poverty" and cannot bear the burden the nation requires from higher education today.[25] Bascom had two large points to make on the greater usefulness of the new state universities over the small colleges.

For one, Bascom believed that the state universities served as harmonizing agencies in a United States where diversity—ethnic, religious, and more increasingly social class—challenged its national identity as never before. In the era of new immigration this challenge to assimilation intensifies, he pointed out. Many in this group and in the nation generally have no attachments to religion and find the sectarian schools "distasteful," Bascom observed. Many other people, however, still wanted public funds to go to these colleges instead of to their state university. Bascom deplored that preference. He contrasted the states of Ohio and Michigan. The first, he observed, has small colleges in proliferation. They have a poor record in scholarship and have kept its state university in mean condition. Michigan showed a different pattern; it had fewer sectarian colleges but, it had the University of Michigan, which Wisconsin had long emulated. That institution had wide state support. The University of Michigan, Bascom indicated, "commands an influence and concentrates an educational energy compared with which the power of any one of [the private] institutions is insignificant." That state university, furthermore, had helped unify the state through the whole system of public education and had a record of superior scholarship. Altogether, Bascom believed, Michigan's state university promoted an "organic" growth for the state.[26]

In a national forum Bascom made a plea for state universities the year after his arrival in Madison. The United States, he said, cannot let so crucial a matter as its advanced education rest on the goodwill and charity of those loyal to the

25. Bascom, *Education and the State*, 9.

26. Bascom, *Education and the State*, 9–11, 15–16 (quotation); idem, "The State University," *Independent*, August 26, 1875, 7.

small sectarian colleges. If nothing else, they serve only to perpetuate the fragmentation of our social body. They ill serve its organic needs, the harmonization process. Thus the happenstance situation that prevails now, he added, "is egregiously unjust to the state itself" and to the nation as a whole. The demands of the day turn our attention to science and technology, keys to economic progress. We need institutions that can promote research in these fields, and the small colleges, overburdened as they are, cannot possibly meet the demands. The state has a duty and an interest in sustaining its university. "Higher education is not a branch of business," Bascom urged. "It does not directly pay for itself. It is not right that its burden should be thrown as a charity on a few, rather than as a duty upon the many. It is unworthy of a great state to do this."[27]

Bascom's conception of the state university fit very well with his entire social philosophy, especially its organic ideals and evolution's scheme of advancing harmony and integration in the human race. The whole idea of "the public" appealed to Bascom. Therefore, he pleaded in the *Independent*: "The state university is a general and common possession." It serves the public in a way that the small colleges cannot. "It exerts a correspondingly broad, universal influence." Bascom wanted that influence to begin in the state's program of public education, from the lowest to the highest levels. He spoke often on the need for integration, and urged that the lower schools orient their instructional programs so as to make a continuous line of subject matter preparatory to the university at Madison. As it is now, Bascom indicated, "Our education in all or almost all of our states lacks completeness, organic dependence, the ministration of all parts to each and each to all." So did Bascom implore in his baccalaureate sermon in 1880, titled "Tests of a School-system." "Does [the] system build up the state in all its powers, and harmonize it in all its interests, and strengthen it in all its liberties?" he asked. Here Bascom stated another recommendation for public education, one that he would give broad application to social issues. Public education should enhance the public spirit. It should give life in our thought and imagination to the reality of the state and the common good. It will need such a vivid sense to meet the designs of powerful, private interests that injure the social organism.[28]

Meeting the charges against them, Bascom had to address the religious and moral pedagogy of the state universities. Here he seized an opportunity and

27. Bascom, "State University," 7.

28. Bascom, "State University," 7; idem, "The State University," *Independent*, July 22, 1875, 2; idem, *Tests of a School-system* [Baccalaureate Sermon] (Milwaukee: Cramer, Aikens & Cramer, 1880), 10 (quotation).

here he placed the last component in his comprehensive social gospel as related to higher education. Simply stated, his position asserted the superior ability of the state institution to instill a truly religious education. And by religious Bascom meant everything that one would expect from his lengthy writings on theology and religious practice. Thus, on the many occasions in which he tried to address the current ills of religion, he cited its dogmatism, its attachment to creeds, its obsession with asserting and enforcing fixed truth. Insofar as the sectarian colleges have denominational loyalties and are under the sponsorship of religious organizations, Bascom believed, they suffer from a static intellect, "instruction that is narrowed down to a single dogmatic system, and enforced on all sides as an authoritative belief."[29]

Bascom had three reinforcing points to make on behalf of the state university. First, he asserted that it could advance religion in religion's best and most common character—its service to morality. Morality, Bascom affirmed, underscores all religious teaching; it provides the common core that thrives amid the theological fine points that have so long fostered disunity in the Christian churches. The state universities, then, may not promote a particular religious faith or creed, but "only the more strongly and clearly may their attention be turned to a beautiful and fruitful ethical life—the culmination of religion." Bascom had always placed religion in the world, its purpose to foster social ideals of love and harmony. This role, he claimed, conjoined the religious life and God's great work for the human race in its collective needs. For Bascom, university education, insofar as it advanced moral knowledge, also advanced a social ethic, one that sometimes stood athwart the counter ideal of individual rights, when that ideology became dangerously ascendant and threatening to the organic society. Bascom, of course, saw that reality dominant in the United States of the 1870s and 1880s.[30]

Second, the state university could serve this ethical need in line with the modern intellect. It would do so through those new curricular advances coming into the university—the social sciences especially. Bascom had made sociology central to his own teaching program at Wisconsin and had given it a religious

29. Bascom, *Education and the State*, 18. Bascom was not entirely fair in making this point; the small colleges had always offered broadly humanistic programs of study, and denominational affiliation barely showed through in their instructional programs, including the important course in moral philosophy. Nor did they impose religious tests on students.

30. John Bascom, "What Do the Members?," 99–100, 92; idem, *Tests of a School-system*, 22.

foundation and a moral substance. Bascom's own instruction marked his commitment to the new academic discipline and carried his conviction that the social sciences bore the means of human progress more helpfully than static religious belief. In the social sciences, Bascom proclaimed, we find the means of "social redemption," for these disciplines supply that enlarged view of the whole that the social organism needs for its means of adaptation and survival, and its moral progress. Bascom gave the social sciences a large embrace and included in them the subjects of political economy, civil law, constitutional law, sociology, and international law. These new intellectual fields expand our understanding of the many parts of the social whole and their precise interconnections. They are to that extent indispensable to an enlarged moral vision. Here, Bascom said, "moral truths have their seat." Of course, Bascom had just as much faith in humanistic learning. Right philosophy, as he said repeatedly, underscores all the social sciences.[31]

And third, Bascom urged that the state university can best meet the needs of the modern intellect and so serve the state as well. We must have no restraints on full access to all the gains the world is making through new ideas. "It is also the privilege of public instruction to handle freely the great truths of our lives," he wrote. Two important points followed. We should have no restrictions on what is taught at the state university. We must legitimate all new knowledge. And we must sanction all methods of pursuing it. "The state," Bascom specified, "is responsible for a truly liberal method, and for that only." In fact, open pursuit of the truth makes the state university a large asset to the state itself. "The state may, in each branch of instruction and in each school, avail itself of all the freedom the specific time and place will allow." And to that extent, he averred, "the freedom of instruction is worth more than any one thing taught." Bascom inscribed these principles into his classroom instruction at Wisconsin, from which he derived his textbook on ethics.[32]

So considering the good role of the new education, Bascom envisioned further gains to come from it. In words remembered by many of his students, most importantly Robert La Follette, Bascom urged from the graduates of the state university a large loyalty to the state and a life of service to the state by those who had benefited from the state's sponsorship of their education. And when he spoke to the graduating students at Madison in 1877 he offered one of his most hopeful and urgent pleas. The state university graduates, as he foresaw their role, would function almost like a new force, a fourth estate in the state's

31. Bascom, "What Do the Members?," 100; idem, *Tests of a School-system*, 22–23.

32. Bascom, *Ethics*, 306–7.

public life. Directly or indirectly they would extend to the life of the state a certain influence; they would provide a leavening effect in wider and wider circles of the state. "The time will come," Bascom said in his baccalaureate, "and public education will hasten it, in which educational men will gather influence within their own field, and become the servants of the State to counsel action as well as to carry it out." Bascom wished to impress on the university graduates a sense of patriotic duty. "The State has educated you for yourselves and for it," he told them. He followed with lines familiar to all his social ethics: The two purposes are not in conflict, he said, "but they can only be harmonized by a noble life. To such a life, at least in its social bearings, you are pre-eminently bound. You have no right to seek your own weal, if your own weal does not include the public weal."[33]

One might find such encouragement of public service not uncommon among the commencement speeches of the day, but these words do have a particular Bascom theme. Bascom had special reasons for explaining why university graduates might take on these roles and exercise this influence. He judged these students especially equipped for these purposes because of the kind of education they had received. They above all others should know and support the moral forces that advance humanity; they above all others should have the wide, inclusive vision of life and of society so as to advance the harmonizing process. Here Bascom contemplated an emerging intellectual elite. For what the university graduates owe above all to the state, Bascom believed, is ideas. They must act as an intellectual vanguard that will usher in a new age of Reason. "It will be your office," Bascom said to graduates on another occasion, "to make these ruling ideas clear, sound, and suitable." The graduates of state universities have a duty to carry into action, through state offices or through a large public influence, the ideas that will bring about the just state and usher in the new era of collective power. Trained in philosophy and the social sciences, the preeminent moral subjects, this cohort owes to society the full force of moral conviction, Bascom asserted.[34]

The Wisconsin Idea, under John Bascom's first conception of it, thus had a powerful moral urgency in its message. Above all, it derived its great hopes from humanistic education and the social sciences. In an age in which demands for "utility" caught the ears of so many university presidents and in which demands for higher education to fuel the engines of industrial growth motivated educational change, Bascom resisted. Mere practicality narrows our

33. Bascom, *Education and the State*, 17, 19.
34. Bascom, "What Do the Members?," 96, 94.

educational vision, he said. Our education should be "free and full and humanitarian." When Bascom told the audience at Madison that "the University of Wisconsin will be permanently great in the degree in which it understands the conditions of the prosperity and peace of the people, and helps to provide them," he meant no narrowly practical instruction. True education included other elements: "revelation of truth, the law of righteousness and the love of man."[35]

Bascom thus spoke in his typical fashion. All issues for him, and especially the grand subject of state university education, reflected the core of his religious liberalism. Bascom offered the following remarks as the concluding words in his last public address as president of the University of Wisconsin in 1887. He spoke to the graduates:

> Standing in this open space of thought between the past and the future, in full view of what has been done, in full view of what may be done, I bid you good-bye, pledging you, one by one, with extended hand, to a faithful adhesion, within your life and beyond it, to all the great issues discussed by us in common, and in common held by us as our inheritance from our fathers—issues that give amplitude and scope to our own love, and are the commitment of the divine hand to us in the gracious and everlasting government of Christ.[36]

"All the great issues discussed by us in common." Many students from the University of Wisconsin long remembered those discussions.

35. Bascom, "What Do the Members?," 93.
36. Bascom, *Christian State*, 32.

Bascom needed little incentive to take up the cause of temperance, but he might have had some prodding along the way. At Williams, Mark Hopkins supported the cause, and at Andover, Moses Stuart extracted from his deep scholarship in ancient Greek and Hebrew his own peculiar defense.[15] Both John and Emma Bascom got involved in the local movement immediately on their arrival to Madison and defended the Graham Law. Emma Bascom worked closely with Lavinia Goodell, who "would become the bane of liquor dealers in courtrooms across Wisconsin," and who led in establishing the Wisconsin Women's Temperance Alliance in 1874. Emma Bascom joined with other Wisconsin women to promote both temperance and women's suffrage. She helped Goodell win a bitter court case that made her the first licensed female attorney in the state. (See next chapter.) In 1879 Bascom won election as president of the Equal Suffrage Association, founded the year before in Madison. The next year, when Frances Willard arrived and helped bring the Wisconsin Women's Temperance Alliance into the WCTU, Emma Bascom became the chapter's corresponding secretary. She later became president of this organization as well. The Bascoms constituted a powerful team for reform in Wisconsin.[16]

Bascom's book *Sociology*, published in 1887, incorporated topics and ideas that he had been presenting at the university over the last fourteen years. Here

13. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 179, 181–82; Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 8–9, 18–19. For more details on women in temperance, see Jack S. Blocker Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 61–94. On differences among women on this issue, see also idem, "Separate Paths: Suffragists and the Women's Temperance Crusade," *Signs* 10 (Spring 1985), 460–76.

14. Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 22, 36.

15. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 146.

16. Genevieve G. McBride, *On Wisconsin Women: Working for Their Rights from Settlement to Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 6–8, 10–11, 21–27, 41–43, 53, 88, 94.

and in other venues, including pamphlets, talks at local churches, and baccalaureate sermons, Bascom took up temperance. Like all who used the printed word to support this cause, Bascom measured the social and personal costs of drinking. He, like the others, insisted that temperance never stood alone as an issue; it mattered because it affected so many other human relationships and took a heavy toll on the social organism. If it were only a matter of the individual drinker, said Bascom, we could pretty much ignore the subject; we would certainly not have recourse to the law to outlaw liquor. So when we deal with temperance, he insisted, we take on also "the extended and inevitable connection of intemperance with crime, insanity, idiocy, the lives of women and children stripped of all safety by it, the great moral perversion and industrial weakness that attend upon it." So he wrote in his sociology textbook. In his baccalaureate sermon in 1887 he denounced the liquor trade and its manifest ill effects. "All the forces, divine and human, that struggle to lift society and make it buoyant with a spiritual life, suffer the eternal suffocation of one vile trade that hugs us to its filthy bosom," he said. Everywhere, Bascom went on, drink leaves "poverty and disease and vice." Bascom urged that everyone pays the costs of the inebriate drinker. He made this point in an address to the Congregational Church in Madison, his speech published by the National Temperance Society with a ringing endorsement. The drunkard exacts a toll "on the part of us all." We pay for poor houses, prisons, and asylums. The drunkard clogs the wheels of industry, slows the progress of enterprise, and thus he "puts his hand in every man's pocket."[17]

Bascom would make his case against drinking on broad philosophical grounds, but there crept into his language now and then words that suggest personal judgment and esthetic disgust with the habit. The drunkard, Bascom said, has lost all self-control and cannot reform himself. Liquor changes the personality and temperament of its consumer. He becomes mean spirited, selfish; he frequents the saloon and unsavory places. He stands athwart the progress of society in reason and civility. "The debasement and retrogression implied in [drunkenness] are too great." Bascom felt the same way about smoking and smokers. Smoking represented to him every bit a personal and social regression, a downward pull on society's general advancement in refinement and

17. John Bascom, *Sociology* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887), 199; idem, *A Christian State* [Baccalaureate Sermon] (Milwaukee: Cramer, Aikens & Cramer, 1887), 18–19; idem, *Prohibition and Common Sense* (New York: National Temperance Society and Publishing House, 1885), 1, 5, 15.

taste. So personal feelings weighed heavily in Bascom's screeds, but he did have a lot more ammunition to wield against drink.[18]

Liquor, Bascom believed, made many innocent victims, but it took its toll directly on the working classes as a group. We hear much talk, he said, about the oppression of labor by capital (and much of that came from Bascom himself), but far less about the oppression from drink. And from that source comes a far heavier toll, he believed. It had to do with money spent, to be sure, and Bascom offered statistics to make the point, but in fact it had a more insidious effect and greater deprivation. Bascom related his discussion of temperance to points made in his earlier sociological essays in *Bibliotheca Sacra*. Drinking and the indulgences that attend it conspire to keep the laboring classes detached from the progressive forces—moral, spiritual—that move the race forward. They deprive them of attachments and interconnections that complete the organic society. The human species advances by integration and inclusiveness, he explained, and all that prevents that vital process of organic formation impairs the whole body, but especially its alienated parts. Bascom wrote: "Not till workingmen seek indulgences more economical, more refreshing, more social, more elevating, will their condition be very much improved." So he spoke too of the "energy of prohibition" as having the quality of fresh air. It would win for workers a more vital engagement with the economic forces that can lift all classes.[19]

Bascom did not want laws to close all the saloons. Such action would smack of invidious class prejudice; nor, he said, did he want to deprive workers of some innocent pleasures. And he recognized that in Wisconsin the subject had a particular sensitivity, given the "beer-drinking customs of our German citizens." But he seemed to suggest that the Germans handled their beer better than the "Americans" did. All that said, Bascom did not know how to get the needed results short of total prohibition. So he endorsed total prohibition. Bascom did not blame immigrants as a group, and he never cited Irish or Germans as corrupting influences in America. He did betray some personal prejudice, however, when he discussed temperance in the framework of history and evolution. He proclaimed that "the Anglo-Saxon race has done more for government

18. Bascom, *Prohibition and Common Sense*, 3–4, 6, 9; idem, "Tobacco and Refinement," *Friend, a Religious and Literary Journal* 60 (September 25, 1886), 60; idem, "Why Should I Vote the Prohibition Ticket?," *Christian Union*, September 6, 1888, 246.

19. John Bascom, *The Philosophy of Prohibition* [Pamphlet] (New York: National Temperance Society and Publishing House, 1884), 10–11; idem, *Prohibition and Common Sense*, 6–7 (quotation).

than all other races combined." It has made freedom a stable force in its societies, and its leaders have given a large place to the rule of law. The United States, however, had increasingly in its midst, he warned, many who "belong to nationalities" that have never obtained freedom in their former countries. Now in America these individuals too often embrace a libertarian ethic without respect for the law that keeps freedom in balance. Such is the ethic of the saloon. Bascom feared that excess on one side will yield to excess on the other. Liberty that becomes destructive to the social organism will require an oppression that will resemble the very tyranny the newer groups have left behind.[20]

Intemperance betrayed certain "laws of inheritance" that reflect the appetites, passions, and diseases that have always plagued the human race, Bascom asserted. These effects should by now have become merely atavistic, gradually disappearing with the advance of the race along its evolutionary course. But we have not done enough to combat them. We have allowed them to pass along family lines from one generation to the next. "The blood of the race," Bascom wrote, "has so long been heated and polluted by intemperance" that years of abstinence must now force down its eroding effects. And to "root out" this hardened legacy will require an effort of great moral energy. It will have to rally all the positive, healthy, organic components of the community to heal its degenerative parts. Bascom did not judge the drunkard guilty; he judged him weak. He stood in need of strengthening, restoration, rejuvenation. As society occupied the "seat of sin," more than the individual, it became a matter of creating good conditions and destroying bad ones. So said the Social Gospelers generally. Society, of course, can do only so much, but that it must do. If not, Bascom warned, the drinker will drink and drink even more, "till nature will have no more of him."[21]

All those who defended temperance faced a considerable challenge. Their opponents constantly asked them, by what right does a government assume to tell people what to do or not to do for their enjoyments, their private pleasures, their choice of a lifestyle? From the days of the Jacksonian political quarrels, the Democratic Party and others embraced the mantra of "personal liberty" and cordoned off the reach of government from a large preserve of individual discretion. The liquor issue headed the list of protections. Temperance leaders, who had so many New England connections, there and by their removal to different parts of the country, drew on a rival defense. They invoked a tradition of community that from the time of John Winthrop honored the priority of the

20. Bascom, *Prohibition and Common Sense*, 7, 10–11, 12–13.
21. Bascom, *Prohibition and Common Sense*, 3–5; Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 128.

society and its interests, the public weal, against libertarian options. Sumptuary laws of various kinds perpetuated that tradition. Moral philosophers like Mark Hopkins sustained notions of the public ethic.[22]

Nonetheless, the prospect of taking the glass from the tippler's hands, especially the moderate imbiber in polite society, gave a hard burden of argument to the temperance folks, the more so in a country where the language of individual rights had flourished from the time of the national founding. Bascom, though, relished this challenge. Of course he drew on his own New England background, but his defense of temperance came out of a larger arsenal. This issue, as much as any, gave him the opportunity to elaborate his philosophy of state as presented in the materials seen from him previously. The temperance matter shows Bascom's long migration from philosophical idealism into the practical politics of his day.

The philosophy of prohibition, Bascom said, begins with a philosophy of state. He reasserted his conviction that Americans did not have a right philosophy of state, that is, one that sanctioned its positive and legitimate powers. "We are losing the idea of government," he wrote. He found antigovernment prejudices understandable. History chronicled the abuses of state power in plentiful ways. It displayed for all to see its manifold corruptions, its cruel tyrannies. One does not take lightly the heroic achievements of those who fought to liberate humans from these oppressions, Bascom acknowledged. So when he began his pamphlet on "the philosophy of prohibition," Bascom proceeded carefully. He wanted to establish first the grounds on which one could acknowledge legitimate government functions. He had to address those who would confine government to mere protection—the national defense and the public safety. He began with the state's role in fostering economic progress. "Government," he wrote, "is thus always passing beyond the office of protection, [and is] securing the conditions of industry, and laying, in various ways, the foundations of enterprise, intelligence and virtue. This great function of government, by which it combines the power of all, and makes it immediately and universally available, is as natural and spontaneous a function as that of protection, and cannot be dispensed with." Bascom adhered to standard Federalist, Whig, and Republican Party prescriptions, but he wanted to go even further.[23]

We need protection in our moral and mental life, too, Bascom insisted. Human progress moves along many fronts. And whereas Bascom had no doubt that material wealth and virtue went hand in hand, he did not hesitate to say

22. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 227–28.
23. Bascom, *Philosophy of Prohibition*, 3–4.

that prohibition offers the aid we can give to our industrial progress. But Americans, especially in the new age of Darwinian antistatism, gave low priority to the moral business of the state. Our weakened sense of government, Bascom said, has held us hostage to the moral erosion of our community. No better example exists than intemperance, "this unmitigated and malignant evil." We think either that we can do nothing about it or that we should do nothing about it. But society, Bascom lamented, is then left "without defense against physical degeneracy and spiritual debasement." Such intellectual agnosticism, he warned, gives huge advantage to the destructive forces that rend the social fabric. The liquor trade moves on apace. But, Bascom avowed, "we can not let this traffic alone because it will not let us alone."[24]

The organic views of society that Bascom derived from evolution and applied in his social gospel also informed his defense of prohibition. Survival depends for each organism on the healthy functioning, the right coordination and integration of all its parts. So did Bascom see society. Any organization, certainly any state, had within it elements—intellectual, moral, spiritual—that assured its adaptability and progress. Bascom saw these positive aspects in intellectual terms especially, but certainly moral and spiritual, too. In fact, he considered them inseparable. But other elements—erratic, anarchic, cancerous elements—defy integration with the whole and conspire against the social organism. So the social organism must see to its own survival need, and it may have to override individuals' personal choices. Bascom wrote: "Society, as the higher, more inclusive and powerful organism, has a right to life, full life, perfect life, both for its own sake and for the sake of the individual whose fortunes it wraps up in its own fortunes." Putting it more graphically in *Sociology*, he said that the organic movement of society gives society the right to deal with the "dead matter," individuals "morally inorganic and repellent," in its complex. That responsibility necessitates exercising the state's moral muscle; government must "overrule unreason with reason, unrighteousness with righteousness. Government means that or it means nothing."[25]

24. Bascom, *Philosophy of Prohibition*, 2; idem, "Why Vote Prohibition?," 246; idem, *A Christian State*, 18; idem, *Prohibition and Common Sense*, 13, 18 (quotation).

25. Bascom, *Prohibition and Common Sense*, 18; idem, *Sociology*, 198.

7

Progressivism 2: Women

Discussions and disputes that surrounded the question of coeducation at Williams found Bascom defending the cause as a professor in the college. The same issue challenged him at the University of Wisconsin, where now he spoke as president of the state institution. But in both locations Bascom brought to bear on the matter a very large perspective. He wrote, as he had long done, as a philosopher, a defender of liberal religion, an evolutionist, a teacher, and a textbook author in the new field of sociology. At Williams Bascom defended coeducation as a subject that addressed not only women's unequal access to higher education in the United States but the whole imbalance of gender relations in America. From the workplace to the dressing room, Bascom had indicated, women suffered a host of disadvantages that demanded attention and corrective action, for the whole matter of human progress and improvement was at stake. In Madison he threw himself into the "woman question" and made the progress of women a major personal commitment.

As did the women who wrote the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls in 1848, John Bascom believed that custom, ancient habits of thinking, sexual stereotyping, all impeded women's progress, all perpetuated the separate spheres that plagued reform and progress. Bascom's book on sociology opened with a chapter on "Custom." He had much respect for it. But Bascom was also the sociologist informed by the philosopher. The power of intellect, the great outreach of Reason into the sensible world and beyond into spiritual truths, always signified for him the necessary conditions of individual and human progress. On the one hand, he insisted, law and tradition assure stability and growth, and they ought not to yield to any immediate demands for change. Just

appreciation of tradition rooted in time and place gives us great statesmen like Edmund Burke, Bascom argued. And certainly one can understand how a thinker like Bascom, who celebrated the organic society, would find value in tradition. But, he warned, many wrongs have come from people's stubborn insistence on things as they always have been. Such an outlook, however, defies human evolution and progress, he asserted. The species must grow in its collective intellect, or it will stagnate. "The root of right is reason," Bascom wrote, "the slow-creeping reason of the aggregate mind." He added: "Customs which are congealed errors must yield to the clear, coherent push of reason proper."[1] Having thus stated the matter, Bascom went on to illustration, and the first application he made of it pertained to women.

Of all the instances wherein custom stood against the right evolutionary path, marriage and sex relations in the modern nations appeared to Bascom as among the most evident. The matter in several ways had worsened over time, and Bascom would point to the stark separation, the separate spheres that now divided males and females. Male superiority as we find it today has its roots in "barbarism," Bascom asserted, but its manifestations now, while milder, remain nonetheless entrenched, he believed. Bascom made no celebration of domesticity, coated it with no gloss of sentiment or idealism. Modern society, he wrote, has assigned women to an "industrial and social sphere" that denies them any meaningful exercise of their human qualities. Bascom laid these errant ways at the feet of custom—custom uninformed by Reason or morality.[2]

Bascom's classroom lectures on sociology and the large book he wrote on the subject asked consideration of the gender issue from many points of view. He pressed the matter with urgent prose.

On women's powers: "It will hardly be denied that women manifestly have the powers that would enable them to enter on a wider activity than now falls to them, and that that activity in turn would rapidly widen the powers which, by their very presence, are leading women to seek a field for their exercise."[3]

On men's power over women: "There is no more fatal concession than that which allows one portion of a community to settle the appropriate aims, ideals, efforts of another portion. It is the right of each class, conscious of its own resources, to define life for itself, under the common limitations of the public welfare."[4]

1. John Bascom, *Sociology* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887), 17.
2. Bascom, *Sociology*, 184, 186–87.
3. Bascom, *Sociology*, 185.
4. Bascom, *Sociology*, 185–86.

And, on sexual equality: "Sex as sex does not modify the fundamental principles governing the rights of men. It is a fact irrelevant to them."[5]

Bascom's writings on this subject reflected two of the intellectual influences we have traced so far in his career. Much in his language incorporated philosophical idealism, as previously employed by transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. For both her and Bascom, women's liberation signified growth in power. It alone could break women from the chains of tradition, exemplified at its worst in marriage and the "brute life" (Bascom) that had described it for centuries. Women had received a training in weakness, Bascom said. Society teaches them docility, attributes to them habits of sentiment and emotion, pretends to favor them for their special kind of religious piety, and celebrates their feminine virtues by bathing them in "the captivating glitter and flattering attentions of social life." Underneath it all Bascom could see only "a profound contempt of women." All the while a popular culture obscures the tyrannies of the domestic prison by displaying in poem and picture "the excellent duties of woman and her holy home functions."[6]

Persons familiar with Margaret Fuller and her celebrated writing on the relations of the sexes in the United States (especially her long essay "The Great Lawsuit" and its extension into her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*) might think of her in reading Bascom on this subject. Fuller, a disciple of Emerson and a major thinker among the transcendentalists, also brought the language of philosophical idealism into contemporary American life. Comparisons abound between both writers, but consider just one. Fuller wrote in her book, "What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home."[7] Fuller urged women to go into the world, break the norms of gender location, become sea captains if so inclined. Bascom, too, related the imperative of intellectual growth in women to enlarged experience everywhere. "It is difficult to believe that the true ideal of womanhood would suffer by more knowledge," he wrote, "wider human interests, broader fields of usefulness, more independent and robust action, physically, intellectually and morally, in shaping the conditions of life."[8]

5. Bascom, *Sociology*, 186.

6. Bascom, *Sociology*, 187–89.

7. Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElworth, 1845), 27.

8. Bascom, *Sociology*, 189–90.

An earlier chapter noted the Cult of True Womanhood and the ideal of the "separate spheres" so prominent in the mid-nineteenth century.[9] Bascom urged his readers to rethink the sexual dualism that had created and now perpetuates the separate spheres. Feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton said that once you concede the innate difference of the sexes you are left with separate spheres. We must reject the rigid differentiation of male and female nature and look for a common nature among humans, said the feminist advocates. Fuller began with the notion of God, whom she described in androgynous terms, a balance of "male" and "female" qualities—the "great radical dualism." Bascom hoped to see a move away from essentialism and prescribed a healthier and more authentic existence for both sexes. It would come when people lived freely, when the soul opened itself to the complementary good effects of both gender types. He specified: "The feminine form should not exclude the essential force of the masculine spirit; if it does, it sinks into weakness. The masculine form should not be wanting in feminine tenderness; if it is, it becomes gross."[10]

Both Fuller and Bascom thus expressed the ideal of harmony. Bascom reinforced this ideal by recourse, as always, to another intellectual source, evolution. Human evolution always referred Bascom to the social organism. His reformist views looked toward the perfection of the whole through the healthy integration of all its parts. That process alone assured progress, compelled the organism into a greater adaptability to its ever shifting and transforming environment. This "movement of enlargement," as Bascom called it, framed his discussion of gender relations in contemporary America. Bascom looked for "new combinations and novel adjustments of living forces." He called for definitions of gender norms that would produce "a higher harmony." The new condition would emerge as "masculine" and "feminine" lost their rigid meanings, as both sexes combined and harmonized the conventional attributes of the other.[11]

Margaret Fuller had said that this new harmonizing could arrive only when both sexes broke from the roles custom had assigned them. They could realize

9. For an effective overview of the historiography of separate spheres, see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," in Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 159–99.

10. Bascom, *Sociology*, 190. Fuller had written: "Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman." *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 103.

11. Bascom, *Sociology*, 186, 190–91.

their own true nature only when they could grow and nurture it through experience of the "real world." Bascom inscribed the same prescription in his own scheme of gender reform. He recognized, however, how entrenched the sexual dualism lay in modern American life and how atavistic it had become. "The two sexes are with us becoming painfully separate in their tastes, habits and conceptions of truth," he lamented. Men in their public location assume a bad distemper wrought from the narrow pursuit of money; women in their private location assume a religious piety and moral virtue that preserves them in purity from the "ugly facts" of the world outside. None in these conditions can assist the other; no higher harmony can ensue. But women suffer the more. Bascom wrote: "When piety is thought especially to become women, piety and womanhood are alike dishonored. When domestic virtues are made pre-eminently and exclusively their virtues, they hang on them like chains and trammel them as uncomfortable garments."[12]

12. Bascom, *Sociology*, 192–94.

13. New York State led in 1848 and in 1860. Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 85–88; Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 103.

14. Ellen Carol DuBois, "Outgrowing the Compact of the Fathers: Equal Rights, Woman Suffrage, and the United States Constitution, 1820–1878," in *Woman Suffrage and Women's Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 88; *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, ed. Theodore Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, 2 vols. (1922; New York: Arno & New York Times, 1969), 2:76–77n2.

Bascom advanced his case for women's rights not only in his sociology, in class and in print, but also in the public arena. He joined the many suffragists who seized the speakers' forums and addressed audiences around the nation. Wisconsin saw them in large numbers. And Bascom had the opportunity in 1882 to offer one of his most important addresses, the one cited by Stanton and her colleagues. He did so at a meeting of the Wisconsin Advocates of the Movement and brought to the subject of woman suffrage a framework that was classic John Bascom.

37. McBride, *On Wisconsin Women*, 46, 59–60, 101, 110, 95 (quotation).
38. McBride, *On Wisconsin Women*, 95.
39. *History of Woman's Suffrage*, 2:647.

Bascom clearly respected his audience because he began with reference to evolution and its complexities. His opening indicates how thoroughly the liberal theologian had appropriated evolution and the organic model as the basis of his views on social reform. Here Bascom's tactics take on special importance. In having recourse to the organic model on which to base women's rights, Bascom placed himself against the rival antifeminists who now rejected individualism and natural rights for the organic model, focusing on the family and insisting that women's rights threatened the social edifice. That emphasis gained currency in the 1870s, the organic ideal as signified by the family above all now given priority over the individual liberties of females who thus threatened the family.[40] Bascom observed how topical evolution had become, even in lay conversation, however much the idea had led to some absurd applications. We must take the widest measure here, Bascom said, and see evolution as the expansion of Reason, opening up the world to new possibilities and human progress. And, of course, he urged a Christian appropriation of evolution. In the new thinking, Bascom instructed, different ideas all come together—evolution, development, growth, the Kingdom of Heaven. Each of them critically underscores what we mean by progress, "from which the resources of reason are springing," Bascom told his listeners.[41]

The topic of woman suffrage, the president urged, owes its substance to these "profound ideas." For what is evolution but the connection of species to species, an endless trajectory of interconnections and interrelationships? Bascom put the organic model right up front. Society, he specified, evolves by "the connection of part with part, and of parts to one whole." So we must consider then how the organic system pertains to this critical question of our day, how society situates men and women. Any measure we take of the subject must answer the overriding consideration of just how society seeks its own good, advances its own progress, indeed anticipates in its actions "the coming of the kingdom of heaven." Bascom never saw the individual as separate from the larger group to which that person belongs, and he affirmed that one cannot prosper, cannot grow, apart from society. Ideally, reciprocity and harmony govern. "The individual should make, and may be called upon to make any needed sacrifice for the community." In turn, the community should exercise its powers on behalf of individuals, all individuals, the inclusive constituent makeup of the social whole. Nothing more properly describes the meaning of growth and progress, he believed.[42]

40. Matthews, *Women's Struggle*, 172. Matthews says that the organic ideal became "the central theme in antifeminist rhetoric."

41. John Bascom, *Woman Suffrage* [Address] (Madison: n.p., [1882]), 1.

42. Bascom, *Woman Suffrage*, 1–2.

With the evolutionary model still in view, Bascom explained that these operations proceed along no prescribed path. They require constant adjustments, shifts, adaptations, as the society works to achieve larger integration of its parts. We know the standard for measuring our progress. "Any movement, therefore," Bascom told his listeners, "which divides society and takes a portion and leaves a portion, is ultimately destructive of society as a complete organization." At each turn, the advancing demands of civilization, virtue, culture, goodwill, and the Kingdom of Heaven will call forth new adjustments.[43]

Thus situating the subject, Bascom, as always, placed society first. Unlike many in the movement, he did not focus on individual rights. He rarely defended women's rights as "natural rights," at least not in the classical Lockean or Jeffersonian sense. That is, he did not appeal to the laws of nature and hold up abstract, universal norms as the intellectual foundation for advancing gender equality. He differed from other strong advocates of woman suffrage to that extent.[44] In this terminology Bascom took careful measures to make distinctions. For although he did maintain that "there are no natural rights in the sense of primary and absolute rights," in an important sense, he affirmed, woman suffrage "is a natural right." One needs to shift the locus of nature from an ideal to a real and practical realm, Bascom believed. He wanted women's equality to have a momentous reference to the historical movement and the point at which society, "civilization," had now arrived. To project equality back onto all history as a point of judgment against it availed nothing, he said. By history Bascom meant evolution. Where stands civilization now on the matter?[45]

Here Bascom's address made a key link. The empowerment of individuals, the essential ingredients of the healthy, adapting social organism, always invokes the activities of the state, he emphasized. The state adjudicates the needs of individuals and the community. Bascom saw the process as an evolutionary norm. Advancing civilization enlarges this role of government, giving expanded strength to the social organism. The state, then, has an obligation to locate and remove restrictions on individuals; these restrictions impede society's progress. That state best fulfills its functions when it both helps to enlarge individual powers and integrates them into the social organism. In other words, the state prepares the way for new rights and provides for their complete exercise when

43. Bascom, *Woman Suffrage*, 2.

44. Elizabeth Cady Stanton insisted that woman suffrage was "based on natural right." *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Richard Cándida Smith (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 242. Julia Ward Howe referenced "the inalienable right of all men" and women. *History of Woman's Suffrage*, 2:321, 335.

45. Bascom, *Woman Suffrage*, 2–4.

they have accrued. As prime illustration of this point, Bascom cited women's right to the electoral franchise. Women claim that right on "an equality with man," he submitted. The state does not confer these powers, Bascom cautioned, it simply arranges the means to exercise them. By the principles of evolutionary growth, humanity moves into arenas of larger liberty, larger powers. The state acts as an agent of progress when it facilitates the incorporation of new liberty and new power.[46]

In the latter part of his address, Bascom moved from the philosopher's perch to the soapbox. He addressed specifics, and often in anger. But even when he bristled at the status of gender relations in contemporary America, his talk remained thematic. Many impediments to advancement and inclusion in public life beset women today, Bascom lamented. He cited the longstanding and degrading attitudes men have toward women and the construction of female attributes by men. The past weighs heavily and oppressively upon us, he said. We still address women, still define their character, in silly, romantic notions. We pretend to exercise a chivalry that has long since had any good use, if it ever did. "Much of the chivalry of bygone centuries," Bascom avowed, "was thoroughly rotten at heart, and much of the gallantry of the present is only the natural heir of its diseases." Underneath, he insisted, lies a "deep, almost bitter contempt" of women. It makes of them obstacles of show, pageantry, scenic effects. As such it trivializes them. In fact, it does worse. These constructions, Bascom pronounced, deny women intellectual strength; they make women peripheral to the large social interest. In short, in a manner that Bascom habitually marked as the worst of sins, they deprive women of power.[47]

Finally, Bascom wanted to meet the arguments used by opponents of women's suffrage. Some, of course, used the romantic construction of female nature to detach women from the rough unpleasantries of "real" life—in business or in politics. We need to get rid of those notions altogether, as Bascom had said earlier in his address. He did acknowledge that women suffered from certain deficiencies. For instance, they do not have the business sense that men do. They do not exhibit the interpersonal skills and protocol needed for the conduct of affairs. But why should we be surprised? he asked. We raise the two sexes in radically different ways, and train them for dual roles in society. The "deficiency" in industrial virtues, then, has nothing to do with innate sex differences. Women also, Bascom believed, exercise an idealistic and absolutist notion of justice. They sometimes err on the side of excess and lack a rooting in concrete

46. Bascom, *Woman Suffrage*, 3.

47. Bascom, *Woman Suffrage*, 6.

matters. But again, why should we be surprised? Society has denied women that exposure to raw experience and to the range of duties and activities that give our judgments relevance to the circumstances of time and place. These habits, Bascom avowed, represent "the crowning results of the limited circle of action which social customs assign women." They reflect their narrow experience, their social confinements. Women will serve society to the best of their capacities, Bascom asserted, only when they can thrive in the large public domain, where adaptation and resourcefulness grow from the experience therein. Bascom concluded his address: "It is precisely because of our ideal of womanly character, and of the direction in which women are falling off from it, that we are led to think that a larger life would be to them as it is to us all, a nobler and better life—the very life into which God is leading us."[48]

48. Bascom, *Woman Suffrage*, 6–7. University historians Curti and Carstensen relate that four years later, in 1886, Susan B. Anthony gave a public recognition to Bascom. She was speaking at the Women's Rights and Suffrage Convention in Madison and began by turning to Bascom in the audience and stating her appreciation for his good work in the cause. "It was a dramatic moment." Bascom offered some optimistic comments; the cause will inevitably triumph, he assured. Curti and Carstensen, *University of Wisconsin*, 1:291.

49. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 214, 228, 231; Henry Ward Beecher, "Woman's Duty to Vote," in *Speeches of George William Curtis [and] Henry Ward*