

FRANCIS WAYLAND:
CHRISTIAN AMERICA-LIBERAL AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

In the decades before the Civil War, two powerful cultural forces shaped American life; evangelical Protestantism and republican liberalism. Among those persons most active in the effort to reconcile the two movements was Brown University President, Baptist leader, and prominent moralist, Francis Wayland. This dissertation traces his efforts to negotiate among the diverse elements of his Christian faith and his liberal beliefs, as he attempted to create a Christian and democratic university, to mediate the growing moral and political crisis over slavery, and to balance social reform with the evangelical command to save souls.

Early in his career, Wayland saw a genuine harmony between his Christian faith and American republicanism. His Baptist faith supported religious liberty, individual autonomy in moral judgment, and limited government, which cohered with his liberal beliefs in laissez-faire economics, democratic educational reform, and meritocratic social organization. He believed that together, Christian faith and liberal republicanism could create a virtuous and free nation. However, in the years after 1837, his faith in harmony between Christianity and liberalism was severely challenged. He failed to convince his fellow citizens to adopt his vision of Baptist evangelical Christianity and republican liberalism as the basis for a free and virtuous national culture, but in his efforts to combine these two powerful movements there is revealed an all too often forgotten option for what frequently seems incompatible elements of the American identity.