

## Theodore Parker: Preacher-Prophet

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Ernest Renan said of William Ellery Channing that he was the George Washington of religious America. If that characterization be correct, it is not less fitting to say that Theodore Parker was the Abraham Lincoln of religious America, its prophet, apostle, martyr. It was the unmatched service of Theodore Parker to the cause of religion in America to have made his great influence felt in the direction of simplifying, rationalizing, liberating, humanizing, moralizing religion. It was not the least of his contributions to religion, as one of its stern and unquailing prophets, to show in speech unafraid that in religion, as in every manifestation of human life and thought, there are elements perishable as well as permanent, transient as well as eternal.

Theodore Parker was a love of truth and freedom throughout his days; a seeker after truth, the search for which makes men free; a battler for the freedom that enables men to seek truth. What he was he became, and what he wrought he achieved, because he loved the truth, — loved it greatly, sought it bravely, spoke it nobly, and was not afraid. No “hired advocate” was he, but searcher for truth at any price. He said of himself: “As fast as I find a new truth, I preach it.” “All truth is God’s truth, and to nothing but error can it be dangerous.” “We have noth-

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ing to fear from truth or for truth.” What Bagehot said of Browning may not less truly be said of Theodore Parker, — “He has applied a hard, strong intellect to real life; he has applied the same intellect to the problems of his age; he has striven to know what *is*; he has endeavored not to be cheated by counterfeits, not to be infatuated by illusions. His heart is in what he says; he has battered his brain against his creed until he believes it.”

Theodore Parker was a lover of freedom, and freedom’s champion throughout his days. He too, like another great son of Massachusetts, that rare being in his own day, and rarer still in ours, — “a Senator with a conscience,” — might have said: “Of course, I am for freedom everywhere.” More than ten years before Abraham Lincoln uttered the historic words of the Gettysburg address, Theodore Parker had said in Boston: “We are consciously, in part, and still more unconsciously aiming at democracy, at a government of all the people, by all the people, and for the sake of all the people. We all love freedom for ourselves, one day we shall love it for every man.” He was a truly a liberator in the life of action as he was a liberator in the life of thought of the American people. As one of the great and unforgettable company of liberators, which includes the names of William Lloyd Garrison, wielding throughout his days the sword of the spirit, and John Brown, not less a soldier in the army of the Lord because his spirit moved him to wield a sword of the flesh, Theodore Parker takes rank with the American immortals.

Nothing in the life of Theodore Parker is more truly prophetic in character than the power with which, throughout his days, he labored to break the fetters of the church. What rebuke of the church could be more terrible than his word: “There are two great sects in Christendom, the churches of Christ and the churches of commerce.” Terrible was his scorn of churches which money controls, —

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“It draws veils of cotton over the pulpit window to color the light that cometh from above. As yet, the churches are not named after men who only virtue is metallic, but the recognized pillars of the church are all pillars of gold. The pulpit looks down to the pews for its gospel, not up to the Eternal God.” The failure of the church in the fifties of the last century was nothing less than tragic. The church faced the supreme opportunity to speak and battle for freedom and it proved unequal to the task. Almost did Theodore Parker redeem the name and honor of the church which, in his day, was sinning against itself and truth and man and God, by defending and even glorifying slavery. Against the Bible, basely misused in defense of slavery, Theodore Parker set the Bible’s God. It was the prophet’s love of freedom for all men and his abhorrence of the wrong of human enslavement that impelled him to be of that small company of men who furthered the glorious adventure of John Brown. And when John Brown lay in a Virginia cell, awaiting the doom that men’s madness was to inflict upon him, this daring soul, Theodore Parker, soon to die in a strange land, wrote to a friend in Boston that the road to heaven is as short from the gallows as from the throne, that no man had given up his breath in a nobler cause than had John Brown.

Theodore Parker was perhaps the first great religious teacher in America, who attempted to link the church of God with a vast program of social reform. He united the worship of the Father with a consecrated endeavor to magnify the service of His children. Theodore Parker saw more clearly than did his age that “the reform and elevation of the perishing class of men must begin by mending their circumstances, though of course, it must not end there,” and that we are to expect no improvement of men that are hungry, naked, cold. In other words, his insight and his sympathy together enabled him to understand that

we must not so much mend men's hearts in order to end their woes, as end their woes in order to mend their hearts. He foresaw that the church must set itself to the task of saving men by serving them, and not of serving them by saving them. For him, the yearly activities of the church were summed up in the number of men, women and children who had, through its agency, been delivered from bondage to freedom. The wisest statesmanship and the noblest prophecy are united in his memorable utterances upon the sin of poverty, not on the sins of the poor. He compared poverty with cannibalism, the butchery of captives, and continual war for the sake of plunder and slavery as relics of the age of barbarism. He lamented "Even here in Boston, there is little of the justice that removes causes of poverty though so much of the charity which alleviates its effects." He demands that the State "extirpate pauperism." This prophet of social reform protests against the criminality of the treatment of the criminal. He declares capital punishment to be homicide with the pomp and formality of law. He urges that the jail be made a moral hospital and that none less than the wisest and most benevolent be set to train up the poor savages of civilization, that the State allow a defending attorney for the accused, that it aid and direct the man after he has been punished by the law and that the only way to reform and elevate the class of so-called criminals is to reform and elevate all other classes.

Theodore Parker was a preacher-prophet, for the soul of a prophet spoke through the lips of the preacher. This God-intoxicated man preached to his own age and of his own age, and therefore he will be heard by the ages. Even if the high-hearted resolve of a small group of men and women had not made it possible for him to be heard in his own day, yet would he have been heard by the future that smiles in pity at the

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passions and prejudices and bitternesses of the hour and adjudges men by eternal standards. Nothing in all his ministry was more prophetic in character than the courage and constancy and power with which he tested the tendencies and movements of his time by the touchstone of moral principles. Nor did he deal in vague and glittering generalities, but with specific and concrete examples of sin and guilt. He brought the whole great power of his righteous wrath to bear upon those men in high places who were leading his city and his State and the nation in the paths of sin. This "Jupiter of the pulpit" had a voice which was "the trumpet of the truth of God." He knew that "you cannot neutralize nitric acid with cologne water." It seemed unmanly and absurd to him to say "a man filled with divine ideas should have no indignation at the world's wrong. Rather let it be said — no man's indignation should be like his, — so deep, so uncompromising, but so holy and full of love."

Theodore Parker spoke of the evils of his own time, not of the evils of the fifteenth or the fifth century. He spoke of the crimes of Boston and not of the wrongdoings of Babylon. He applied the principles of all time to the principles of his own time. He dealt with political themes because he knew that underlying politics is the essence of morals. He did not believe that religion and politics were to be kept asunder, and when Daniel Webster sought to defend his indefensible support for the cause of slavery in the words, "Religion is a very excellent thing, except when it interferes with politics and then it makes men mad," Theodore Parker flamed forth as a veritable prophet of the Lord, proclaiming anew that "righteousness alone exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." It is not the interference of religion with politics that makes men mad, but it is madness not to let religion interfere with, purify, ennoble, exalt politics. In

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our own day, he would be stigmatized as a muck-raker. He was not afraid of muck-raking, but the muck was very much afraid of his rake.

Perhaps no fairer nor more decisive test could be found of the value of the life and work of Theodore Parker than in the answer of two questions: What have been the gains in the moral and religious life of the century that has passed since Theodore Parker's birth and what part, if any, had Theodore Parker in ensuring those gains for the life of the world?

In the Western world of 1910, we have a new view of God and man and religion and the Bible, and that new view is as largely the result of Theodore Parker's influence as that of any other man. Theodore Parker insisted upon the absoluteness of religion, of which any sect or creed is at best and most nothing more than a passing phase. In answer to Emerson's question, it might be said that here was a prophet of the church of God, who made "man sensible that he is an infinite soul, that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God."

Theodore Parker did more than any man of the Western world to help us to claim and to hold the results of the new scholarship touching the Old and the New Testament. We have lost the old Bible as the exclusive channel of Divine revelation, but we have gained a new Bible as one of a multitude of human and imperfect revealing through all time of the Divine spirit. Theodore Parker helped men, as did not other man, to understand that God was in all lands, and that he spoke through his servants in all place and at all times; that he not only spoke, but speaks; that Hebrew and Greek are not his only means of communication; that every people may have its Bible; that every place may have its prophet; that every age may hold communion with God.

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Earnestly, determinedly, fearlessly, Theodore Parker set out to maintain that the church must be the leader and inspirer of the race in the holy task of social redemption. Against the evil of his century, slavery, he pitted himself with the strength of a giant. Against the toleration of wrong by the church, he thundered with mighty power. He protested against the degrading place of woman and against the wickedness of the State in its dealing with its erring or fallen sons.

Slavery is no more; woman is being emancipated. On the morrow, an International Prison Congress will further the crusade on behalf of the prisoner. The church is beginning to count at last in the conflict with the forces of evil. This is in some part the work of Theodore Parker. To it he gave his life, and in its continuance he lives on. In the great task of human emancipation, he stood throughout his days by the side of two of America's noblest sons, the heavenly-minded Channing, and the poet-seer Emerson. He was a disciple of the one and comrade of the other, and each rejoiced in the kinship.

In a character study of Parker published a year ago, one of the foremost religious journals of the land contrasted the influence of Parker with the greater influence of Beecher and Finney. What of justice can be hoped for Parker from one who calls him "the over-worked preacher and agitator," who alludes to John Brown's adventure as "a disastrous raid," and who, because Parker, in helping Brown, said, "I doubt whether the thing will succeed. But we shall make a great many failures before we discover the right way of getting at it," refers to Parker's as "a kind of leap-before-you-look philosophy quite characteristic of a certain type of radicals."

He speaks of the prosperous Plymouth Church which Beecher left behind him and Oberlin College by Finney founded, and he adds, "The congregation of Mr. Parker

disappeared at his death; the 28<sup>th</sup> Congregational Society no longer exists, and the only material monument to his name is the Centenary Edition of his works.” The answer to the statement that Parker’s congregation disappeared at his death might be given to the fact that in America, in Germany, in Japan, and in India, the centenary of Parker has been gratefully and reveringly commemorated. Was Emerson wrong in predicting that Theodore Parker would become “a living and enlarging influence,” and is this journal right in intimating that the influence of Theodore Parker is disappearing?

Beecher left Plymouth a prosperous and flourishing congregation but Theodore Parker did something better and nobler yet. So did he stir the hearts of men and inspire the souls of his generation that a multitude of men are ready, because of him, to embark upon new adventures of the spirit which shall land them at the Plymouths of newer worlds. Finney founded Oberlin which stands, but Theodore Parker’s work is to be found in the emancipated slave, in the liberation of woman soon to come, in the hopefuller attitude toward the incurable injustice of poverty, in the holy war against war, in the humaner judgment of the fallen, in the resurrection from the sleep of centuries of a “guilty and complacent church.”

What if the 28<sup>th</sup> Congregational Society, as is half-exultingly maintained, disappeared at his death! There are ten thousand 28<sup>th</sup> Congregational Societies in these United States, and Theodore Parker is their preacher-prophet. One of this multitude of religious societies in the land that owes much of vitalizing inspiration to Theodore Parker is the Free Synagogue, which the speaker serves as teacher and it is in no sense false to the Hebrew prophets of an earlier day because it would be true to the inspirations of this prophet of the Western world of a later day.

If there has not arisen another Theodore Parker, as he

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dreamed there would, who could finish his work, let us dare to utter the high hope that our land in our generation may be blessed by the leadership of men who shall, in some part, be the inheritors of the spirit of Theodore Parker, the spirit that will bid them be true to themselves and true to truth, the spirit that will move them to be unafraid in declaring unto Jacob his sins and unto Israel his transgressions, the spirit that will move them in obedience to the command of God to the prophet to stand upon his feet whether men will hear or whether men will forebear. Then shall men know that the spirit of Theodore Parker has not passed out of the life of the nation, and that there has been a prophet among them. Theodore Parker belongs not to the Unitarian church, not to Christianity, no to Christendom alone, but to the wider and inclusive religion of humanity. He was the prophet of a larger toleration, a wider fellowship, a tenderer love, a higher truth, a diviner humanity, a humaner God.