

Theodore Parker, Unitarian Heretic

Sermon given at Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation March 4, 2018

By Bruce Froelich

Theodore Parker died before the age of 50 and had an immediate and lasting impact on Unitarian theology, as well as social reform movements.

Born in 1810 on a farm outside Lexington, Massachusetts, his paternal grandfather was John Parker, who led the colonial militia at the battle of Lexington. At age 19 he walked 10 miles to apply to Harvard College and passed the entrance exams. Because he could not afford to pay tuition, Parker read the Harvard curriculum at home and only went to campus to take exams. Thus he passed 3 years of college curriculum in just one year.

In 1834, after founding and teaching at a local academy, he applied to Harvard Divinity School. He was accorded advanced standing even though he had no college degree, and finished divinity school in just 2 years. By then, as a self-taught prodigy, he could read twenty languages, and speak about half of them.

He married Lydia Dodge Cabot in 1837, who was youngest child of a prominent Unitarian family. As described a century later,

This is good old Boston
The home of the bean and the cod
Where the Lowells talk to the Cabots
And the Cabots talk only to God

John Collins Bossidy

That June, Parker was ordained minister of the West Roxbury Unitarian church, which had only 60 adult members. Parker took this small settlement at the urging of his wife's family, who lived nearby.

Unitarians generally adhered to a theological system identified as "supernatural rationalism." According to this view, "unassisted" human reason could determine certain religious truths, such as the existence of God; these truths collectively made up "natural religion." Natural religion had to be supplemented, however, by "revealed religion"; certain essential religious truths, such as that Christ plays a mediator role in salvation, could be discovered only through the miraculous revelation given in the Bible. Those who denied that Christianity was a miraculous revelation were "infidels" or "deists," unworthy of Christian fellowship. Parker during the 1830s came to deny Christianity was a miraculous revelation, but insisted he was still Christian and worthy of fellowship.

In Parker's study on his desk were a bust of Jesus and the Roman slave rebel Spartacus.

He spent 7 years writing an English version of a German theological text that argued Old Testament "miracles" were not facts or just legends but instead should be appreciated as "myths" as poetic expressions of ancient Jewish piety with profound symbolic meaning. Quite parallel to Joseph Campbell's view.

Parker wrote many essays published in the Unitarian weekly *Christian Register* and the primary Unitarian journal called the *Christian Examiner*. Meanwhile, the German critic D.F. Strauss made the same claim regarding New Testament miracles in his explosively controversial *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835). Parker wrote a long, generally sympathetic review of Strauss's book for the *Examiner* in 1840. By that point, Parker had come to doubt the factuality of all miracle stories and to see the Bible as full of contradictions and mistakes.

Very much like George Gershwin's "It Ain't Necessarily So." Parker wrote to a friend: "I preach abundant heresies and they all go down – for the listeners do not know how heretical they are."

Most Unitarians believed Jesus had been inspired in a miraculous manner to give an authoritative revelation. Parker now believed Jesus had been inspired in the same manner as everyone else, by being true to the spiritual laws. Parker still honored Jesus, however, as the most divinely inspired person in history. And Parker held that many modern people were more divinely inspired than many of the Biblical writers, who lived in more primitive times.

Parker's ideas were similar to those of the Transcendentalist movement, which emerged among younger Unitarians in the mid-1830s. Parker attended meetings of the so-called "Transcendentalist Club" and contributed many articles and reviews to the most important Transcendentalist periodical, *The Dial* (1840-1844). In 1838, he enthusiastically listened to the Transcendentalist [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) deliver the Divinity School Address. Its prophetic tone inspired Parker to begin preaching on church and social reform.

Parker emerged as a major Transcendentalist spokesman in May 1841, when he delivered *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* at an ordination in South Boston. Parker intended the point of the sermon to be that Jesus preached the Absolute Religion. What made the strongest impression on Parker's audience, however, was his vehement denial of the factuality of Biblical miracles and of the miraculous authority of both the Bible and Jesus. Particularly outraged were three Trinitarian guests in the audience. They published an attack on the sermon in the newspapers and demanded to know if Unitarians considered Parker a Christian minister. During the resulting uproar, most Unitarian ministers, and a large portion of the Unitarian lay public, concluded that Parker's theology was not Christian.

Parker found himself denied access to Unitarian pulpits and shut out of the *Register* and the *Examiner*. He feared his ministerial career was over. The controversy did in fact cost him friendships and forced him to abandon his early dream of becoming accepted as a member of the Boston elite. Even his wife's family, he later wrote, treated him as if he had committed a crime.

His West Roxbury congregation stood by him, however, and the outcry against him made him famous. In the fall of 1841, audiences flocked to hear him deliver a course of lectures that he published in revised form the following spring as *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*. In this Transcendentalist manifesto, Parker systematically laid out his ideas about inspiration, Jesus, the Bible, and the church. Unitarian critics denounced the book as "deistical" and impious.

Parker's conflict grew particularly intense with his colleagues in the (all Unitarian) Boston Association of Congregational Ministers. The Association had a confrontational meeting with him in January 1843 in which they tried to persuade him to resign his membership. He refused.

In December 1844, Parker gave a Thursday Lecture at the First Church, Boston. The traditional weekly "Thursday Lecture" (actually a sermon) was sponsored by the Boston Association; every member preached one when his turn came in rotation. Parker's sermon on "The Relation of Jesus to His Age and the Ages" reaffirmed his naturalistic Christology. The Boston Association responded by debating whether to expel him.

These and other events prompted extensive, public Unitarian soul-searching over whether Unitarians had an implicit creed, whether they ought to have an explicit one, and whether they owed Parker ministerial fellowship. Parker presented his own position in *A Friendly Letter to the Boston Association* (1845), in which he maintained that Unitarians had no grounds to exclude him.

In January 1845, Parker accepted the invitation of some supporters to preach regularly in Boston. They rented the Melodeon Theater, and he delivered his first sermon there in February, to a large audience. Over the following year, he preached in the morning at the Melodeon and in the afternoon at West Roxbury. In December 1845, Parker's supporters organized the 28th Congregational Society of Boston. He was installed as its minister in January 1846, his isolation from his colleagues symbolized by his

preaching his own installation sermon (*The True Idea of a Christian Church*). He resigned his West Roxbury pulpit the following month.

The core of Parker's society consisted of about 300 people. This group financed the society and managed its affairs. Attendance at Parker's services grew from 1000 in 1846 to 2000 in 1852, which was three percent of Boston's population. The congregation had to move from the Melodeon to the more spacious Boston Music Hall. Even larger audiences turned out whenever Parker preached on some significant public issue or political event. Those who worshipped at the Melodeon or Music Hall included William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, [Julia Ward Howe](#), Samuel Gridley Howe, William C. Nell, and [Louisa May Alcott](#) (who gave favorable, thinly fictionalized account of her experience in her novel *Work*).

The 28th Congregational Society was not generally considered a Unitarian organization. It was called a "free church" and its members were sometimes called "Parkerites." Parker's personal ties to Unitarianism diminished. Unitarian ministers did not exchange pulpits with him, and Unitarian publications either ignored or criticized him. He lost his membership in the Boston Association when he resigned his West Roxbury pulpit and was never re-admitted.

With Parker's move to Boston, he became a nationally prominent intellectual. He lectured all over the North, published books and sermons continuously, edited the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* (1848-1851), corresponded extensively, and collected a personal library of 13,000 volumes. His thought developed in new directions.

He linked his politics to a vision, which he began to develop after his European trip, of America becoming "industrial democracy." Its government would be a true democracy, as opposed to an aristocracy or a monarchy, when it was "of all the people, by all the people, for all the people." One Thomas Herndon heard Parker while visiting Boston and bought copies of many of Parker's writings, which he took home to Springfield, Illinois. There Herndon shared Parker's ideas with his law partner, Abraham Lincoln. By this phrase, Parker meant a government that was an organic expression of the whole people's mind, conscience, and piety, that was controlled by no individual or class, and that acted on behalf of all, and not on

behalf of an individual or class. Meanwhile, the American social order would be "industrial," as opposed to "feudal," when it valued people for their work and character, rather than their wealth and social position. An industrial democracy would promote the spiritual perfection of each individual and therefore would be the most religious possible form of society.

He championed better schools and universal education. He supported efforts to alleviate urban poverty, and urged that the criminal justice system reform criminals, not punish them. He advocated for the end of the "degradation of women" and endorsed women's suffrage (notably in his sermon, *On the Public Function of Woman* [1853]). In it he wrote "The domestic function of woman does not exhaust her powers. . . . To make one half of the human race consume its energies in the functions of housekeeper, wife and mother is a monstrous waste of the most precious material God ever made." This quote was chosen as the epigraph for Betty Friedan's influential best seller *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.

He was the first American clergyman to refer to God as both "Father" and "Mother." Parker even rejected traditional clerical white neckties, as a symbol of false authority, so instead he wore black ones.

Parker saw slavery as the greatest obstacle to achieving industrial democracy. He denounced the Mexican War (1846-1848) as an attempt to expand slavery and led Boston opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Parker pronounced the act a violation of Christian ideals and a threat to free institutions. In his *Sermon of Conscience* (1850), he openly called for it to be defied.

Parker served as the abolitionists' Minister at Large to fugitive slaves in Boston. He chaired the executive committee of the Vigilance Committee, the principal Boston organization providing fugitives with material aid, legal assistance, and help in eluding capture. In 1850, when a fugitive in his congregation, Ellen Craft, was threatened with arrest, he hid her in his house until arrangements could be made to send her to Canada.

Parker grew convinced that there could be no political solution to the slavery crisis. During the proto-civil war in Kansas territory, he raised money to buy weapons for the free state militias, and later became a member of the secret committee that helped finance and arm John Brown's failed attempt, in October 1859, to start a slave insurrection in Virginia. When Brown was arrested, Parker wrote a public letter defending Brown's actions and the right of slaves to kill their masters (*John Brown's Expedition Reviewed*).

Parker's health began to fail in 1857. In January 1859, he suffered a physical collapse, brought about by tuberculosis, which ended his preaching career. He died in Florence, Italy in May of 1860.

The Boston Unitarian leadership remained hostile to the end. In 1859, with Parker sick, the annual meeting of Harvard Divinity School alumni refused to allow a vote on a proposed resolution of sympathy. But many younger Unitarian ministers admired him for his assault on traditional theology, his fight for a free faith and a free pulpit, and his example of public engagement. When they took over the leadership of Unitarianism, in the late 19th century, they made Parker a canonical figure—the model of a prophetic minister in the American Unitarian tradition.

One more expression from Parker has become popular in our lifetimes. In his book *Ten Sermons of Religion*, Parker wrote “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

This sermon is primarily excerpted with some minor changes from the biography of Theodore Parker written by Professor Dean Grodzins from Meadville-Lombard Divinity School, published in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society.

<http://uudb.org/articles/theodreparker.html>

Other sources for specific details include the following:

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/parker-radical-theologian>

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/toolbox/session8/109685.shtml>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker