THEODORE PARKER SPEAKS TO HIS TIME AND TO OURS

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As I look back upon my life and ministry it is clear to me that the thrust of my ministry into the public realm truly began on that auspicious day on the 19th of May, 1841 at the ordination of Charles Shackford in South Boston. It was the first "Ordination Sermon" I ever preached and the first separate document I ever published with my own name. It was a raw cold day in May that day, and was perhaps a sign of how my remarks were to be received. At the time it brought me not fame, but infamy and cost me my reputation in the so called "Christian Church." Even the Unitarian ministers, who were themselves reckoned but the tail of heresy, denounced me as "no Christian," and an "Infidel." In public places they refused my hand extended as before in friendly salutation; and struck my name out of their Almanac—the only Unitarian form of excommunication.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Let me take you back a few years to the 15th of July in 1838 at the Harvard Divinity School where Mr. Emerson was speaking to the graduating class of that year. I recall these words I had once said of that great Transcendentalist philosopher: "The brilliant genius of Emerson rose in the winter nights and hung over Boston, drawing the eyes of ingenuous young people to look up to that great new star, a beauty and a mystery." I was one of those ingenuous young people in the summer of 1838. I had been recently graduated from the Divinity School and installed in my dear little church in West Roxbury for but a year. Together with my wife, Lydia, we made our way to Cambridge by way of Brookline, to hear the great Sage of Concord address the graduating class.

I shall give no abstract of that sterling discourse--it being well known to all of you--except to say that to my aspiring mind it was so beautiful, so just, so true and terribly sublime in its picture of the faults of the Church in its present position. I considered it the noblest, the most inspiring strain I ever listened to. Others considered it inappropriate to the occasion, unchristian in its views, and verging on pantheism. I did not agree with all of its sentences,

but I delighted in its poetic sentiments and the declaration that the Spirit of God was more alive in our own life experience and the laws of nature than in the dead hand of tradition. To me it was a breath of fresh air in a stale and stagnant institution. If that made me a Transcendentalist then I was glad to own the name. I returned to my parish in West Roxbury with my soul deeply stirred and with the resolution fixed afresh in my mind to reflect on the state of the Church and the duties of these times.

In the controversy that followed Mr. Emerson's address, I entered into the public debate with the publication of a pamphlet, under a pseudonym, Levi Blodgett. In it I defended the Transcendentalist doctrine of the "instinctive intuition of the divine" which required neither the testimony of Scripture nor the belief in miracles for its authority. I wrote under a pseudonym because I wanted truth to speak for itself above the contention of personalities. Many suspected that I was the author which I neither confirmed nor denied. I was a young minister serving his first parish and few would care what Theodore Parker thought or said. My pseudonym gave me an entree into the public forum and I was satisfied to have my views considered without the trumpet of self-approbation.

It was the furthest thing from my mind that I myself would become the center of yet another Transcendentalist controversy within the Unitarian church and ministry, even more heated than that occasioned by Mr. Emerson's Divinity School Address. Nor was it my intention to issue a Manifesto of Transcendentalist Unitarianism when I was invited to preach at the ordination of Mr. Shackford. I preached the kind of sermon I had often preached to my own congregation and the views expressed were ones I had written and spoken of publicly in the recent past.

The title of my sermon was taken from an essay by the German New Testament scholar, David Strauss, and I endeavored to show that the theologies and doctrines about Christ were transient and changeable from one generation to another, while his moral teachings of love to God and love to humankind were permanent and true whether he ever spoke them or not. Even if he never existed his teachings were still true. That is the gist of what I said and even many of my more conservative Unitarian colleagues seemed courteous and well disposed to my remarks.

Indeed, the whole matter might have been forgotten, but for the response of some orthodox clergy--a Congregationalist, a Methodist and a Baptist--who happened to be present for the occasion. They prepared a critical summary of my discourse for publication in several of their journals. Unitarianism was already considered "a halfway house to infidelity" by the orthodox and they believed that my discourse was "proof of the pudding." They had no doubt that I was an infidel and an atheist and asked whether other Unitarian clergy considered me to be a Christian preacher. They even expressed surprise that no one had asked Mr. Shackford to disavow my opinions as a condition for continuation of the ordination service! Later they suggested that I might be considered as a candidate for public trail of blasphemy as was done to Universalist Abner Kneeland only three years before.

And how did my Unitarian brethren in the ministry respond to these outrageous charges of the orthodox? I am pained to say that they were only too willing to agree, with few if any reservations. If the objective of my orthodox critics was to turn my colleagues in the Unitarian ministry against me, to have them ostracize me and to disavow my right to preach Christian truth as I saw it from Unitarian pulpits, other than my own, well then, I am ashamed to say that, for a time, they succeeded. I was shunned by my fellow Unitarian Christian collegues and finally asked to resign from their distinguished Boston Association, the reason being that I did not conform to their theological criteria for membership.

I was accused of being "vehemently deistical" and that the difference between us was a case of "Christianity and no Christianity." I argued that differences of theological opinion ought to exist and had always existed within the Boston Association. Moreover, I wished to know "the precise quiddity" which must be added to my view of natural religion to make it "Christian." The answer given was belief in the miracles as set forth in Scripture which established the authority of Christ.

The doctrinal line had been drawn. Since I did not believe in supernatural miracles that made me no Christian in their eyes. It was therefore suggested that in view of the lack of sympathy with the opinions of the other members it was my duty to withdraw my membership in the Boston Association. I refused to accede to their wishes, told them I had no intention of resigning, that I considered the principle of free inquiry to be at stake, that I was as

personally committed to the ministry as any of them, and that unless they were disposed to prescribe a doctrinal test for membership, I would stay. I suppose this was the closest the Unitarians ever came to a heresy trial.

Well, I was bound and determined that unlike Mr. Emerson I would not leave the ministry or be forced out by those who could not bear to hear other views of Christian truth spoken from their pulpits. Though they would refuse the courtesy of pulpit exchanges I was intent that I would preach and lecture in the city and the glen, by the roadside and the field-side, if need be, and wherever men and women could be found. They would have my voice silenced in Boston. I would rise and go eastward and westward, northward and southward, and make the land ring.

The opportunity to do just that came in February of 1845 when several Unitarian laymen from Boston invited me to lecture and preach at the Melodeon Theatre. Week after week we filled the theatre. By December I was persuaded to leave my pastorate in West Roxbury and to become minister to the newly formed 28th Congregational Society in Boston. The focus of my preaching shifted from theological reform to social and political reform. The audiences at the Melodeon Theatre grew to such numbers that a move was necessitated in 1852 to the new Music Hall, whose seating capacity of 2,700 persons was soon to be taxed to the limit.

In the course of my ministry “I spoke against slavery more than any concrete wrong”, because it was the greatest of all the evils of my time, and “the sum of all villanies”, though too often “the wanton darling of government” as witnessed by those who dared to pass a fugitive slave law to reimpress those who fled its oppression for a life of freedom. Well, I would have none of it, and for a time did indeed write my denunciations of that most wicked of institutions with a gun in my desk drawer, and did actively engage in seeking to hide and transport runaway slaves on the underground railway. Law or no law I would do it again without a moment’s hesitation.

I set out to study the Bible in its original tongues with a critical mind and an informed conscience. In so doing I found “pearls surrounded by sand and roses beset with thorns.” I liked the Bible better when I could take its contradictions for what they were, truths mixed with falsehoods, and high moral maxims mixed with abhorent doctrines used to justify damnable actions. I felt no less reverence for the great and good things I found in both

Testaments of the Bible. I could freely use it as a help when it matched the demands of reason and conscience, and felt no need to serve it as a master, nor worship it as an idol. I took no doctrine for true simply because it was in the Bible, and rejected what seemed to me false or wrong, just as I would have had I found such things in other writings whether secular or religious. I came to realize that “eccelesiastical worship of the Bible *actually* hindered the relgious welfare and progress of Christians more than any other cause.”

The distance between me and my more conservative ministerial colleagues was not to be bridged except for a kind of strained cordiality between us. I was referred to in some of the Unitarian publications as "a lecturer...formerly recognized as a Unitarian preacher." That I still considered myself to be a Unitarian preacher mattered not. I began to feel some sense of vindication of my views in that a growing number of young Divinity School graduates were partial to my opinions and deigned to call themselves "Parkerites." I neither sought nor needed personal approbation, but I was secretly delighted to note the growing diversity of theological views within the Unitarian church.

In the summer of 1853, in a futile attempt to stem the tide of change, the Executive Committee of the American Unitarian Association, which was headed by my conservative opponents, secured the adoption of an elaborate "declaration of opinion" that strongly resembled a creed. It declared "the Divine origin (and) authority of the religion of Jesus Christ" and that God did raise him up "to aid in our redemption from sin." It was hoped that the declaration would relieve the Unitarian body of the "excessive radicalism and irreverence of some who have stood nominally within our own circle." Who do you suppose they might have been referring to? Though individuals were at liberty to dissent from the declaration of opinion, it is clear that they wanted to make my philosophical companions feel less than welcome in the Association. Well, just as they were unsuccessful in their attempts to make Theodore Parker withdraw from the Boston Association so were they unsuccessful in forcing the Parkerites from the Unitarian church.

I take no satisfaction in the fact that Parkerism eventually prevailed in the Unitarian movement. I sought no following nor followers of the person of Theodore Parker. What I wished for was free inquiry in the church and the right to pursue religious truth as one's heart and mind and conscience would lead one, and the willingness of the Unitarian clergy and laity to consider

new views and ideas of religion, even those considered radical and unpopular.

Theodore Parker the person is perhaps not read or quoted much by Unitarian Universalists today. That is all well and good. I am satisfied that in the course of time Theodore Parker's ideas received a fair hearing before the throne of truth and that others have taken up the quest for religious truth in directions I had not thought of nor considered. The best testimonial to my preachments is to continue the quest and to seek for those permanent truths of religion that will stand the test of time.

In terms of your Unitarian Universalist Association today I am pleased to see that your new statement of principles and purposes is inclusive and welcoming to a wide variety of religious and theological sources—Christian, theist, humanist—plus the insights of science and the contributions of other world religions. You have put up a wide umbrella. But in your eagerness to embrace new views and new sources of spiriutality do not forget your origins and roots in the religion of Jesus, else you may find yourself intentionally or unintentionally making Christian Unitarian Universalists feel unwelcome in your midst. You did not create this new and inclusive faith with the intention of forcing anybody out.

But neither should you who have found meaningful sources of spiritual guidance in mystical, pagan or pantheistic traditions, make those of a rational humanist persuasion feel unwelcome in your new found faith of the free—for you all have need of one another. Be ye transcendentally wise and inclusive, not transcendentally foolish and narrow. Let your free faith be both broad and deep to stretch the mind and feed the soul.

One of the things that utterly delights me in terms of the changes that have taken place in the liberal church of your day is the entrance of women into the ministry and into the arena of theological thought and debate. But there is still much work for you to do to right the wrongs of the centuries against the role of Woman in church and society. She was shut out of the choir, barred from the priest’s house, banned from the pulpit, and told to keep silent in church. If Woman had been consulted, it seems to me theology would have been in a vastly better state in both my time and yours.

I do not think that any woman would ever have preached the damnation of babies new-born—why, you could not get a woman who had intellect enough to open her mouth to preach such things anywhere. For centuries theology left us nothing feminine in the character of God. How could it be otherwise when so much of the so-called orthodox theology was the work of men who thought Woman was a "pollution," and barred her out of all the high places of the Church?

I said to my generation and I say it again to yours that Woman has the same individual right to determine her aim in life, and to follow it, has the same individual rights of body and of spirit, of mind and conscience, and heart and soul; the same physical rights, the same intellectual, moral, affectional, and religious rights which Man has. This is true of womankind as a whole, and of each special woman who can be named. In domestic affairs she is to determine her own sphere as much as Man, and say where her function is to begin, when it shall begin, with whom it shall begin; where it shall end, when it shall end, and what it shall comprise.

Moreover, there is no reason why women should not vote, hold office, make and administer laws, and have the same right to freedom of industry that men have. You at least have made progress in these areas. But do not become complacent in your accomplishments, for there are those who would take away the rights you have won for yourselves as women and men.

To every woman let me say, "Respect your nature as a human being, your nature as a woman' then respect your rights; then remember your duty to possess, to use, to develop, and to enjoy every faculty which God has given you, each in its normal way." And to men let me say, "Respect, with the profoundest reverence respect, the mother that bore you, the sisters who bless you, the woman that you love or marry. As you seek to possess your own manly rights, seek also to vindicate her rights as Woman, as yours as Man." Then may we see better things in the Church, better things in the State, in the community, in the home. Then the green shall show what buds it hid, the buds shall blossom; the flowers bear fruit, and the blessing of God will truly be on us all.

I would say to your generation what I said to mine. The church that is to lead the new age will not be a church creeping on all fours, mewling and whining, its face turned down, its eyes turned back, appealing only to old

books as the standard of truth and source of light; anitquarian in its habits; and waring on the new age. Nay, it must be full of the adventurous spirit of the day, keeping the good of times past, yes, but using the present age to lead public opinion, not follow it.

The church which did for the fifth century, or the fifteen, or even the 19th and 20th centuries, will not do for the church of the 21st century and the beginning of a new millennium. Let us have a church for the whole person: truth for the mind, good works for the hands; love for the heart; and for the soul, that aspiring after perfection, that unfaltering faith in life and God, which like lightning in the clouds, shines brightest when elsewhere it is most dark.

We do not want a religion hierarchically organized, which shall generate nothing but meeting-houses made of stone, and end at last in an *unquestioning* priesthood. We want a religion democratically organized, generating great political, social, and domestic institutions and ideals, and ending in a world full of noble men and women, all their faculties developed well, serving God and one another with that love which casts out fear. We seek to instill a faith that looks to the future, a future to be made; a church whose creed is truth, whose worship love; a society full of industry and abundance, full of wisdom, virtue, and the poetry of life; a church without tyranny and a state without oppression; a world without war and a society with freedom for each and justice for all. Shall this ever become a fact? History says, No; but human nature says, Yes.

In closing I would reiterate the basic message of my sermon on "The Transient And The Permanent In Christianity." The permanent truths of religion, the truths of absolute morality, of love to God and love to humankind, set loose upon the world without let or hindrance, are still true, whether spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, Theodore Parker, Levi Blodgett, or unattached to any name. They are as true today as they were yesterday, and will be tomorrow.

And so let us be about the practice of these truths, not because Jesus taught them two millennia ago, or Theodore Parker preached them 160 or more years ago, but because they are the eternal moral and spiritual truths of God and of the human condition.

All of the changing and transitory theologies and christologies of the Christian church will do us no good if we do not put the enduring moral teachings of the Nazarene into practice and make them our own.

May I close with a blessing and a prayer. O Thou Creating and Sustaining Power, who art our Father, yea, our Mother not the less, help us to use this world which thou hast given us, to build up the being that we are to a nobler stature of strength and beauty. And may we educate and culture our powers of mind, conscience and heart till we have attained the measure of a whole and perfect humanity, and have passed from glory to glory. May thy truth be our thought, thy justice our will, thy loving-kindness the feeling of our heart, and thy holiness and integrity the course of our daily life, from this time forth and even forevermore. Amen.