

The Radicalization of Theodore Parker

Unitarian Universalists tend to claim among their members anyone who has made a significant contribution to human progress. Great artists, musicians, scientists and statesmen, no matter how tenuous their connection, are listed on the UUA website. But while UU's have a penchant for borrowing from the great and famous, the great and famous have also borrowed from them.

Consider, for example, the last phrase of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." President Lincoln borrowed this phrase from a Unitarian minister, Reverend Theodore Parker, who wrote: "This idea demands, as the proximate organization thereof, a democracy, that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people...."¹

Today, Theodore Parker is acknowledged as a preeminent Unitarian minister and theologian. The son of a Massachusetts farmer and grandson of Captain John Parker who commanded the militia on Lexington Green in April 1775, Parker graduated from Harvard Divinity School. Along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller, he was a founding member of the Transcendentalist movement that had become disenchanted with Unitarianism in early to mid-nineteenth century New England. His theological attacks on the denomination were so radical that he was banned from preaching in any Unitarian church in Boston.

But there is another side to Parker's radicalism. The Protestant revivalist movement called the Second Great Awakening that began at the end of the 18th and continued well into the 19th century, brought religious and moral reform including abolitionism to New England, New York and westward to the former Northwest Territory. While many denominations declared slavery immoral, nowhere was the institution more despised than in Boston where Unitarian ministers such as Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and William Ellery Channing actively opposed it from the pulpit, in the press and in the halls of government.

In 1846, Parker and another Unitarian, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, a renowned teacher of the blind and husband of Julia Ward Howe, a Parker adherent who would write the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, had become members of Boston's Vigilance Committee that was set up in the 1840's to assist escaped slaves. In September 1846, Parker wrote to Howe defining the Committee's peaceful objectives, that as soon as a slave reached Boston, the committee should find him or her a job. He urged the governor to proclaim slavery as a national sin and demand its abolition from the District of Columbia and U.S. territories through legislative means. Parker had adopted a pacifist approach, "asking people to rescue slaves 'with only the arms their mothers gave them.'"²

One single event, however, can be attributed to the awakening of the Unitarians from reform to radicalism and motivated some of them to move from peaceful methods to support extreme violence. Intellectually rational people of faith, like Parker,

Howe and Higginson, became advocates for and willing participants in violence against other persons to the extent that by today's standards and statutes, and current presidential depictions, they may have been called terrorists.

That single event was the Compromise of 1850. Although the compromise is generally attributed to Henry Clay, President Millard Fillmore was also instrumental in its passage. Fillmore, like Parker, was a Unitarian. Born in a log cabin in New York in 1800, Fillmore joined the Unitarian Society in Kelloggsville in central New York and in 1831, he became a founding member of the Unitarian Church near his Buffalo home.

Fillmore was an accidental president, reaching the White House upon the death of Zachary Taylor, who left a country fragmented by irreconcilable economic and social differences. The Compromise of 1850, an attempt at reconciliation that had stalled in Congress during Taylor's presidency, passed with a more receptive Fillmore. Hoping to forestall disunion and the inevitable bloody clash a decade later, Fillmore declared the Compromise in his annual message to Congress, "a final settlement."

Fillmore's acceptance of the Compromise was part of his plan to rid his party of its radical wing, the "conscience Whigs" who opposed slavery. Fillmore went further, removing federal office holders who opposed the Compromise, a policy that cost him the 1852 Whig nomination. In 1856, Fillmore was nominated for president by the nativist, anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party and won one state: Maryland.

In the compromise, the North got California admitted as a free state and got the slave trade banned in the District of Columbia. In return the South got the unpalatable Fugitive Slave Act. The Act brought the full force and power of the Federal government behind southern slave owner efforts to recapture escaped slaves. Accused fugitive slaves were denied habeas corpus, trial by jury and the right to testify in their own behalf. The law was an open invitation for unencumbered slave catchers to abduct any black person and transport him or her into slavery. Most northerners were incensed. Ten northern states enacted personal liberty laws that granted legal protection to fugitives and, in some cases, made the seizure of a black person a punishable kidnapping offense.³ William Ellery Channing was instrumental in petitioning the Massachusetts legislature to pass that state's personal liberty law.⁴

In a sermon soon after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, Parker, who had previously adopted a pacifist approach, told his Roxbury congregation “the man who attacks me to reduce me to slavery, in that moment of attack alienates his right to life, and if I were the fugitive, and could escape in no other way, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would drive a mosquito from my face.”⁵

One of the first tests for Parker and the Vigilance Committee against the Fugitive Slave Act came when William and Ellen Craft slipped away from their enslavement in Georgia in 1848. Upon arriving in Boston, the Crafts joined Parker's Roxbury congregation. The Craft's story, heralded in the northern abolitionist newspapers, eventually found its way to the

attention of their former "owner." As soon as the Fugitive Slave Act became law, the "owner" sent two slave catchers to capture them. The Vigilance Committee sprang into action, with Parker hiding Ellen in his home and writing sermons with a loaded pistol on his desk prepared to prevent her re-capture. The Vigilance Committee successfully spirited the Crafts to Canada.

Parker and Higginson eventually came into violent conflict with the United States Government in 1854. Anthony Burns, a young man in Alexandria, Virginia escaped his enslavement aboard a ship bound for Boston. Burns' "owner" intercepted a letter Burns had written to his brother, still a slave, then traveled to Boston and requested the court to seize Burns under the Fugitive Slave Act. Burns was taken into custody. At the hearing, Parker, Higginson, Howe, appeared for the defense with Richard Henry Dana, (yes, the author of *Two Years Before the Mast*) who served as counsel. Dana asked for a postponement, which was granted.

During the postponement, Parker, Howe, Higginson and the Vigilance Committee called for a public meeting at Faneuil Hall. While Parker addressed the meeting, Higginson, surreptitiously had gathered dozens of armed men and stormed the courthouse to free Burns. In what became known as the Burns Riot, a deputy U.S. marshal was killed. But Higginson was unable to free Burns. President Franklin Pierce sent the U.S. Army to escort Burns to a ship waiting in Boston harbor. Bostonians lined the route to the ship with flags draped upside down as the army band insultingly played "Carry Me Back to Old Virginy."

Eventually, Bostonians raised enough money to buy Burns' freedom. Parker, Higginson and several others were indicted and tried for their role in the Burns Riot. The charges were dropped after the prosecution realized it could not get a conviction in Boston.

Meanwhile, John Brown, who was hailed by northerners, including Parker, Higginson and Howe for his violent attacks against pro-slavery settlers in Kansas, traveled to Boston to seek \$20,000 for another venture and was introduced to Franklin Sanborn, a Harvard graduate who ran a college prep school in Concord, to George Luther Stearns, a wealthy philanthropist and abolitionist, as well as to Parker, Howe, Higginson, Emerson and Thoreau, all Unitarians and Gerrit Smith, a wealthy New York social reformer.

During the next two years, Sanborn, Parker, Howe, Higginson, Stearns and Smith financially supported Brown's plans. Money and rifles from these Unitarian backers flowed to Brown as he prepared to commence a slave revolt at Harper's Ferry.

The revolt failed. Brown was captured by U.S. Marines commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee, was tried and hanged. Letters found among Brown's possessions named Sanborn, Parker, Howe, Higginson, Stearns and Smith as the group that plotted with him. A U. S. Senate investigating committee issued subpoenas. Parker was the safest, having moved to the Italian villa of poets Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning for his tuberculosis. Howe left his wife Julia, escaped to Canada, twice. Stearns and his wife stayed just south of the Canadian border. Sanborn went to Canada, returned, and with Higginson moved

from home to home in Concord, hiding with Emerson and the Thoreau family.

Eventually Howe appeared before the Senate and denied all knowledge of the Harper's Ferry raid. Stearns countered accusations of giving rifles to Brown by demanding the Senate investigate two hundred years of slavery instead. Higginson was disappointed that he was not called to testify. Sanborn was arrested in Concord but after Emerson's intervention was freed.

Parker died a month before Mason's committee issued its final report condemning him. Two months later Samuel and Julia Ward Howe stood on the steps of the golden-domed Massachusetts state house while Governor John Andrew presented the legislature with a gift bequeathed to it by Parker: the British rifle his grandfather had captured at the Battle of Lexington, where the "shot heard 'round the world" was first fired for liberty.

Twenty-first century parallels are frightening. Instead of slave catchers, Federal agents roam city streets and arrest peaceful protestors in Portland or, in many cases, hard-working immigrants who have committed no crime except seeking a safe life for themselves and their families. Like Channing's Massachusetts, where some states adopted personal liberty laws to protect Black lives, today some cities declare themselves sanctuaries. Like Millard Fillmore who purged the civil service of those who did not support him, we have seen Inspectors General and whistleblowers lose their jobs. Like Franklin Pierce who sent U.S. troops to Boston, we have seen armed soldiers disperse peaceful protestors in Lafayette Square.

Although Parker and other Unitarians had resorted to violence to save black lives, many peaceful protestors in cities across America have continued to implore their neighbors with “only the arms their mothers gave them” to acknowledge that Black Lives Matter.

Benediction: From Theodore Parker

Be ours a religion which like sunshine goes everywhere
Its temple all space
Its shrine the good heart
Its creed all truth
Its ritual works of love

¹ *The American Idea*, a speech at New England Anti-Slavery Convention, Boston (29 May 1850)

² Renehan, 50.

³ Personal Liberty Law States: Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin

⁴ Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Theodore Parker: A Biography (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1880), 399.

⁵ Theodore Parker on Conscience and Slavery, “The Function and Place of Conscience in Relation to the Laws,” Sermon, 1850, http://www.americanphilosophy.net/parker_conscience.htm