

Theodore Parker and America's religious nativism

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We are living in a time of nativism around the globe. Britain just voted to leave the European Union based on [Euroscepticism](#). The Alternative for Germany movement aims to do the same for the EU's largest remaining nation, while France's National Front Party and Italy's Northern League have grown in power over the last decade. And in the U.S., the Republican Party has nominated a candidate whose platform includes building a giant wall on the border. Nationalism is a tricky and malleable concept, and it has often reared its ugly side during moments of economic unrest and popular revolt.

Religion plays a central role in these populist debates, especially in America. Sometimes, religious conceptions of belonging can be a unifying factor that draws people together, like how Protestantism helped Americans construct an image of dissent and chosenness during their fight for independence. But such conceptions can also be used against people, as when anti-Catholicism served as an umbrella for opposing European immigration a century later. Religion offers the tools for both including and excluding, both adoption and alienation.

One American figure who embodied this tension was Theodore Parker, an abolitionist preacher in Boston before the Civil War. Trained at Harvard to be a Unitarian minister, Parker became involved with the Transcendentalist movement, which called for innovative forms of knowledge and novel forms of authority. He eventually broke away from the Unitarian faith and formed his own successful congregation, preaching to 2,000 Bostonians each week.

Once energized by the Mexican-American War, Parker became animated over the issue of slavery and evolved into one of the nation's most persuasive and popular abolitionist spokesmen. Prominent orator Wendell Phillips argued that if Boston could claim any Christian spirit during the battle with slavery, it was "more due to [Parker] than to all the pulpits that vex her Sabbath air."

Crucial to Parker's vision of rejuvenating his nation was a religious reawakening. At the root of his political theology was a belief that in humanity's natural and perfected state, society and Christianity intermingled. "Man is a social being, so Christianity is the law of an ideal society," he explained. "Man is also a political being, born in his nation, hence Christianity must be the Law of an Ideal State in which the societies find their shelter & defense."

Parker not only believed that American law must "be estimated by its conformity to natural law" but also saw Christianity—or at least his version of it—to be the nexus of that natural law. The "true purpose" of both politics and religion was to improve the lives of "all humanity." Religion shaped Parker's vision of America's progress.

Yet Parker's religious views also imposed limits on the reforms he envisioned. While his beliefs urged a more compassionate legal system, his theology of civilization maintained a hierarchy of racial supremacy. "In respect to the power of civilization," he wrote to a fellow abolitionist, "the African is at the bottom" and "the American Indian next." Like many northern white abolitionists, Parker could not envision a future of racial integration. He assumed that once "slavery is abolished, the African population will decline in the United States" due to an inability to adapt to their new conditions. Parker was one of many [enlightened liberals](#) in the 19th century who were committed both to equality under the law and to strident racism.

Nationalism, at its most basic level, is an exercise in imagining groups of belonging to which one wishes to be attached. People want to be tethered to communities that are like-minded and similarly focused, and diversity is often seen as a threat to those shared interests.

Religion, within this particularly political sphere, can serve as a uniting factor that casts a broad net of inclusion—or as a hatchet that cleaves groups asunder. #Brexit's appeals to ethnographic fears, and Donald Trump's rhetoric of religious exceptionalism and racial exclusion, are only the most recent examples of this unfortunate tradition, rooted in the Christian experience.

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