

Francis James Grimke: Prophet on a Tightrope

Americans in 1850 suffered from pervasive feelings of ambivalence, ambiguity and antagonism. For over two decades animosity had simmered over the issue of slavery and competing theories of states' rights and federalism. The clash of Cavalier and Yankee life-styles reinforced sectional biases and cultivated a growing sense of mistrust between regions and their citizens. A political compromise fashioned by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster during the spring, and enacted into law in September, promised relief from the specter of national division. (The respite proved a brief one; it would be shattered by the passage of the Kansas -Nebraska Act within four years and the path to the tragedy of civil war resumed.)

Later that fall, the *Charleston [S.C.] Courier* carried the following advertisement:

Herr Downey The Celebrated Tight Rope Walker and Balancer who created so much wonder and excitement in the Northern and Western cities, respectfully announces to the citizens of Charleston, that he will give an exhibition at Mount Pleasant, *this* Day 4th November, at 4 o'clock P. M., weathering permitting. (Vol. XLVIII, p.3)

Henry Grimke, sometime lawyer, gentleman planter, and member of one of the leading families in South Carolina might have been interested in attending with some of his aristocratic friends. But a "wonderful event" of a different nature was occurring at "Caneacres," his rice plantation twenty miles northwest of the city. There, Nancy Weston, was giving birth to a boy, Francis James, the second of three sons resulting from an unusual relationship between master and slave. Nancy had served as maid to Selena

Grimke, Henry's long deceased wife, and nurse for their three children, Henrietta, Montague and Thomas. Over time Nancy had become the de facto "mistress" of Caneacres. The second Grimke trio of children, like some other similarly situated offspring of the planter class, might have been quietly raised and sent north or abroad for education and manumission (both then proscribed by law in South Carolina) had not Henry died suddenly during a fever epidemic in 1852.

Henry had willed Nancy and her children to his elder son, Montague, with the expectation that they would be treated as family. Nancy was provided with funds to build a small house on Weston family property in Charleston. For the next several years she and the boys lived as *de facto* free persons of color like many of her siblings in the city. She functioned as a single parent providing for her family as a laundress. The boys helped as best they could while acquiring a rudimentary education.

Montague's relationship with his foster parent and half-brothers until 1860 could best be described as benign neglect. In that year he married and demanded that Archibald, Francis' older brother, become part of his household staff. Soon thereafter he made the same demand for Francis. Both boys rebelled at this effort to insist on their *de jure* status and for the next year there ensued a battle of wills that ended only when both Archibald and Francis became fugitive slaves. The onset of the Civil War created the opportunity for escape and Francis found an ironic freedom by offering his service as a valet to a Confederate officer serving at Fort Pinckney in Charleston harbor. He was later turned in as a runaway slave; Montague had him beaten and thrown into jail. Only Nancy's ministrations to him saved his life, and before he could run away again, Montague sold him to another officer. The fall of Charleston in the final days of the war

gave Francis and Archibald their liberty and the opportunity to prepare for careers as freedmen in the Reconstruction era. After abortive attempts to pursue apprenticeships in New England, both gained admission to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Francis and Archibald excelled as students in the classical liberal arts curriculum provide by what some called the “Black Princeton,” so designated because so many of the faculty were graduates of the University and/or the Seminary. The academic environment was suffused with a Calvinistic veneration of learning in the service of God linked to an appreciation for education as an instrument of liberation. During the summers some Lincoln students, including Francis, returned to the South to teach elementary courses in schools for freedmen.

While at Lincoln the brothers came to the attention of their famous abolitionist aunts, Sarah Grimke and Angelina Grimke Weld who acknowledged them as their nephews and assisted in the educational development. When they graduated in 1870, Francis was at the head of the class, and he and Archibald decided to pursue degrees in law. Archibald was admitted to Harvard Law School, but Francis began his legal studies at Lincoln deciding also to serve as an agent for the University. Eventually he made his way to Howard University to continue his program. During his Howard Law School years he explored his sense of call to ministry with John B. Reeve, Dean of the Theological Department (now School of Divinity), and his former pastor at Lombard Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. The results of their conversations led to his decision to abandon law as a profession and to matriculate at Princeton Seminary in 1875.

When Francis Grimke came to Princeton Seminary he represented a new expression of a chronic weakness in American Presbyterian churches: throughout their previous history they had suffered from an inadequate supply of ministers, in large part because of their insistence on having a theologically trained clergy. The denomination, therefore, had never realized its potential for growth as opportunities arose. The Civil War was one such opportunity for the northern branches of the church. Union victory seemed to be a mandate for missionary intervention in the South lest thousands of African-Americans be lost to Presbyterianism. Raising a “native ministry” was recognized as an imperative for success. However, the persons so recruited had to unite “religion and literature; that piety of the heart which is the fruit only of the renewing and sanctifying grace of God, with solid learning,” because it was believed that “religion without learning, or learning without religion, in the ministers of the gospel, must ultimately prove injurious to the church.” (PCUSA, *Digest* p. 241)

Grimke fulfilled this expectation admirably. He was not the first African-American student to attend Princeton Seminary, nor was he the only one in the student body during his three year stay. He was followed over the intervening decades by a host of others, and when representative graduates were chosen for inclusion in the Seminary’s sesquicentennial Festschrift, *Sons of the Prophets*, one chapter was devoted to the prophetic ministry of Francis James Grimke.

Grimke’s seminary education coincided with the final years of Charles Hodge’s notable career as the luminary member of Princeton’s faculty during which the school had achieved a well-deserved reputation as the bastion of scholastic Reformed orthodoxy. He was already part of Grimke’s prior education as the author of *The Way of Life*, a

classic in American Reformed spirituality and required reading at Lincoln. For three years he was exposed to an intellectual climate under the hegemony of Hodge, whose long experience teaching Old and New Testament courses provided the foundation for his particular expression of Reformed theology. Grimke internalized Hodge's scripture based methodology in his own preaching and polemical writings, relying on his "perfect faith in the Bible" as the trusted source of truth by which human beings should order their lives and through which they would find salvation. Applying that methodology to the human condition constituted one source in the process by which Grimke pursued his prophetic calling, balancing what for him was the plain Word of God against the sinfulness of individuals and institutions.

A second source shaping Grimke's ministry, like those of Paul and Calvin before him, came from the legal training he had pursued before accepting his call. His theological and moral perspectives reflected the influence of "the law" as a body of principles governing social relations and conduct. Grimke was specifically concerned by constitutional questions as they impacted the rights of American citizens, especially those of African descent. This is not surprising given the activity of his abolitionist aunts and the writings of his uncle, Judge Frederick Grimke (1791-1863) of Ohio, the foremost scholar of the U. S. Constitution of his era. When one adds the activities of another uncle, Thomas Smith Grimke (1786-1834), one of the leading advocates of social reform in the first third of the nineteenth century, the impetus for Francis to attack problems of injustice becomes quite clear. He appropriated these remarkable individuals, siblings of his father, as exemplars of responsible American citizenship.

Graduation from Princeton in 1878 led to a call from the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D. C. The congregation had been organized in 1841 in response to the failure of Presbyterian churches in the city to be inclusive and with its founding a tradition of a prophetic pulpit had been established. Grimke had served the congregation as a supply minister during the summer between his middler and senior years, a period that allowed him to become familiar with the members and to be vetted by them. It also exposed him to the distinctive character of a church known for its history of pastors as “race leaders,” perhaps the most notable being Henry Highland Garnet. The expectation that Grimke would follow in the path of such figures formed another resource upon which he drew over the next fifty years. With the exception of a four year pastorate (1885-1889) in Jacksonville, Florida, his ministry would be based at Fifteenth Street Church.

To fully appreciate the prophetic character of that ministry it is essential to grasp the significance of Washington, D. C. for African-Americans. For them the capital-city possessed more than the ordinary meaning as the seat of political power; it symbolized the mood and intent of the nation concerning their future. At least since the Civil War, they instinctively looked to Washington as the hub about which turned their fortunes as a people. As long as the federal government stood guard, their civil rights appeared secure, and their opportunities relatively unlimited. However, Grimke arrived in the city just as Reconstruction was ending and Washington was becoming not a sentinel for racial justice, but a weather-vane of political expediency blown by the winds of a nation undergoing drastic social alteration.

Mass immigration after the Civil War contributed to the change, and Grimke candidly expressed his concern over the “millions of foreigners” pouring into America. “These people,” he told his congregation, “come to us from all the nations of Europe, and represent all grades and classes of society. Many are valuable acquisitions, ...but others are only a menace to our free institutions.” (MS Sermon, Feb. 11, 1894). This influx accelerated the pace of urbanization and set the pattern for ghetto development in the cities. It also helped undercut the access of black workers to the benefits of industrialization under laissez-faire principles. Combined with America’s emergence as a world power, these internal developments tended to refocus the nation’s vision and relegate African-Americans to the status of second class citizenship. During Grimke’s pastorate white ill-will supplanted the modicum of tolerance and acceptance that black people had enjoyed in Washington, and throughout the country, and their social trajectory began a descent that would not be reversed until after World War II.

Shortly after Grimke arrived in the city, the black population reached almost 60,000, or one third the total inhabitants, the highest percentage until the mid-twentieth century. According to the urban historian, Constance Green, the class structure of this population “resembled a pyramid less than a truncated cone capped by a needle” (*Secret City*, p. 200). The membership of Fifteenth Street Church constituted a good part of the elite portion at the point of the needle, and Grimke, with his new bride, Charlotte Forten of the Philadelphia Fortens, blended well into that company of believers.

Anticipating the roll to be played by those W. E. B. DuBois dubbed the “Talented Tenth,” Grimke emphasized the theme of moral improvement in much of his early preaching. As leaders of the community, gifted persons needed to achieve moral

maturity, to grow from conduct determined by impulse to conduct determined by principle. Scripture guided such a principled life and the virtues enjoined therein were common to the Puritan ethos: temperance, industry, honesty, courage, patience. Their cultivation contributed to the development of character, or growth in grace, that for Grimke was a form of sanctification. His personal commitment to this discipline earned him the sobriquet, the “Black Puritan.” Such a value orientation reflects the era and class attitudes. For those, like Grimke, who had been educated during Reconstruction, cultivation of character was the key to integration into the broader American society. Upon its possession depended success in the quest for justice. This point would remain a consistent emphasis on the internal dimension of a bivocal approach Grimke developed in his preaching. The external dimension focused on the disparities present between white proclamations of Christian and democratic ideals and the practice of the proclaimers.

Grimke quickly established himself among the preeminent leaders in Washington’s black community, and beyond. He became close friends with Frederick Douglass and joined him on the Howard University Board of Trustees in 1880. In the same year he was elected as the first African-American moderator of the Presbytery of Washington City, and at thirty, one of the youngest to hold the office. He served on the Presbytery Committees on Freedmen and Education.

In 1884, as chair of the Education Committee he encountered the type of ambivalence that marked an emerging attitude on the part of some toward the seminary preparation of black clergy. The Presbytery had under care several students at Howard University. Four had completed three years of study in the Preparatory Department while receiving practical training for ministry from James Craighead, the white Dean of the

Theological Department. They now wished to continue in the University's Collegiate Department toward a bachelor's degree. Grimke approved of their intention to seek the best possible preparation for service in the church, and he felt a special concern for these men because they came from his congregation. The students sought aid from the denominational Board of Education and Presbytery approved their request. However, Dr. Craighead, without consulting Grimke or the rest of the Committee sent an adverse report to the Board accusing the students of a "defect in piety," having developed an unfavorable moral character marked by lying. On the strength of Craighead's report, which contrasted completely with those he had submitted the three previous years, the Board cut off the students' funds. In the process of resolving the issue in favor of the students Grimke became aware that Craighead did not share his view concerning what constituted their best preparation. This episode foreshadowed the debate a decade later between advocates of industrial/vocational education, e.g. Booker T. Washington, and proponents of classical/collegiate education, e.g. DuBois and his colleagues at Atlanta University among others. In both instances a strong undercurrent of "accommodation" philosophy can be detected, and this was counter to Grimke's ingrained disposition to protest. In the Howard contest we can see the emergence of Grimke's prophetic role, one that would become increasingly prominent in widening circles within church and nation. From William Lloyd Garrison and Douglass he had inherited a motto: agitate, agitate, agitate! And Grimke would be heard!

During his Florida pastorate the centennial General Assembly met in Philadelphia and Grimke became deeply involved in the debate over efforts at reunion between the PCUSA and the PCUS. At issue was the proposal to segregate congregations by race at

the presbytery and synod levels with a common General Assembly. In Grimke' view, incorporation of such a policy into the organic law of the church would give legislative approval to race prejudice. In rebutting an article that appeared in the New York Evangelist, he asserted that "It Is Drawing the Color Line" to adopt the proposal and contradicted the gospel as Grimke understood it. The northern Assembly escaped having to make a decision when the southern Assembly voted against reunion. The threat of Jim Crow into the constitution of the northern church had passed for the moment, but American churches, following the sentiment of the culture, exhibited increasing willingness to adopt a "southern mentality" when confronted with the "race question."

In retrospect, the experience at the 1888 General Assembly was a dress rehearsal for the bitter and prolonged battle over merger between the PCUSA and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1904. In that struggle, Grimke, who was sent as a commissioner from the Presbytery of Washington City addressed the General Assembly voicing opposition to reunion. In rhetoric that weaves an argument from biblical, theological, and church history perspectives he exhorted the Assembly to resist the spirit of the times and reject changing the constitution. He said:

If the Bible is true; if Jesus meant what he said in the Sermon on the Mount and in His other utterances, and if we are to follow His example, and to be influenced by His Spirit, in a word, if Christianity is not a miserable farce, there can be no doubt as to where the change ought to be made, and as to what the duty of the church is.... Its duty is to seek to mold public sentiment in accordance with Christian principles, and not be molded by it. (FJG, *Argument Against Union*, p.10)

Such a change as proposed would not only condone the existence of race prejudice in the church; it would have “the effect of encouraging the Negro-hating spirit that [was] already too strongly developed” in America. He concluded his remarks before the Assembly in words evoking the memory of Luther at the Diet of Worms:

Union? Yes; but never at the sacrifice of a great principle; never by Sanctioning the spirit of caste, or by putting the stamp of inferiority upon any class or race within the Church. Here is where I stand; and here is where the Church ought to stand; where it will stand, if it is true to Jesus Christ. (*Ibid.*, p.16)

A few months after Grimke returned to Florida the Fifteenth Street congregation extended a call for him to resume his position as their pastor. The Grimkes returned to Washington in March, 1889, along with Benjamin Harrison and the Republican Party. Hopes that the return of a Republican administration would bring some improvement of the political and civil conditions among blacks after a decade of encroachments upon their rights supposedly guaranteed then by the Constitution, especially its Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, went unfulfilled. In April, the Afro-American National Council meeting in Washington issued a call for a day of prayer and fasting on Friday, June 2, to call attention to the deteriorating circumstances of American-American citizens. It further requested that ministers address the issue of lynching on the following Sabbath .

Grimke complied in a series of three sermons addressing violence against blacks in America. His exposition of Acts 7:57 formed the basis for a penetrating analysis of the causes of lynching. He identified a low state of civilization in the south that nurtured a culture of violence among white folk. Within that environment he noted also the

contributory presence of race hatred, serving as an integral component in a white supremacist political strategy. The remedy he proffered depended primarily upon a multiple front educational effort led by educators, clergy, and editors. It would be a lengthy, painful, demanding task, but worth the cost. He encouraged his congregation with the following words:

I do not despair. This Negro problem will be solved. And when it is ultimately solved, the Negro will have all of his rights. There will be none to molest or make him afraid; there will be no disposition to molest or make him afraid. The stars and stripes will mean equal protection to all citizens, in the enjoyment of every right, whether at home or abroad.

The principles of the Declaration of Independence will be no longer glittering generalities, merely empty statements, but realities, living, vitalizing forces in the life of the nation; America will be no longer, in name only, as we lyingly and hypocritically sing today, "The land of the free, and the home of the brave," but in reality. It will then, be the land of the free. Its citizens, white and black alike, will be free, in the enjoyment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in every section of it. It will be the home of the brave. Its prejudices will have been conquered, and right will have been enthroned in the hearts of the people. (FJG, *Works I* , p.333)

Over the next forty years Grimke returned to the question of race prejudice in the nation and in the churches from multiple perspectives, prompted by diverse sets of circumstances and events. Against the demeaning and discriminatory treatment experienced by black people he raised his protest by asking the simplest questions: does

it conform to the political principles upon which the nation was founded? is it consistent with the teaching and behavior of Jesus? He saw the culmination of mob violence in the assassination of President McKinley; World War I evoked his sardonic observation that, “it was amazing into what spasms of indignation American orators work themselves up when they are speaking of German atrocities; and yet they are moved by no such feelings ... by the equally atrocious conduct of southern lynchers.” He also rejected as spurious the claim that America had entered the war to make the world safe for democracy, when, as best he could determine there was no commitment to practice true democracy in the United States. He excoriated the hypocrisy of evangelical outreach in segregated revivals, Sunday School conventions, and celebrations by non-denominational organizations like the American Bible Society, almost despairing in the face of growing insensitivity among white Christians.

When race riots broke out in several American cities, including Washington, during the summer of 1919, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America responded by acknowledging that the churches had not lived up to their social and moral responsibilities regarding race relations in America. It called for ministers to preach “the duty of economic and community justice for the colored man,” and for “confession on the part of Christian men and women of failure to live up to the standard of universal brotherhood taught by Jesus Christ.” (FCCCA, *Appeal*, cited in FJG, *Works*, I, p. 610) Grimke took heart that, at last, the “so-called Christian church in this country, that white American Christianity, has at last awakened to a realization of the fact that the religion of Jesus Christ has something to do with this race question in this country.” “It looks,” he told his congregation, “as if the scales are really beginning to fall from the eyes of the

church; and that it means, in the future, to be true to its great mission... as the fearless and uncompromising exponent of Christian principles and ideals; as the living representative of a brotherhood that knows no man by the color of his skin, or by his race identity.” (*Ibid.*, pp.111-115, *passim*)

It seems that his hopeful reaction to the Council’s statement was premature, for in 1923, when he addressed the Howard University School of Religion’s annual convocation, he asked the question, “What is the trouble with the Christianity of today?” “To my mind,” he told his audience, “it is its hypocrisy, its manifest insincerity.” Jesus was accepted as teacher, proclaimed as Redeemer, but rejected as Ruler. Grimke asserted that:

The Christianity of today is a Christianity that makes no serious effort to carry out the whole counsel of God, to live up to the full requirements of his most holy and righteous laws ; it chooses among these God given requirements which it will carry out and which it will not. (FJG, *Trouble...*, n. p.)

By making total obedience to Christ the touchstone of faith, Grimke revealed his interpretation of the traditional Calvinistic understanding of Christ’s offices; recognition of Christ as King authenticated one’s recognition of Him as prophet and priest. Yet it was precisely at this point that American churches were deficient. Given this lack, race prejudice had flourished in the Christianity that Grimnke saw all about him in Washington: an all white Federation of Churches, an all-white YMCA, a group of white “neighbors” meeting in a United Brethren Church to pass resolutions calling for the expulsion of a colored professor from their community. And then marching, en masse, to deliver the “eviction decree” while singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Such a “color-

prejudiced Christianity can never save the world, asserted Grimke, “can never bring it to Christ -- a world two thirds of the inhabitants of which are not white but colored.” To be revitalized Christianity had to become Christian! Everyone’s duty, therefore, consists in working to overcome the spurious brand of faith by testimony and example, despite the cost.

If to call present-day Christianity to an account for its lack of the spirit of Christ, in its shameful attitude in the race question, is to be a pessimist, then let us hope that there may be pessimists springing up all over the land and in all of the churches! That is the kind of pessimism that is needed, the kind ... that has been back of all the moral and religious reforms that have taken place in the world. In spite of what may be said, ... there is nothing for us to do but go on upbraiding the church with its inconsistency, its unbrotherly, unchristian spirit, until it either ceases to call itself Christian, or makes up its mind to square its actions with its professed ideals and principles. (*Ibid., passim*).

As a result of this address, the federal appropriation for Howard University was slashed from \$280,000 to \$190,000, due mainly to the efforts of Representative James Byrnes of South Carolina. He inserted Grimke’s address in the Congressional Record as an example of the negative attitude of one of Howard University’s trustees. Reflecting on the situation Grimke marveled at the turn of events:

When the address was prepared, I felt strongly at the time that God wanted me to say just the things I did say. What use he would ultimately make of it, ... I did not know. How wonderful are the ways of God! It has been given a publicity and a hearing far beyond

what we ever could have hoped for. It is ... in the records of the Nation, there to remain as a perpetual reminder of present day conditions, and as a protest against them. (FJG, *Works*, III, p. 119)

Admittedly the cost of such testimony was high; but who can doubt that Grimke deemed it worth every cent?

When Grimke resigned from the Howard Board of Trustees two years later, Dean Kelly Miller's column captured the esteem in which the pastor was held by the Black community:

For forty-eight years, he has gone in and out among the people as a priest of God without spot or blemish. He carries the sacredness of His presence with him.... He has stood not merely as the mouth piece, but as the exemplar of the Gospel which he preached. ... Through the silent potency of moral consistency and spiritual endowment, he has done more to vindicate the claims of the Christian minister upon the confidence of the people than any other minister ... [in] the national capital, black or white. He has kept the faith. Behold, a man of God in an age of gold!" (*Afro-American*, June 13, 1925)

Grimke shared the criteria by which he hoped to be measured in the following diary entry:

I have just finished reading a notable address on John Calvin by ... Donald McKenzie of Princeton Theological Seminary delivered before the General Assembly of our church meeting in Cleveland ... ending with the words, "We then, who owe so much to him, this day revere his memory and thank

God for the great example and the enduring influence of his servant, who being dead yet speaks.” As I laid it aside, more profoundly impressed than ever before with the character and work of John Calvin, there went up from my heart the earnest prayer that when my life ends here that I too may be remembered because of some things that I have said or done in bringing men face to face with life and its great and solemn responsibilities for which they must answer at the bar of God. To feel, as John Calvin felt, the sovereignty of God, and to get others to feel the same, ... is a great achievement and will go on working for good long after we are gone. (FJG, STM XXXIII)

The lasting significance of Grimke’s life may well derive from the suggestion that the various forms of schizophrenia plaguing race relations in America can be cured, and that the “balm in Gilead” may be found in African-American spirituality. In perhaps the most quoted, and often only remembered, lines from his writings, DuBois has described a division in the Africa-American mentality that has been assumed ever since: “One ever feels his twoness -- an American, a Negro; two souls. Two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings....(*Souls of Black Folk*, p. 3).

However, it may well be that DuBois has been misled. Perhaps the dichotomy he found in the souls of black folk is but the deceptive reflection of the radical division in the heart of white people described by Gunnar Myrdal in the *American Dilemma*. The real antithesis therefore, is not Negro/American, but American/hypocritical American. How else does one account for the fact that Grimke developed his critique of the nation in terms of its own principles, or his indictment of the American churches based upon the Word of God?

Consequently, Grimke's life implies the existence of an understanding of the American Creed and the Christian Confession unalloyed by the rationalizations necessary to white folk. Because he did not have to justify prejudice, Grimke could speak without ambivalence of democracy and freedom, of love and justice. His example holds forth the promise that the vision of America, as one nation under God, may yet be a reality.