Francis Grimké and African American Prophecy

Chris Hobson

October 1, 2006

Contents

> If John Brown were permitted to speak to us today from heaven, where he has been now for fifty years, he would say to us, I believe, Never despair! Never give up! The forces that are for you are greater than those that are against you. Be patient; be earnest; be aggressive. […] Back of all the forces that have been put in operation for the uplift of your race, from the beginning to the present, God has been, and still is. […] And will he now desert you? Will he leave you naked to the tender mercies of your enemies? Never. God doesn't work that way; that is not his way of doing things. […] God never would have brought you thus far unless he meant to stand by you. (Francis Grimké, Memorial Sermon on John Brown [1909], Works 1.140)

Francis J. Grimké (1850–1937) is a major voice of early twentieth century African American church prophecy. My interest in Grimké stems from work I have been doing for severalyears on African American prophetic religious traditions. By "prophecy," I don't mean foretelling the future, even though nearly all the figures I consider do use prophecy to discern what they see as the path from the past to the future. Rather, "prophecy" as I understand it refers to the cluster of ideas associated with Old Testament prophecy: perception of God's "saving work in history" (this term comes from Gerhard von Rad, one of the greatest of recent writers on prophecy); proclamation of the nation's crisis and testing by God; and elaboration of a pattern of national fault or sin, punishment and/or turning away from sin, and possible future redemption. I see these ideas as central in African American church tradition. In discussing them, I do not mean to affirm religious belief, whether Christian or of some other variety—as a personal matter, I have no religious belief at all. Rather, my concern is with the central role religious ideas have played in African Americans' long struggle for full freedom.

Readers with an anarchist background are, no doubt, familiar with the idea that religious ideas serve as a damper onsocial struggle. This conception (discussed also by Nekeisha Alexis-Baker in an article elsewhere in this issue) is probably the dominant anarchist idea about religion in relation to human needs on earth. Many anarchists would share the idea expressed a few years ago by the late Harald Beyer-Arnesen on the "Organise!" anarchist listserv, that "To put one's faith in a racist God-Thing, who included slavery as a natural part of his Order, […] has its obvious problems." In relation to African American struggle in particular, many would cite biblical texts such as Paul's "Servants, be obedient to your masters according to the flesh" (Ephesians 6.5) as if such texts "proved" the socially conservative effect of Christian teaching. Some African American writers themselves subscribe to the same conception of a necessarily conservative Christianity. James Baldwin, for example, describes himself, as an adolescent class leader, telling Sunday School pupils in Rosa A. Horn's Pentecostal church "to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life."[1] Yet the pioneers of African American Christianity themselves knew such texts as Paul's. They rejected or affirmed them (one can make a case for good service even in an unjust situation), but in any case concluded that Christianity as they understood it condemned slavery. They based their thought on other texts that have had far more resonance in African American belief, such as Jesus' "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25.40) or Paul's "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" and "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in

[1] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; New York: Vintage International, 1993), 39.

Christ Jesus" (Acts. 17.26, Galatians 3.28).[2] A long line of African American religious leadership in social struggle testifies that Christian belief is not necessarily, nor primarily, a disincentive to struggle here on earth. Grimké serves as an illustration of this point.

It is crucial to realize that, as Albert J. Raboteau has observed, "Slaves did not merely become Christians; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their peculiar experience of enslavement in America." Further, what African Americans found in Christianity was not only Paul's "Of one blood" and "Neither Jew nor Greek," but a central identification between God's assumed acts toward Israel and in the present day. African Americans, to quote Raboteau again, believed that "God had acted, was acting, and would continue to act within human history and within [slaves'] own particular history as a peculiar people just as long ago he had acted on behalf of another chosen people, biblical Israel." With this tradition in mind, the present-day "Black Liberation" theologian James H. Cone states as an axiom, "It is impossible to speak of the God of Israelite history, who is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, without recognizing that God is the God of and for those who labor and are over laden."[3]

A related concern lies in the ongoing impressions, derived from Malcolm X and the African American nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, that "integration" as a goal means rejection of African American culture and subordination to white society, that African American self-identification as American is self-oppressive, that both have acted to damp down social militancy, and that a separate "Africanist" identity and/or separatist goals have been the core of militant resistance to U.S. racism. This idea—for which Grimké will also serve as a rebuttal—does have a history in nineteenth and early twentieth century African American Christianity. In those years, major debates occurred among African Americans over whether they should regard the United States as their home or should emigrate to Africa or some other area such as Haiti and/or seek a separate homeland within the U.S. Such debates went on from the 1820s through Marcus Garvey's time a century later and still continue in modified form.

The predominant African American response to emigration agitation was negative. In 1827, Richard Allen, founder of the A.M.E. Church, reversing an earlier willingness to envision some forms of Black American colonization to Africa, argued, "This land which we have watered with our *tears* and our *blood*, is now our *mother country* and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds, and the gospel is free." Allen's "tears and blood" idea became a foundation of thinking on the topic, repeated by many others. Partly echoing Allen, a meeting of "People of Colour in the City of Baltimore, March 21st, 1831," resolved among other points: "That we consider the land in which we were born, and in which we have been bred, our only true and appropriate home, and that when we desire to remove we will apprise the public of the same in due season." J.W.C. Pennington, placing the issue in the context of the anti-slavery struggle, wrote in 1852—in a decade that saw a good deal of pro-emigration advocacy—"That thousands will emigrate while their condition is being agitated, to escape from the noise and the strife of the mighty contest between truth and error, like those who live in the immediate vicinity of the battle-field [...] is

[2] At least fourteen writers that I am familiar with, from Frederick Douglass to Pauline E. Hopkins, cite Acts 17.26 prominently, in some cases as the subject of entire articles. Galatians 3.28 is used by , among others, A.M.E. Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom as the epigraph of his 1935 book *The Negro: The Hope or the Despair of Christianity.*

[3] Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980), 209, 318; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970; revised ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 1, paraphrasing Matt. 11.28.

not denied. […] But the millions will remain in this country."[4] It was probably always true, as one historian of the movement points out, that "for most black Americans, the United States would always be home."[5]

Against this view a phalanx of great figures, including James Holly (Episcopal Bishop of Haiti), doctor andactivist Martin Delany, A.M.E. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and the Caribbean-born West African thinker Edward W. Blyden, spoke for emigration, first to Haiti and later to Liberia or an unspecified African locale. Emigrationists themselves did not necessarily advocate mass migration; Turner, for example, noted in 1883, "I am no advocate for wholesale emigration; I know we are not prepared for it, nor is Africa herself prepared for it."[6] But the two groups' assumptions about the United States divid ed them, with most if not all emigrationists rejecting their opponents' assumption that a mixed society was or could become displaced Africans' true home. Both Blyden and Turner were certain that "[i]t ought to be clear to every thinking and impartial mind, that there can never occur in this country an equality, social or political, between whites and blacks" and that "There is no manhood future in the United States for the Negro. He may eke out an existence for generations to come, but he can never be a man—full, symmetrical and undwarfed."[7] Such comments have obvious continuities with later Black Nationalist thought.

When we probe a bit we see that a view like Turner's represents what in prophecy would be called a "Jeremian" stance—a view, like Jeremiah's in much of his prophecy, that the possibility of reforming toward a better society essentially doesn't exist; Israel has committed itself to wickedness and is doomed. The alternative view, that a "turn" toward justice is possible even for a society with a long history of injustice, is found in many of the later prophets, particularly Ezekiel, who devotes a lengthy discussion to the idea that "When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he die. Again, when the wicked man turn-eth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive" (18.26–27; Ezekiel is speaking of Israel). The idea that "turning" is possible can be seen, for example, in Frederick Douglass's 1883 speech on the twentieth anniversary of emancipation in the District of Columbia. For Douglass, the 1862 measure "was the first step toward a redeemed and regenerated nation"—but only the first. Ahead, Douglass saw a long vista of struggle that would last "[u]ntil the public schools shall cease to be caste schools in every part of our country […] [u]ntil

[4] "Letter from Bishop Allen," *Freedom's Journal* 1.34 (Nov. 2, 1827): 134; Nathaniel Paul, *Reply to Mr. Joseph Phillips' Enquiry, Respecting "The Light in Which the Operations of the American Colonization Society Are viewed by the Free People of Colour in the United States"* (London: N.p., 1832), 5; J. W. C. Pennington, "The Destiny of the Colored Race in the United States," *Christian Recorder* July 1, 1852, reprinted in Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A. M. E. Sunday School Union, 1891), 299–300.

[5] Gilbert Anthony Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: History of a Forum for Ideas, 1854–1902* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland,1996), 100, paraphrasing Christian Recorder editor Benjamin Lee.

[6] *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* (ed. Edwin S. Redkey; New York: Arno-New York Times, 1971), 56.

[7] Blyden, *Liberia's Offering: Being Addresses, Sermons, Etc.* (New York: Gray, 1862), 83; Turner, "Essay: The American Negro and the Fatherland." *Africa and the American Negro: Addresses and Proceedings of the Congress on Africa […] December 13–15, 1895* (ed. J.W.E. Bowen; Atlanta: Gammon Theological Seminary, 1896), 197.

the colored man's pathway to the American ballot box, North and South, shall be as smooth and safe as the same is for the white citizen," and so on through a long list.[8]

It is not perhaps for me to say which of these views, Turner's and Blyden's or Allen's and Douglass's, is ultimately correct. What I can say with some certainty however is that the views of Pennington, Douglass, and the others on the "turning" side of the debate represent the main line of African American thought, from their day onward and whether correct or wrong. Douglass in particular emerges as a central architect of a stance of critical constitutionalism that, whether successful or not, has in fact been the dominant African American strategy against oppression for a century and a half. There is, as well, a prophetic character to Douglass's words—not only in his biblically-inspired view of himself as an "old watchman on the walls of liberty," seeking to answer "What of the night?" and answering, "The sky of the American Negro is dark, but not rayless; it is stormy, but not cheerless" (2, alluding to Isa. 21.11), but centrally in his enunciation of an unfinished agenda that would in historical fact provide the fulcrum for eighty and more years of struggle. Further, while Blyden's and Turner's rejectionism may have echoed powerfully to the then-young scholars who revived and popularized their works in the 1960s, its certitude that civil and social equality can never exist in the United States forecloses an issue that others saw as open, and its belief that the Negro in the United States "can never be a *man*" (Turner) misses something essential in African American character—for as Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* says of his grandfather, a contemporary of Turner, "Hell, he never had any doubt about his humanity […] He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle."[9] Finally, Allen's conviction that the land "watered with our *tears* and *our blood*" is "now our *mother country*" has been the majority African American position from his time to ours, notwithstanding a long and honorable tradition on the opposing side.

Francis Grimké—Background to Prophecy

Francis James Grimké provides an example of an African American prophetic thinker with a strong emphasis on the "turning" conception and, logically linked to this, a strong belief that African Americans' destined home is in the U.S. Grimké, who grew to adolescence as a slave and lived into the second Franklin Roosevelt administration, served nearly sixty years (1878–1885, 1889–1937) as minister of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. Freed by his father's will, at age ten Grimké ran away to avoid reenslavement by his father's eldest son, his own half brother, and became orderly to a Confederate officer. Reenslaved, he was sold to a second officer and served out the war. Aided by liberal benefactors, he moved north, graduated from Lincoln University (1870), pursued law studies at Lincoln and Howard, and then earned a divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. Aside from a four years' move to Florida for reasons of health, he served at Fifteenth Street for his entire career, though in semiretirement after 1923.[10] The years of his most active ministry, the 1890s to the start of the 1920s, were those of the

[8] Frederick Douglass, *Address by Frederick Douglass, Delivered in the Congregational Church, Washington, D.C., April 16, 1883, on the Twenty-First Anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia* (Washington: N.p., 1883), 14, 7.

[9] Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 580.

[10] Grimké, *Works*, ed. Carter G. Woodson (4 vols.,Washington: Associated, 1942), 1: 546–47 (address on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Fifteenth Street church, 1916); Woodson, Introduction to *Works*, 1: xxi-xxii. Grimké works quoted in my text are cited from this edition. Grimké's family connections were a galaxy of antislavery and civil

deepest attack on African Americans in U.S. history, not excluding the slave era—a period of mob attacks, lynch law, and serious proposals to repeal the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. In Grimké's *Works* we see an evolution from a rather conservative emphasis on upward striving, economic advance, and "character"—emphases he never entirely dropped—to a stress on fighting for full civic and political equality, maintaining continual "agitation," and defending the race by every appropriate means, including violence when necessary. Racial progress is of course not the only subject of his sermons and addresses— there are major series on marriage, children, women's roles and duties, temperance, etc.—but it is a major one. Throughout Grimké's writings, collected in four volumes by Carter W. Woodson (1941), we observe his concerns with the central elements of prophetic tradition: providence and covenant, thenation's corruption and possible redemption, and prophecy itself. We also observe the prophet as pastoral leader intimately concerned with the morale and well-being of his followers.

Providential History, the Crisis of the Nation, and the Prophet's Role

Like other figures in African American prophecy such as Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummell, Grimké believes in providential history. "In the providence of God we are citizens of this great Republic," he declares in 1905 ("The Negro and His Citizenship," *Works* 1: 396)—a simple statement containing enormous assumptions about God's guiding hand in history as well as the race's American destiny. Of the abolitionists, Grimké asks, "Who inspired their hearts? Who clarified their vision? Who enabled them to see eye to eye, and pull together in a common cause?" He answers, "It wasn't accidental, it wasn't a result of chance, a mere coincidence. God was back of it. […] These men and women were created by him; they were brought here by him, the time of their coming was fixed by him, they were his agents" ("Centennial of John Greenleaf Whittier, 1807–1907," 1907; *Works* 1: 104). From this assumption of providence he draws assurance of victory: "We are not always going to be behind; we are not always going to be discriminated against; we are not always going to be denied our rights. For as Sojourner Truth said, 'God is not dead'" ("Fifty Years of Freedom," 1913; *Works* 1: 513).[11] And to Grimké this assurance of God's backing is not a substitute for aggressive pursuit of rights, but a spur to it: "The colored man has no idea, not the remotest idea of accepting [present treatment] as a finality: and God Almighty, who sits on the throne, is not going to allow it to be a finality" ("The Race Problem—Two Suggestions as to Its Solution," 1919; *Works* 1: 597).

Grimké's teachings on the nation and its crisis can be divided into two categories: specific advice to the race and a general view of the U.S. and African Americans' place in it. Despite the early self-improvement ideology already referred to, by 1905 Grimké worked out a broadscale civil rights agenda similar to those then being advocated by W.E.B. Du Bois and the Niagara

rights luminaries, including his white father's collateral relatives, the abolitionist sisters Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld; his wife, Charlotte Forten of the abolitionist Forten family; his brother Archibald Grimké (1849–1930), NAACP board member; and his niece the poet Angelina Grimké.

[11] Grimké is alluding to an incident dramatically recalled in Harriet Beecher Stowe's article on Sojourner Truth, her reported intervention as Frederick Douglass was lecturing on the need for slave insurrection and armed struggle, to ask in a "deep, peculiar voice, heard all over the house," "Frederick, is God dead?" The article, "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl," appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863 and is reprinted in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (ed. Nell Irvin Painter, New York: Penguin, 1998), 114.

Movement (with which his brother Archibald Grimké was affiliated): the right to life and equal justice, equal public accommodations, integrated education, equality in the armed forces, the right to vote, and the right to hold office ("The Negro and His Citizenship, *Works* 1: 400–4). He denounces what he calls the doctrine of "self-effacement," the "pernicious doctrine" that African Americans should seek whites' goodwill by moderating their demands. He targets Booker T. Washington in veiled and not-so-veiled language as a misleader of the race. And he makes his watchword "We must agitate, and agitate, and agitate, and go on agitating" ("The Negro and His Citizenship," *Works* 1: 398; "A Resemblance and a Contrast between the American Negro and the Children of Israel in Egypt," 1902; Works 1: 359). He teaches racial self-reliance: "[M]ore and more we are waking up to the thought that we have got to work out our own destiny in this country. And out of that thought or conviction is coming, more and more activity from within the race" ("The Atlanta Riot," 1906; *Works* 1: 408). And, while calling for "the wisdom of the serpent," avoiding conflict when possible (Works 1: 415), he endorses armed self-defense when necessary:

> Be prepared to defend yourselves, if necessary. I know the meaning of these words. I have carefully weighed them; and, before God, I believe in the message which they contain. To every black man throughout the whole southland, I say, and say deliberately, Be prepared to defend yourself if necessary. ("The Atlanta Riot," 1906; *Works* 1: 416.)

On the broad issue of African Americans' place in the United States, Grimké speaks for a version of the idea handed on from Richard Allen through the antiemigrationist opinion of the nineteenth century: African Americans have made this their country. This conception is implicit in statements already cited: God's providence made African Americans citizens, African Americans must "work out our destiny in this country" (*Works* 1: 396, 408). Grimké reverts to this idea frequently: "The Negro is here, and he is here to stay: and to stay not as the civil and political inferior of the white man, but as his equal under the laws"; "We are not going to die out, and we are not going to be transported from this country to some other. We are here, and we are here to stay. It is in this land that we are to work out our salvation, that we are to demonstrate to the world of what material we are made" ("The Remedy for the Present Strained Relations between the Races in the South," 1899, *Works* 1: 327; "The Things of Paramount Importance in the Development of the Negro Race," 1903, *Works* 1: 378).

Coupled with this assertion of belonging is the consistent use of anathema against national iniquity and prophetic warning of the necessity—if possible—of a "turning":

> This boasted land of the free, in many respects, has been and now is one of the most despicable countries in this world. ("John Brown," 1909; *Works* 1: 124.)
>
> If Christianity has sufficient hold upon the conscience of the nation to mould public sentiment in the interest of right, and justice, and humanity, the Republic will stand; otherwise it will go down, and ought to go down. […] For it is written, "The nation that will not serve the Lord […] shall perish." ("Lynching. Its Causes—The Crimes of the Negro," 1899, *Works* 1: 315–16, paraphrasing Isa. 60:12)
>
> The white man may be strong enough to fight the black man in this country, but he is not strong enough to fight God Almighty and his eternal and inexorable laws

> of RIGHTEOUSNESS and BROTHERHOOD. These laws will ultimately remake him, or break him and cast him "as rubbish to the void." Which shall it be? Let this great white race take warning. ("Fifty Years of Freedom," 1913, *Works* 1: 515–16, quoting Tennyson, "In Memoriam" 54.7)

Prophecy is itself a key conception in Grimké's thought. In an undated late meditation, he notes, "During the last fifty years, the work that I have been trying to do in dealing with race matters, has been largely of the function of the prophet. I have called, again and again, the whites to an account […] and I have no less clearly pointed out the weaknesses, the defects, of the Negro." He has done so, Grimké avows, without asking "whether the course which I was pursuing was acceptable," but "in the fear of God, and in the consciousness that I was following the dictates of my own conscience." "In every age," he summarizes, "there must be prophets, men who fear God and not man,—men who speak, because impelled to do so by the great Power outside of themselves that makes for righteousness" (*Works* 3: 321). His heroes are of the same stamp: Douglass in the nineteenth century "[l]ike the prophets of old, […] cried aloud and spared not," Oswald Garrison Villard in the twentieth is among the "prophets," and in the dark period of race retreat "[t]here is no Garrison! There are no men built on his heroic mould! There is no inspired prophet crying aloud!" (*Works* 1: 60, 3: 330, 1: 95). And, at crucial moments, Grimké turns to direct prophecy to provide an assurance of better times not readable from the facts alone, whether concluding his three sermons of June 1899 on lynching with the assertion that "This Negro problem will be solved; and […] [America] will then be the home of the brave" (*Works* 1: 333); or, in the John Brown memorial quoted at the beginning of my article, assuring his hearers, "God never would have brought you thus far unless he meant to stand by you."

The Prophet as Pastor

Our most familiar images of biblical prophets are of outsiders such as Amos, the herdsman of Tekoa; but some prophets, such as Isaiah of Jerusalem or Ezekiel, were insiders, confidants of royalty or priests with standing in the community. African Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, of course, outside the U.S. power structure as a whole; yet African American prophets could be, and often were, established figures and pastoral caregivers within the African American community. Exemplifying the prophet as community leader and pastoral caregiver, Grimké aims in his sermons to teach and guide a specific group of people, his parishioners and Washington's African American community. While in a general way he may "speak truth to power," he always speaks it specifically to this audience. Some of his greatest sermons are efforts to comfort and guide this group in affliction, to help them discern pattern in history, and to point out to them signs of future hope.

Among sermons of comfort, none are more stark than four Grimké preached on successive Sundays, Nov. 20-Dec. 11, 1898, immediately following the Democratic-organized white race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, on Nov. 9 and following. The riot overturned the city's elected government and forced its most prominent African American citizens to flee for their lives; a modern historian says that it "was the capstone of the white supremacy campaign in North Carolina and signaled its victory across the nation."[12] The text for all four of Grimké's sermons is

[12] H. Leon Prather, "We Have Taken a City: A Centennial Essay." *Democracy Betrayed: The White Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy,* ed. David S. Cecelski, Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 15.

"Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thy heart" (Pss. 27.14). The psalm fits the occasion—it is a psalm of God's protection that promises, "For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion; […] he shall set me upon the rock" (verse 5). Yet Grimké does not refer to it or its message of hope until his fourth sermon. He begins, "Despondency is a state of mind in which all hope seems to be lost" (*Works* 1: 234) and tells the story of Elijah, driven into the wilderness and begging God to take his life (234–36; 1 Kings 19.1–4). Grimké then speaks directly to his hearers:

> I have touched upon this subject this morning because as a people, I am afraid, there is danger, in view of the terrible ordeal through which we are now passing, and have been passing for some time, of losing heart; a coming to feel as Elijah did, It is enough: there is no use of continuing the struggle. (237)

Grimké does not return to Elijah's story. His listeners already know that at its conclusion Elijah hears the "still small voice" (verse 12) and is told to resume his work, and so they understand from the start that the overall message is of perseverance. But Grimké turns first to negatives. In large part his first two sermons are devoted to forces working against the Negro—southern lawbreakers and their apologists, an apathetic northern public, a dishonest press, a church silent in the face of outrages—and to forces from which Grimké thinks no help may be expected. Among the latter he counts the national government, the Democratic and Republican parties, insurrection (he is most ambivalent about this, recognizing that at times even a hopeless uprising may be the only way to goad the nation to respond) and the doctrine of "self-effacement," which he here attacks for the first time: "Show me a Negro who believes in self-effacement and I will show you a Negro, who will himself sooner or later become effaced" (256). Grimké promises to discuss the grounds for hope (250–51) but does not yet do so; instead he works to rouse his hearers' determination, and evokes the spirits of the past and their courage against odds. This, he says in closing the first sermon, is "the time for every pulpit to speak out, and to speak in no uncertain tone; […] [it is] no time for cowards, and sycophants, and timesavers [servers], but for men who know what their rights are, and are willing, if need be, to die in their defense" (247); ending the second sermon, he pledges to preach William Lloyd Garrison's "gospel"—"We must be in earnest; we must not equivocate; we must not excuse; we must not retreat a single inch […] and we must be heard"—for "as long as God gives me breath" (260).

Only in the last two sermons does Grimké reach the grounds for hope. There are seven, beginning with

> the fact that the Negro is thinking about his rights today, with a seriousness and earnestness such as he has never displayed before. Not only the more intelligent and thoughtful Negro, but all classes, from the highest to the lowest, from the most intelligent to the illiterate. The recent outrage that has been perpetrated at Wilmington by a band of law breakers and murderers has stirred our people as nothing else has ever done. […] The very thing which so many of our enemies are finding fault with, are using against us,— namely, that the Negro is becoming more and more insolent, more and more obtrusive, more and more selfassertive,—is the very thing which gives me hope. (260–61)

Other reasons for hope are both material and moral: the race's growing prosperity and education, faith in the triumph of right, the influence of Christianity, and the presence of a few white

men and women who take the Negro's side, several of whom he lists individually. Aside from assuring his hearers that they are not truly alone, Grimké is now reaching the core of his faith, for, in his mind, the presence of such allies is no accident: "We are not going to be left to fight our battles alone. […] God will raise up friends for us" (273).

Grimké's last sermon is devoted to two final reasons for hope: God's existence and the power of prayer. Grimké's unspoken assumption is that the God who exists is a God o just providence in history; he refers to Sojourner Truth's question to Douglass, "Is God dead, Frederick?" and asserts "Because God reigns, there is hope for the oppressed, for the down-trodden, for all upon whose necks the iron heel o oppression rests" (275). Further, the existence of this God helps, itself, to explain the race's increased determination, the presence of friends, etc., for—quoting Isaiah—"[T]hey that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles" (276; Isa. 40:31). Finally, this God may be moved by prayer; Grimké suggests seriously that the prayer of slaves helped bring on and win the Civil War (279) and proposes that African Americans pray for uprightness, for strength to continue their struggle for justice, and for the souls of their enemies (282–89). Prayer, he explains carefully, is not a substitute for active struggle, but means "that in the midst of the conflict, while we are doing all we can, […] we are at the same time to lay fast hold of the Almighty, to keep ourselves and our wants ever before Him, and to look to him for help" (289). Grimké closes with a turn to direct prophecy: in view of the positive signs already discussed and of God's favor, "if I am asked, What of the night, for the Negro race in this country? I say, unhesitatingly, Well. There is a future here for us; in this land there are better things in store for us" (289)

The four Wilmington sermons exemplify the prophet's role as pastoral community leader. Grimké himself, in a coda, says they have had three purposes: to "let the white people know that we are conscious of what our rights are, and that we mean to have them"; to wake the "sleeping conscience" of the nation; and to "inspire those of our own people, who may be disposed to become despondent, with hope and with renewed determination to keep up the struggle" (290). The last purpose is central, as the repetition of the sermons' first word implies. Beginning his talks only ten days after the Wilmington riots, Grimké does not focus just on these events but places them in the context of history from slave times through Reconstruction to the present, "a chapter which has been fraught with evils as great, and sufferings as intense as the first, if not greater" (249). He spends most of the first two sermons enumerating evils in order to acquaint his hearers and himself with the depth of the struggle they face, as well as to ensure that his final call to prayer is taken as intended—as seeking aid in active struggle. Finally, the sermons are indeed a call for strength against despondency, in his hearers and himself, for the Elijah story which lies at the sermon's heart is one of prophetic despair and renewal. By sharing with his hearers the prophet's temptation to despair Grimké is able to rally them.

Prophecy and the Shape of History

One aspect of Old Testament prophecy is the prophet's view of the span of history. Speaking of the time covered by the story of God's promises in the first six books of the bible— from Abraham to the conquest of Canaan—Gerhard von Rad speaks of "this colossal arch spanning the time from the promise of a land in the ancient promise to the ancestors to the fulfillment of the same

promise in the days of Joshua."[13] For the later prophets, the span of history stretches even farther to include the new society of justice they see in the future, the "new thing" of Isaiah 43.19 and the "new heavens and a new earth" of Isaiah 65.17 and Revelation 22.1. For the African American prophet, history includes the past, present, and anticipated future, what Henry Highland Garnet, in an 1848 lecture, called *The Past and the Present Condition, and the Destiny, of the Colored Race.* Two of Grimké's addresses in 1909 show the prophet's function of discerning pattern and God's purpose in history. The addresses were delivered on separate occasions, one as a public lecture and the other as a sermon, and their emphases supplement each other. The first, "Equality of Rights for All Citizens, Black and White Alike," was given Saturday, March 27, 1909, during the inaugural week of President Taft. Since it was not a church sermon, there is no sermon text, but Grimké uses 1 Corinthians 16. 13 , "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong," in the same way a minister would use a sermon text. The address shows a sweeping command of history's outline and details, moving from past to present and future in the same way as Garnet's *Destiny* pamphlet. Grimké's overall purpose, he says, is to use the inaugural week and the recently celebrated Lincoln centennial to review "some of the questions which grew out of the war, and which were settled by it" (*Works* 1: 419). Two of these, the union and slavery, Grimké reviews quickly, with a twice-repeated tribute to "[o]ur brave boys in blue" who settled them forever (421; compare 423). On the third question, equality, Grimké steps back and quotes at length Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens's so-man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition" (Grimké 425, quoting Stephens). Stephens's idea, Grimké says, is "exactly the Southern view today" (425). Thus Grimké puts the present southern program into the context of past history and a world struggle spanning generations. Grimké has now reached the present, one third of the way through his address. He next surveys in detail the southern effort to nullify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments within the South and, so far as possible, the rest of the United States (426–31). From this survey of the present in light of the past, he turns to the future. Whether the North will "ultimately, come to accept the Southern view of the race question" or will "reject it and insist upon the maintenance of our rights even in the South itself," Grimké says, is the question around which "the battle in the Republic is to be waged for years to come" (431). Victory, he forecasts, is "assured" (434), mainly by objective political and sociological trends but also by the race's determination. Turning to his scripture text, he interprets its final words, "quit you like men, be strong," as meaning "that we are to stand up in a manly way for our rights," to "contend, and contend earnestly, for what belongs to us […] keep up the agitation" (437–38). "A better day is coming," he concludes, "but we have got to help to bring it about. It isn't coming independently of our efforts, and it isn't coming by quietly, timidly, cowardly acquiescing in our wrongs" (440).

By recalling Stephens's "cornerstone" speech, Grimké presents current issues as part of a conflict unfolding over historic time, from past to future, and he offers assurance that African Americans' present travails are part of a movement from injustice to justice that will conclude in future time. Yet the address reveals only part of Grimké's thinking about historical pattern. His approach to history in this speech is mainly secular and nonreligious; but in the tradition I have been analyzing, historical pattern is not mainly a matter of cause and effect or evolutionary change, but is determined by God's purposes. This aspect of history is the main topic in Grimké's sermon com-

[13] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology vol. 1, The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions,* trans. D.M.G. Stalker (1962; reprinted Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press,2001), 134.

memorating the semicentenary of John Brown's execution, delivered later in the same year (Dec. 5, 1909). Like the inauguration week address, this sermon moves from past to present and future, through sections on Brown's life and accomplishments, their lessons for conduct today, and his martyrdom's promise for the future. Grimké begins by speaking of martyrs' willingness "to die for a principle" (122), citing the examples of Paul, Martin Luther, the abolitionists in general, and Brown himself. Grimké asserts forcefully and at length that Brown's sacrifice was not in vain: "It was at Harpers Ferry that the 'trumpet that never calls retreat,' was sounded forth as it had not been heard before in this land" (135, paraphrasing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"). Grimké then moves to the present, summarizing the lessons of Brown's life for the race's conduct. "We need," he says, "to be dominated by a great purpose, as John Brown was. […] We need the spirit of self-sacrifice that John Brown possessed" and, similarly, his "sublime courage," his "tireless, sleepless energy," his "passion for work," and his "faith in God, in the old book of God" (136, 137, 138, 139). Moving to the future, Grimké promises, "[W]ith faith in God, and faith in ourselves, and the purpose to do right, we cannot fail" (140). The sermon's remarkable closing section, part of which I already quoted at the head of this article, focuses on God's providence in history, in a powerful vision offered with prophetic assurance in Brown's imagined voice:

> ["]Out of the darkness, and seeming triumph of the forces of oppression and injustice in 1859 when I was executed, there came the Emancipation Proclamation, and the great Amendments to the Constitution. Be assured of one thing, God did not strike the shackles from your limbs, and lift you to the place of American citizenship, that he might desert you and leave you in the hands of your enemies. […] He it was who stirred the Anti-slavery leaders to action, and brought on the war, and inspired the men in Congress, men like Sumner, and Stephens, and Wade,—and that moved upon the heart of Lincoln himself. […] In spite of discouragements; in spite of the gathering gloom, God is leading you on." […] That is what John Brown would say to us today, I believe, if he were permitted to speak to us. Ours is not a hopeless fight, but one that is sure to eventuate in victory. (140–41)

The inaugural week address and this sermon together present the full sweep of Grimké's prophetic reading of history. Though the two dovetail, the sermon stands on a higher plane. Without the inaugural discourse's detailed presentation of historical forces from 1861 to the present and into the future—most probably heard by many of Grimké's December 1909 audience on presentation in March—the Brown sermon would be less rich but would preserve its essential view of history; without the Brown sermon, the inaugural week speech is incomplete, lacking the dimension of providential purpose that Grimké believes gives history its coherence.

Prophecy and the Achievement of Justice

Prophecy deals essentially with justice—not constitutional or procedural justice, but ultimate, substantive justice for everyone. This thread in prophecy runs from Micah's "But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid" (4.4) through Isaiah's "Thus saith thy Lord the Lord, and they God that pleadeth the cause of his people, Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, even the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again" (51.22) to the great promise of Revelation, "And God shall wipe

away all tears from their eyes" (21.4). In his wonderful book *The Prophets*, Abraham J. Heschel comments on Isaiah's words, "the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in justice" (5.16). Heschel argues, "This is a staggering assertion. Why should His justice be the supreme manifestation of God? Is not wisdom or omnipotence a mode of manifestation more magnificent and more indicative of what we associate with the divine? […] [And yet] History, what happens here and now, is the decisive stage for God's manifestation. His glorious disclosure is not in a display of miracles, evoking fascination, but in establishing righteousness."[14] This core promise of justice, no less part of African American than of biblical prophecy, is visible in many Grimké addresses. I'll refer to two. The first, a Thanksgiving sermon for 1918, makes a rare reference to apocalyptic redemption at the end of the present world:

> There is going to be a new earth. Old things are going to pass away. […] The close of this bloody war is the beginning, I believe, of the realization of this vision of better things […] which the prophets of old foresaw, and which I believe some day is going to be realized in the actual life of the world. (*Works* 1: 575–76, paraphrasing Isa. 65.17, Rev. 21.1, and similar texts)

More frequently Grimké's discussion focuses on the long road from past to present and future. In biblical terms it refers to the example of Exodus and the Wanderings rather than the apocalyptic end of time, and this stress on achieving justice over centuries, characteristic of prophecy as conceived in the bible's first books, is a major theme in African American prophecy. This focus appears in Grimké's Thanksgiving address for the next year, 1919, on the text "Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, call upon His name; make known among the peoples His doings" (Pss. 105.1, Revised Version; *Works* 1: 600). In keeping with its occasion the sermon is formally a review of the past year, but in fact it focuses on what Grimké sees as new hopes. Among past events, Grimké quickly covers the end of World War I, the relatively low level of U.S. casualties, the check he feels the war gave German militarism, etc. (600–1). He then asks what grounds for thanks exist for "colored American citizens," who are "citizens, and yet not citizens" (602). The first ground he finds is "a growing sense, within the race, that it has rights under the Constitution, and of the value and importance of those rights" (602). Grimké applauds what he feels is a new mass awareness of rights and a dying out of "the time-serving type of leaders" (604). A further ground is the prevalence of armed self-defense in response to the white race riots of summer 1919: the Negro has come "to the realization of the fact, that there is such a thing as selfprotection[….] It is not his purpose to become the aggressor; but when he is assaulted […] he is going to do what he can to protect himself and his family, even though he may lose his own life in so doing" (607). Grimké quotes in full Claude McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die," recently published in *The Liberator*, and pays homage to a letter by "a colored woman of the South" on the Washington riot of July 19–22, 1919: "I was alone," the woman wrote, as quoted by Grimké, "when I read between the lines of the morning paper that at last our men had stood like men, struck back, were no longer dumb, driven cattle. When I could no longer read for my streaming tears, I stood up, alone in my room, held both hands high over my head and exclaimed aloud, 'Oh, I thank God, thank God!'" (608)

In the third and longest section of his review, Grimké pays tribute to a resolution on race tolerance issued after the summer's riots by the federal council representing most U.S. Protestant churches. Grimké sees in this statement a possible shift from these church's past inaction, a

[14] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962; reprinted New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 272–73.

"ground of rejoicing and thanksgiving for all, white as well as black" if—he keeps repeating this word—the church now takes care "that it turns a deaf ear to every other voice except the voice of God" (615–16).

Each of Grimké's reasons for thanksgiving, though referring to events of the past year, looks forward to a hoped-for future in which those trends become dominant. His closing words, which resolve to serve God "in the future as in the past," contain a kind of summation of Grimké's conception of Christianity. "Whatever other races may do, or other individuals may do, let us make up our minds that we will serve the Lord"—Grimké is echoing Joshua's "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24.15)—"and that we will train our children to do the same. Linked with God; yielding ourselves in loving obedience to God, the gate of hell, all the powers of darkness, in high places as well as low places, will not be able to prevail against us; we will still be pressing on the upward way" (618). To "serve God," then, is to press "on the upward way" as a race, and when the race continues to serve God in this way, "in the future as in the past," the "gate of hell" will yield.

African American Prophecy and the Struggle for Justice

Grimké, as well as a giant figure in African American religious history, is an attractive one. There is a grandness in the man of sixty-nine still speaking his truth in "the function of a prophet," more unbending than ever yet applauding the new generation and its fire. But his is not the remote grandness of a Jeremiah but rather the intimate grandness of Ezekiel, providing care and hope. With his quiet cautioning against "despondency" and his concern for how "we will train our children," Grimké, as scholar Joseph Blenkinsopp says of Ezekiel, "exemplifies prophecy as a form of pastoral ministry and community leadership." Grimké contributes significantly to an African American prophetic tradition, epitomizing the prophet's trust in God's guiding hand in history and the prophetic grasp of past, present, and anticipated future; and, with his challenge to the nation to correct its path, Grimké adds to the "turning" emphasis within this tradition—again a point of contact with Ezekiel, for the "turning" idea is "one of the most important aspects of Ezekiel's teaching."[15]

Aside from his personal qualities Grimké is an example of some basic points that can be learned from a study of African American prophecy. He shows, as I stressed in the beginning, that the widespread identification of Black Nationalism as the most militant thread within African American thought is oversimple, for Grimké always believed in both a U.S. and an integrationist future for African Americans, yet stood for continued, uncompromising "agitation" and, when appropriate, armed self-defense. Further, Grimké shows that these "Americanist" and integrationist ideas did not originate in a naïve faith in U.S. institutions or an abject prostration before majority power—Grimké could unhesitatingly speak of the U.S. as "one of the most despicable countries in this world" and could warn whites that they risk being cast "as rubbish to the void" ("John Brown," "Fifty Years of Freedom," quoted earlier). Rather, these ideas stemmed from a coherent biblical prophecy tradition, the "turning" tradition I spoke of earlier. To say this tradition is "coherent" does not mean it is right, but I believe it and its embrace by the majority of African Americans are worthy of respectful consideration. Finally, Grimké shows that the assumption

[15] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (revised edition Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 180, 173.

that religion necessarily acts as an "opiate" and a damper on struggle is wrong. For Grimké and others before and after him the Old Testament and Gospel assurances of God's guidance of history and his care for the downtrodden, what von Rad calls the "saving history" of Israel, acted as a spur to efforts for justice and—certainly—an antidote to "despondency" in the long decades when victories were few.

A little more broadly, study of Grimké and other major figures in nineteenth and early twentieth century African American prophecy such as Allen, Garnet, Crummell, and A.M.E. Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom shows that African American prophecy (and the overall Christianity which it was part of) was a largely new element in Christianity, constructed by African Americans themselves. This is a somewhat paradoxical statement. African American Christians shared the doctrinal theology of the white denominations they had divided from. Indeed, in a review of church history, Ransom remarked, "This [A.M.E.] church presents nothing that is new and original as a contribution to religious faith. When it withdrew from the Methodist Church, it took the doctrine and polity of that church along with it and has added nothing to it in the last 160 years."[16] Nor was condemnation of slavery in biblical terms original with African Americans; Quakers had denounced slavery in the seventeenth century as did the American Methodists and Baptists from whom African Americans learned their Christianity, though these churches later retreated on the issue. Nonetheless African Americans took the Christian promiseas applying directly to them and made the conception of a race-free culture central to their understanding of Christianity in a way that few whites did, except of course those who dedicated their lives to the struggle against race oppression. Texts such as Paul's "of one blood" and "neither Jew nor Greek," uses of "typology" such as the equation of biblical Israel with African Americans, and catch-phrases like "God of the oppressed" were central to African American as compared to white Protestantism. Further, African Americans did not construct this tradition is a vacuum but in the face of competing traditions dominant at the time—embodied in such texts as Paul's "Servants, be obedient," discussed earlier. Probably most African Americans who were familiar with bible texts at all knew of these and similar conceptions; so in constructing their version of Christianity they were not reading naïvely, but were adding to and revising a theological tradition by selectively interpreting the words of the great predecessors, as theological thinkers have always done.

Over time and in the face of pro-slavery Christian thought, African Americans constructed a theological tradition. Its prophecy component, like its basic sense of God and humanity, provided new meaning for central ideas. It stressed that the Old Testament and Gospel messages are of freedom on earth as well as in heaven; that the covenant with oppressed Israel continues with other oppressed peoples; that ministers have a function akin to that of the prophets to make clear the nation's sin and the providences that oppose it; that these providences must lead to a new Exodus event and/or a new inheritance of a redeemed land. These conceptions, created largely by African Americans, were then handed on and became a tradition: There is a line connecting Allen's "God himself was the first pleader of the cause of slaves" to Grimké's "God would never have brought you thus far unless he meant to stand by you" and then to James Cone's "God is the God *of* and *for* those who labor and are over laden."[17]

[16] *Making the Gospel Plain: The Writings of Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom* (ed. Anthony B. Pinn; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 179 (written in 1951).

[17] Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833), 47 (electronic edition: Documenting the American South, docsouth.unc.edu); Grimké and Cone, quoted above.

African Americans' Christianity was not, then, mainly a doctrine imbibed from the hand of well meaning but conservative whites. On the contrary, it was one that African Americans constructed for themselves by gleaning from the bible the sense of God, God's role in history, and God's relation to the covenanted people that made most sense to them (as well as fusing with this doctrine continuing African spiritual conceptions and practices, an aspect of the adaptive process that I haven't had space to discuss). In the process they created a largely new understanding of Christianity and used Old Testament prophecy conceptions as a scourge against the nation's crimes and a promise of future justice, in a way consistent with the prophets' example yet suited to the particular conditions of the United States. Francis Grimké, the subject of this article, both drew on and contributed to these conceptions.

Chris Hobson
Francis Grimké and African American Prophecy
October 1, 2006

Retrieved on 21st July 2021 from www.utopianmag.com
Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 5.

theanarchistlibrary.org