THE BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

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At the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Florence Howe Hall praised her mother’s *Battle Hymn of the Republic* for its “universal quality—a hymn for men of every clime,” she wrote, “who love liberty and are willing to lay down their lives for its sake.”¹ Howe’s second daughter, named for Florence Nightingale, looked to none other than Rudyard Kipling to confirm her faith in the *Battle Hymn*’s universality. At the end of the original version of *The Light That Failed*, as published in Philadelphia by *Lippincott’s Magazine* in 1891, the young novelist had indeed quoted several stanzas of what he called “the terrible Battle Hymn of the Republic”—“terrible” in the sense of dreadful or severe, as in God’s “terrible swift sword” of judgment. Kipling depicted a group of rowdy British war correspondents, about to head off to Africa in the 1880s to cover the Sudan campaign, breaking into America’s war hymn “by the instinct of association.”² No matter what Kipling meant by the words “instinct of association,” and however ambiguous the novelist’s actual use of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, Florence Hall took the reference as a compliment paid to the global humanitarianism of her mother’s most famous poem.

Hall’s claim for universality challenges what would otherwise be an easy and intuitive assumption that the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* expanded from a national to an international anthem of liberation after the Civil War, that what began life as part of the Union’s wartime civil religion was first nationalized after 1865 along with a lot of other New England ideology, and then internationalized in the Spanish-American War, the First World War, the Second World War, and subsequent American conflicts and interventions. It would make sense to suppose that the North’s most famous war song found continuing relevance as imperialists and social gospellers took up its stanzas to justify intervention at home and abroad.

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That did indeed happen. But the historical error comes in supposing that Howe’s *Battle Hymn* had to be transformed (or “reimagined,” as cultural historians like to say) in order to be universalized. Not so. The poem proved so useful in 1898, 1917, 1944, and beyond because it had always been about international democratic revolution. And if this is so, then the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* performed by combined military choirs at Ronald Reagan’s funeral at the Washington National Cathedral in 2005 was the same *Battle Hymn* sung by Union soldiers and civilians in 1861. America’s *Battle Hymn* had no need to be reinvented. It was born universal.

On the whole, historians and biographers have not situated the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* in the world of ideas and events prior to 1861. Historians of antebellum Unitarianism, transcendentalism, nationalism, and the New England literary renaissance have had little reason to pay attention to Howe. Yes, she was a liberal Unitarian, intimate friends with the members of the Transcendentalist Club, committed to nationalist causes in Greece, Poland, Italy, Hungary, and later Armenia, and a respected poet. But she was a tertiary figure at best in these other stories, obscured by William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller at the forefront, and by such secondary figures as George Ripley, Frederick Henry Hedge, and William Henry Channing.

Howe’s biographers on the other hand have their own purposes for writing, and the arcana of liberal Unitarian theology, transcendentalism, philosophical idealism, and nationalist ideology concern them only in passing as they delve into Howe’s upbringing, marriage, literary career, and involvement in the women’s movement and other reforms. Likewise, two recent books, one on Civil War songs in general and one entirely on the *Battle Hymn*, do not need the theology of Howe’s ministers in Boston, the ideology of the European Revolutions of 1848, or Howe’s larger body of work to tell their stories.\(^3\)

Combined, the good efforts of all these studies still leave a gaping hole in our understanding of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and do not account for its quick absorption into the American civil religion. One of the most helpful books showing the connection between American authors and romantic nationalism is Larry J. Reynolds’s 1988 *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance*.\(^4\) Reynolds makes a compelling case built on biographical and textual evidence that Emerson, Fuller, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman, along with Whittier, Lowell, Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, all responded to the Revolutions of 1848 in their art. Even those such as Hawthorne and Melville who thought in Burkean terms and feared the consequences of these revolutions for Europe and America could not escape their influence.

If you are curious about this link, reread Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sometime with an eye out for what was at the time of its publication the recent Hungarian revolution and Austria’s repression of the uprising and you will find the characters discussing these events repeatedly. Reynolds does not mention Julia Ward Howe, but the same illumination of detail emerges once her work is placed in the setting of mid-nineteenth-century European history.

Howe’s poetry takes on clarity, greater historical texture, and more significance for the story of American civil religion once it is tied to both romantic nationalism and liberal Unitarianism. The label “romantic nationalism” poses some problems in definition and keeps scholars busy trying to sort out its various manifestations after the French Revolution. Moreover, the lines dividing
nineteenth-century nationalism, liberalism, populism, and republicanism are not easy to establish. Historians like to keep these movements distinct, especially if they happen to favor one or more of these ideologies and reject the others. True, nationalism was promoted for both liberal and nonliberal ends. But at the time, Howe’s progressive view of history jumbled together these powerful tendencies. Supposedly, national independence movements in Greece, Poland, and Hungary, and the national unification movement in Italy and Germany, would automatically be liberal, republican, and emancipatory.

To this enthusiasm for nation building, Howe added an idealist’s faith in the readability of history akin to Emerson’s certainty that transcendentalist insight enabled him to view the tapestry of the world from the top as presenting one coherent picture rather than from the bottom along with the rest of us confused mortals not blessed with his second sight. Howe, like many other idealist of her day, looked not at but through the events of history to trace the movement from tyranny to freedom, from monarchy to republicanism, from empire to self-determination, from fragmentation to national unification, from all kinds of oppression to global emancipation. It was not surprising, then, that in 1861 she read the Civil War itself as part of this larger, longer story. This was her gospel.

Howe drew her nationalism from a number of sources. Her husband, Samuel Gridley Howe, had fought in the Greek war for independence against the Ottomans in the 1820s—the first of the successful revolts that would dismember the Turkish Empire over the next century. He had welcomed the July Revolution while in Paris in 1830. He had worked closely with the French and American friends of Polish liberty and had even spent time in a Prussian prison for smuggling funds to Polish refugees. He and Julia supported the Hungarian revolution and hosted Lajos Kossuth in Boston on the patriot’s controversial tour through the U.S.

Julia made two extended trips to Europe before the American Civil War: the first in 1843–44 on her honeymoon, and the second in 1850–51. On both these trips she spent months living in Rome. In 1848–49 she read Margaret Fuller’s important dispatches from Rome published in Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune and later devoted several chapters to Fuller’s account of the revolution in Rome in her 1883 biography of the friend she had admired so much. Howe’s own interpretation of these events culminated in about half a dozen of the poems in her 1853 collection, Passion-Flowers.

In her later Reminiscences, the elderly Howe connected the poetry of Passion-Flowers directly to the revolutions of 1848. “The work, such as it was,” she wrote, “dealt partly with the stirring questions of the time, partly with things near and familiar. The events of 1848 were still in fresh remembrance: the heroic efforts of Italian patriots to deliver their country from foreign oppression, the struggle of Hungary to maintain her ancient immunities. The most important among my ‘Passion Flowers’ were devoted to these themes. The wrongs and sufferings of the slave had their part in the volume.” The book appeared anonymously, but what Howe obliquely referred to as “things near and familiar” infuriated the often-obtuse Samuel Gridley Howe for publicly intimating the emotional trauma of their unhappy marriage.

Family friend and fellow poet John Greenleaf Whittier singled out two of the poems from Passion-Flowers for special praise. He wrote Julia that “they excited me like a war-trumpet.” “I like [the book’s] noble aim,” he continued, “its scorn and hate of priestcraft and Slavery. It speaks out bravely, beautifully
all I have felt, but could not express, when contemplating the condition of Europe.”

Whittier’s linking of Roman Catholicism and chattel slavery was common among the New England reformers in general and highlights a key element in Howe’s thought and poetry.

The five-stanza “Pio Nono,” not mentioned by Whittier but typical of the kind of thing Howe tried to achieve in the collection’s most political poems, begins by chastising Pope Pius IX. The troubled pontiff, once the hope of liberal reformers and nationalists, had returned to French-occupied Rome just six months before the Howes’ second stay in the city in 1850. “Thou should’st have had more faith!” Howe complaints at the head of each of the first three stanzas—more faith, that is, in the Revolution of 1848, more faith in the popular uprising for liberty and unification.

Pius had “shed/The seed of Freedom in the field of God,” but instead of meeting his destiny with courage, he had fled the city. By the third stanza, it becomes clear that for Howe the Church’s primary message, its divine commission, in fact, is political and earthly. She evokes in this stanza and the next the Gospel account of Peter walking on the stormy waters at Jesus’s call, sinking when he begins to fear, and hearing the rebuke of his master for his lack of faith (Matthew 14:22–33):

Thou should’st have had more faith!
the voice of Christ
Called thee to meet him, walking on
the wave;
Thou should’st have trod the waters
as a path,
Such power divine thy holy mission
gave.

Fifty years later, by which time Italian unification had been an accomplished fact for decades and the Papal States had been wiped from the map, Howe still blamed Pope Pius for his alleged cowardice: “The Pope retreated before the logical sequence of his own initiatives,” she recalled. The expected New Jerusalem would have to wait. She remembered being surprised in 1850 that Romans she met weren’t more visibly agitated by recent events. In private, however, when she asked one citizen why the pope had “so suddenly forsaken his liberal policy,” she was told, “Oh, the Pope was a puppet moved from without. He never rightly understood the import of his first departure. When the natural result of this came about, he fled from it in terror.”

“From Newport to Rome,” one of the poems Whittier praised by name for attacking “priestcraft and Slavery,” directly addressed the events of 1848. In fact, it carries the year “1848” as a subtitle. This time the poet rebukes the complacent men and women of the world, thoughtlessly distracted by their own petty preoccupations, who waltz away the hours while the world explodes around them. These seem to be the frivolous, privileged youth of the world Howe had known as the daughter of a prosperous Wall Street banker. In the midst of this fool’s paradise, the poet had chosen instead the sober life of study. She had cultivated a conscience, and among the whirl of high society she “alone could hear/The wailing of the world without.” The cry she heard came from Europe. But her generation heard only the music of the “sweetest waltz.” For them, nothing was “out of tune.”

But she felt the thrill of revolution. She saw the patriots on the ramparts. She heard, appalled, “When even the Marseillaise/Sounds for the treachery of France,” a reference to Louis Napoleon’s occupation army sent to crush the rebellion in Rome. Her worldly contemporaries remain oblivious to “how pregnant is the time.” History is compressed. Events rush on. The call of brother-
hood is now, but onlookers are too stupid to realize it.

“For the brave world is given to us
For all the brave in heart to keep,
Lest wicked hands should sow the thorns
That bleeding generations reap.

“Oh world! oh time! oh heart of Christ!
Oh heart, betrayed and sold anew!
Dance on, ye slaves! ay, take your sport,
All times are one to such as you.”

Howe’s preoccupation with events in Europe runs through these two poems and others in the collection. The nationalist movements of the 1840s, despite suppression at the hands of France, Austria, and Russia, seemed to her certain to triumph in history’s inexorable march toward freedom. Europe’s struggle between revolution and counter-revolution gave Howe a template with which to trace the meaning of events at home and abroad. Europe’s fight over American slavery in the 1850s was but one episode in the epochal struggle between Slavery and Freedom worldwide. Likewise, wars for liberation and unification abroad were matched soon by a war for liberation and unification at home.11

As potent as Howe’s romantic nationalism and historicism were on their own, combined with liberal Unitarianism and transcendentalism they become revolutionary. Unitarianism and transcendentalism blended into a single intellectual reform movement for Howe, much as they did for Emerson, Ripley, Hedge, John S. Dwight, and others. Like them, she rejected the “sensational” epistemology of John Locke in favor of Kantian intuition and made a close study of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. She also read Hegel, Goethe, Herder, Spinoza, Comte, and, like Emerson, a good deal of Swedenborg. She first encountered Unitarianism in a sermon by William Ellery Channing, but later in Boston she and her husband attended Theodore Parker’s church from 1846 to 1854 and then moved to James Freeman Clarke’s Church of the Disciples.

Parker had established himself as one of the most important and controversial importers of German higher criticism and philosophical idealism, while Clarke was one of the few Unitarian ministers radical enough to exchange pulpits with him. Howe left behind the evangelical Episcopalianism of her father and her childhood to identify with the most progressive wing of reforming Unitarianism. Her handling of the Bible and her depictions of Christ, miracles, dogma, ritual, and the moral apathy of the modern church reflect her liberal Unitarianism and her debt to German idealism and Swedenborg’s mysticism.

In the 1950s, historian Edward Snyder published a short but thorough analysis of Howe’s blending of biblical motifs and language in the *Battle Hymn*, especially the poet’s fascination with the apocalyptic “Day of the Lord.”12 Even with the help of this careful scholarship, however, it is easy to come away from reading or singing the *Battle Hymn* with the impression that the poem is little more than a patchwork of violent images snipped from Scripture. But it is much more than that. No matter how many Old and New Testament verses appear in the poem, it doesn’t “work” theologically without Howe’s Unitarian doctrines of Christ and salvation.

Literary scholar Gary Williams, in his illuminating study of Howe’s poetic imagination, points to scholars’ conflicting interpretations of Howe’s “Christ” in the last stanza of the *Battle Hymn* (“In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the seas”).13 Edmund Wilson, in *Patriotic Gore*, identified Howe’s “treatment of Jesus” as one
“so characteristic of Calvinism”—that is, as taking a backseat to the Old Testament warrior God of the battlefield. Howe’s modern biographer, Deborah Clifford, writes of this stanza that by emphasizing “God’s justice rather than his mercy,” Howe, “like so many liberal Christians [of the war years], had reverted to the stern evangelical creed of her childhood.” Williams much more plausibly points to “the militant, conviction-driven figure so compellingly limned in [the Passion-Flowers poem] ‘Whit-Sunday in the Church.’” This Christ is not the Jesus of Calvinist or evangelical orthodoxy but the thoroughly modernized Jesus—the zealous reformer—of Boston’s liberal Unitarianism.

If this Jesus still owed anything to Calvinism and to evangelicalism, and he did, it was as those traditions were adapted by New England liberalism under the influence of the most innovative of nineteenth-century German theology. Unitarians like Howe kept Calvin around on their own terms. They missed the irony as they forgot their hostility to John Calvin’s doctrines long enough to praise John Brown as a hero animated, they said, by the same theology that had produced the Scottish Covenanters and Cromwell’s New Model Army. They were happy to feature Calvin in their story as a cultural force behind Puritanism, revolution, and social reform and not as the Reformed theologian of the doctrines they had jettisoned long ago in their rebellion against New England orthodoxy.

An odd but significant source for the Christ who appears as the “Hero” of the Battle Hymn of the Republic is Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). The eighteenth-century Swedish mystic who founded the Church of the New Jerusalem influenced a number of transcendentalists, including Emerson and George Ripley. Howe singled out Swedenborg’s “theory of the divine man” for its influence on her idea of Christ, and pointed to several of his hefty tomes as the “writings which interested [her] most.” She credited Swedenborg with the doctrine of Christ she still adhered to in 1899. Jesus was “the heavenly Being whose presence was beneficence, whose word was judgment, whose brief career on earth ended in a sacrifice, whose purity and pathos have had much to do with the redemption of the human race from barbarism and the rule of the animal passions.”

In light of her Christology, there is no reason to read the Battle Hymn of the Republic as inconsistent with Howe’s liberal faith or as some sort of reversion to the default mode of childhood Calvinism. Her Christ and the kind of redemption he provided matched Parker’s and Clarke’s and any number of other liberal Unitarians’ theology. Again, a poem from her 1853 Passion-Flowers makes her theology of Christ and the Church obvious. The collection’s title itself points to Christ and his suffering. The passion-flower vine, first encountered by Spanish explorers in the Americas in the sixteenth century, was popular in Victorian Britain and America. An Italian monk early in the seventeenth century had published a description of the flower’s complex structure and its supposed symbolic connections to the wounds of Christ, including the crown of thorns. Beginning with the title of her collection, then, Howe invoked powerful Christological symbolism.

The poem “Whit-Sunday in the Church” effectively depicts Howe’s Christ and summarizes her indictment of the modern Church. Whitsunday is another name for Pentecost in the liturgical year. It falls seven weeks after Easter and marks the gift of the Holy Spirit and the apostolic miracle of tongues. Howe celebrated the miracle of Pentecost in this poem as the binding of humankind back together with the recovery
of man’s “lost ancestral tongue,” a reversal, that is, of the curse of Babel in Genesis. Out of divided “Men” would one day come the ideal “Man.” Howe rebukes the modern Church for falling away from the Church at its birth, for its “flimsy” preaching, “dead Bible,” and ritual of “song and prayer”—a common charge from conservative and liberal evangelicals alike against forms, creeds, and confessions. The pastor’s sermon merely admonishes the congregation to pray, to attend services, to take the sacrament, and wait for the work of the Holy Spirit. This was God’s “appointed way,” he tells them.

But none of this cold indifference to the state of the world could prevent the true message of Christ from breaking through dead formality, biblical literalism, and the “cold abstraction” of orthodoxy. The living Christ of an active faith appears among the worshippers:

And Christ, my Christ, by doctrine slain,
By ritual buried, from his ashes
Breathed out the fervor of his soul,
And swept the aisles, and shook the sashes;

And turned us to the simpler truth
He taught, beside the sea’s wild splendor,
And showed the meaning of his life
With urgings passionate and tender:

“For song and prayer, the old time had
The Hebrew and the classic Muses;
I left a rule of work and life,
A work of love, a life of uses.”

This Jesus now worked in solidarity with the peasant and the factory worker, with the liberal theologians who “free the truth” from “dead symbols,” with the victims of Russian despotism, with the Lombards in chains in Austria’s notorious Spielberg prison, and with the beaten slave. (The reference to Spielberg connects Howe’s Christ with the northern Italian uprising against Austria in 1848. Spielberg, the most heavily fortified prison in Europe at the time, was home in the nineteenth century to hundreds of Polish and Italian prisoners, including the Italian nationalist poet Silvio Pellico and others whom Howe had met in Italy.) Howe’s Christ, chastising Christians in their comfortable churches for their “dead worship,” asks in astonishment:

“Think ye, in these portentous times
Of wrath, and hate, and wild distraction,
Christ dwells within a church that rests
A comfortable, cold abstraction?

. . .

“He cries: ‘On, brethren, draw the sword,
Loose the bold tongue and pen,
unfearing,
The weakness of our human flesh
Is ransomed by your persevering.’ ”

This was the same Christ who “died to make men holy,” the same Christ who a decade later summoned his American brethren to “die to make men free.”

When Julia Ward Howe began jotting down “Mine eyes have seen the glory . . .” in the early morning gray of November 19, 1861, at Willard’s Hotel in Washington, D.C., no doubt she pictured the Union encampments she had seen as her train brought her and her party from Boston to the Capital. She no doubt
pictured also the soldiers of General McClellan’s Army of the Potomac whom she, James Freeman Clarke, and Massachusetts governor John Andrew and his wife had seen the day before. But she also drew upon the romantic nationalism she cultivated in Europe and the liberal Unitarianism she learned under Boston’s most important theological transcendentalists. Her hymn’s “universalty,” while used in later years in ways that perhaps she could not have imagined, nevertheless gets to the core of what the poem had always been. The religious nationalism of the Battle Hymn of the Republic came from a close observer and passionate advocate of the European wars of liberation who also promoted a radically reformed, creedless, activist Christianity dedicated to ending oppression at home and abroad.

At the end of his landmark 1967 essay “Civil Religion in America,” sociologist Robert N. Bellah turned from scholarly analysis to prophetic vision. He anticipated nothing less than the birth of a global civil religion if America emerged victorious through its third time of national crisis. America’s first two defining crises, the Revolution and the Civil War, produced, he wrote, “the major symbols of the American civil religion.” The third crisis, this time played out on a global scale, tested America’s fidelity to its calling to build an international order of democracy, prosperity, progress, and peace. The nation faced, Bellah wrote, “the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world, a world seeking to attain many of the things, material and spiritual, that we have already attained.”

Like the previous American crises, this one too “would precipitate a major new set of symbolic forms.” “The emergence of a genuine transnational sovereignty,” he continued, “would necessitate the incorporation of vital international symbolism into our civil religion, or, perhaps a better way of putting it, it would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion of the world.” Such a new, global civil religion, Bellah assured the readers of Daedalus, “could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed, such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself.”

There are so many questions Bellah’s last paragraphs beg and raise: Has there in fact been such a strong continuity in American civil religion? Has the national faith been propelled by such a potent internal teleology? Has America’s “eschatological hope” indeed been global from the beginning? What does it say about the accuracy of Bellah’s history of the American civil religion that he mobilizes his analysis to this end? And is the “meaning of America” so obvious and uncontested? What ought to be obvious at least is that far from a dispassionate observer and analyst of the American civil religion, Bellah was actually a participant in that faith who sought to perpetuate the nation’s civil religion. He was a contributor to civil religion who appropriated a national civil religion for internationalist ends.

The problem is not so much Bellah’s presentism, teleology, or liberal internationalism. It is his assumption that something would have to be done to the American civil religion in the 1960s in order to internationalize it. This claim presupposes that an embarrassingly provincial or “primitive” civil religion had to change and incorporate new symbols to become global and progressive. Contra Bellah, the main doctrines of the American civil religion were not national ideals that needed to be universalized in order to endure but rather internationalist
ideals that had already been nationalized in the fiery furnace of the Civil War. The history of the American civil religion does not describe an arc of eschatological fulfillment. The truth is almost the reverse.

Instead, a century and a half ago an internationalist vision of an American eschaton was made national. This is what Julia Ward Howe and her *Battle Hymn* helped achieve. America as an “idea” was invented in the decades leading up to the Civil War by reformers who had one eye on Europe and the other eye on America, who saw the rising tide of nationalism, liberalism, and democracy as a global emancipatory process that had to be made to redeem America, while America, acting as its truest self, would play a leading, inspiring role in world transformation. This generation of idealists, every bit as much as Bellah’s in the 1960s, believed it lived in a “revolutionary world” and acted on that belief. The paradox is that such a narrowly provincial understanding of America as cultivated in Boston in the mid-nineteenth century should come to be interpreted as definitively American and the nation’s gift to a world remade in its own image.

Rudyard Kipling’s reason for ending the 1891 version of *The Light That Failed* with a few stanzas of the *Battle Hymn* is hard to pinpoint. He seems not to have left behind any explanation for its prominence in the novel’s closing scene. As the British journalists reach the hymn’s final verse and begin to sing, “In the beauty of the lilies,” one character stops them and says, “Hold on….We’ve nothing to do with that. It belongs to another man”—meaning Christ. But then the main character, the artist Dick Heldar, who is going blind, says, “No…the other man belongs.” And with that ambiguous, mysterious objection, the novel ends. Whether the young Kipling signaled by these words his belief that Christ belonged with the British army in the Sudan, or that Christ endorsed the British Empire, or that the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* really was meant, as Florence Howe Hall later claimed, “for men of every clime who love liberty,” Julia Ward Howe’s poem as written in 1861 affirmed her own judgment that “the other man belongs”—her Christ belonged in the Greek war for independence, in Poland, in Hungary, in Italy, and along the Potomac as North battled South. For Howe and Boston’s elite, the American Civil War erupted in a global context of progressive historical development as soldiers in blue died to make men free.

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11 In 1866 George Ripley, the founder of Brook Farm, directly associated the Franco-Prussian War and Prussia’s unification of Germany with the Union cause. Charles Crowe, George Ripley: Transcendentalist and Utopian Socialist (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 257.
13 Gary Williams, *Hungry Heart*, 268n57.
16 See, for example, James Freeman Clarke, *Causes and Consequences of the Affair at Harper’s [sic] Ferry: A Sermon Preached in the Indiana Place Chapel on Sunday Morning, Nov. 6, 1859* (Boston: Walker, Wise, 1859), 10. Julia Ward Howe was present in the congregation to hear this sermon.
20 Ibid., 53–54.