

EDWARD H. MADDEN, *Civil Disobedience and Moral Law in Nineteenth-Century American Philosophy*

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In our troubled times, we naturally look with interest toward a book like Edward H. Madden's *Civil Disobedience and Moral Law in Nineteenth-Century American Philosophy*, which claims to contain "different views of reform" that "constitute parables for our own times (p. 15)."

Three schools of thought in nineteenth century American social philosophy are examined: academic orthodoxy represented by Francis Wayland, Asa Mahan, and James H. Fairchild; Transcendentalism represented by Emerson, George Wm. Curtis, and Theodore Parker; and the evolutionary hypothesis represented by Chauncey Wright and Charles Eliot Norton. In particular, the book claims to study these thinkers' views on the source of moral law and on civil disobedience.

The study is well researched, is heavily footnoted, is interestingly written, and is a solid contribution to the literature of nineteenth century American intellectual history. It does not, however, suffice as a comprehensive survey of its topic, and the meanings of its "parables" are far from clear. Some of the thinkers selected for examination appear to be far from central in the history of nineteenth century American thought on the topics of moral law and civil disobedience. For example, almost nothing is said about the views on civil disobedience of Mahan, Fairchild, or Wright, yet at least one chapter is devoted to each of these men. Two chapters are devoted to Chauncey Wright's moral theory, although he published nothing during his lifetime on moral issues (p. 140). Other thinkers who made important contributions to the problems under study receive scant mention. Why does Henry David Thoreau, author of the immortal essay on *Civil Disobedience*, receive only one page of analysis (p. 97) out of a total of more than two hundred pages? Both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were heavily influenced by Thoreau, and it is puzzling how any "parables for our own times" could essentially ignore him. On the other hand, what "parables for our own times" are suggested by Chauncey

Wright or James Fairchild? In what ways are the traditions of Transcendentalism or traditional supernaturalism relevant to our century, which believes in neither? The reader may accumulate such questions, hoping that a concluding chapter will at least hint at the answers, but it is a vain hope, for there is no conclusion given.

Even more perplexing is the complete absence of analysis of several nineteenth century American thinkers who had much to say about civil disobedience and moral law. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a terribly important antislavery book of wide circulation, which certainly contains clear parables for our times. Horace Greeley spoke out on these problems, and wrote the *Prayer of Twenty Millions* to Abraham Lincoln. Many black men were engaged in deep and vigorous philosophical criticism of these problems of civil disobedience and moral law which were of special concern to them, but only the thoughts of white men about the black slavery problem are selected for analysis. Where are the *ideas* of Nat Turner and John Brown, that sparked civil disobedience and moral protest in the form of slave revolts? Where are the teachings of Sojourner Truth? David Walker wrote *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* in 1829, and Frederick Douglass wrote *Men of Color, to Arms!*, as well as publishing an abolition newspaper. Surely these writings are concerned with moral and social philosophy, and contain *ideas* and parables that deserve analysis in any comprehensive study of this kind. Surely it is false historically to suppose that abolition was an all white doctrine. The omission of black *thinkers* from the study seems to imply that there were no black *thinkers* sufficiently articulate or profound to merit analysis in a history of the subject. Like historians who declare that Columbus "discovered" America though red men had populated the continent for a millennium before, philosophers need to uncover and expel the prejudice of a white perspective in their philosophy that leads them, for example, to discuss abolition as if its intellectual and philosophical foundations were essentially laid and sustained by the benevolent paternalism of white thinkers. This is, perhaps, the most important of the "parables for our own times" contained in the book, albeit inadvertently.

The dust jacket tells us that in this book, "issues and attitudes explosively present today are illuminated," and that the book "exposes the relevance to our own time of the spirited discussions in nineteenth century American philosophy and of

the events they helped produce." This reviewer finds little of the illumination or relevance to the explosive problems of civil disobedience and moral law of our own time that is promised. The book is, rather, an excellent scholarly study of the social philosophies of some *selected* nineteenth century *academic* philosophers, who wrote in the context of their *own* times and problems. Perhaps too much stress is placed presently upon the need for contemporary relevance, but if that promise is made, and unfulfilled, the reading public will be misled.