Episode 1,405: The Battle Hymn of the Republic and American Righteousness

Guest: Richard Gamble

WOODS: I've got a bunch of questions I jotted down after reading your book. The first one, though, if you can't figure out the answer, I'm happy to supply it for you, okay, because what we've talked about on the show before are a couple of your other books. We talked about your book analyzing the "City on a Hill" imagery and how it's been appropriated in American history. And then we've also talked about your book on the social gospel clergy during World War I.

GAMBLE: Right.

WOODS: This book, *A Fiery Gospel*, about the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" I think can be easily situated alongside these, because there's a common strain running through all these works. I now leave it to you, Richard Gamble, to identify for us what that common strain is.

GAMBLE: You're very perceptive. And this is a strange experience for me, because as I look back now, take this retrospective glance, I see much more continuity in my work than I probably realized was there. Well, they all deal in some way or another with civil religion. They all touch on the confusion between the church and the state, theological confusion. They all deal with heresy. Take your pick, Tom.

WOODS: Yeah, so in other words, the appropriation of biblical language, concepts, metaphors for the purposes of the American regime or American society or American government —

GAMBLE: Wars.

WOODS: — or whatever, or some kind of privileging of the United States over the other countries of the world.

GAMBLE: Yes, absolutely.

WOODS: All right, and so as we'll see what the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," that work is not by any means confined just to 1861 to 1865, that period, just that one war, right? It has a life of its own, right, because, first of all, there's no specific language in there that would necessarily confine it to use in the 1860s. All right, we'll get to all this a little bit later. Why don't we start with some biographical information that we might need to know about Julia Ward Howe, who wrote it?

GAMBLE: Sure. One of my big hopes with this book is to introduce readers to a Julia Ward Howe they have never met before. She has become an iconic figure within the American civil religion itself, a patriotic figure, a celebrated figure for women's rights, for abolitionism, for humanitarianism, for the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." But when we look carefully, we discover pretty quickly that we don't know Julia Ward Howe.

So I'll give you a bit of a sketch here and try not to drown your listeners in detail. Julia Ward Howe is most closely associated with the city of Boston and abolitionism, transcendentalism, liberal Unitarianism. And there's a very good reason for that, and I'll come back to that, but she's actually a native of New York City. She was born in 1819 in Lower Manhattan. Her father was a very prominent banker, very much caught up in the history of the Jacksonian banking question. He was hit very hard by the Panic of 1837. He died shortly thereafter, a very difficult, but also a very prosperous life. He was the descendant of some very staunch New England Puritans who settled in Rhode Island. One of his ancestors fought in Oliver Cromwell's army. And he married a Southern belle, who had connections actually to Francis Marion in South Carolina. And Julia Ward Howe liked to boast about her ancestry being Puritan and Cavalier, but she's really 100% Puritan, it becomes pretty clear.

She was born and raised in privilege. She was educated at home mostly. She was even educated by a private tutor who was trained in graduate schools in Germany. She knew many languages; I would say she knew, as an adult, probably seven languages, including Hebrew. She knew French, German; she was steeped in German theology, liberal theology, higher criticism. She was steeped in German philosophy, German poetry. She wrote review essays about new translations of Goethe and Schiller, really a remarkably intelligent young woman.

And she aspired to be a poet, with mixed next success. She looked like in the 1850s that she would emerge as one of the preeminent women poets of America. Even Nathaniel Hawthorne at one point spoke very favorably of her first volume of poetry. It was rough — people often refer to it as roughhewn, and there is a certain vibrancy and vitality to it. As she grew older, her poetry became more formulaic, more occasional poetry. From there, she married Samuel Gridley Howe in the early 1840s. Samuel Gridley Howe had volunteered to fight in the Greek war for independence, was a dashing Byronic romantic figure, quite a few years older than Julia.

They married and settled in Boston, and that was her entry into the world of radical liberal Unitarianism. Your listeners may be familiar with the name Theodore Parker, may on a chance be familiar with the name James Freeman Clarke. These were pastors and close friends. And if you do a little digging about these two men, you discover that she was just immersed — I keep coming to the language of saturation — she was saturated in the most radical theology of the 1840s, 1850s. She knew everybody. She knew the whole Concord circle. She knew every reformer. She was involved with editing an abolitionist newspaper in the 1850s. She published essays, reviews, poetry and *The Atlantic Monthly*. And the more you dig, the more complex she becomes. And she lived forever. She lived until 1910, and she was an active public speaker, a diarist and author, up until very close to the time of her death.

WOODS: How is Unitarianism related to the story? I mean, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is extremely rich in biblical imagery. It doesn't necessarily read at first glance as the work of a higher critic, necessarily. So first of all, what is Unitarianism? But does it fit into the story?

GAMBLE: It does, and I have to admit, as a researcher and historian, I wanted it to fit a little better.

WOODS: Okay.

GAMBLE: I wanted to be able to prove that this was a distinctly Unitarian poem. I think if it had been, it would not have had the wide appeal. It would not have been embraced immediately by evangelical Methodists, for example.

WOODS: Right, and in a way, that was kind of what I was implying in my question, is that is she cynically manipulating religious language in order to win favor for her way of looking at the world in this hymn?

GAMBLE: I —

WOODS: Hard to know, right?

GAMBLE: Hard to know, and I tend to agree with what Mel Bradford wrote years ago in his analysis of the "Battle Hymn." He had I think a one-sentence paragraph that said, she meant every word [laughing].

WOODS: [laughing] Okay.

GAMBLE: And it has a wonderful comic timing, the way he did that. So she did mean every word, but knowing what she meant by those words, as you said, early on, there is so little language in this five-stanza poem that attaches it directly to the Civil War. That's part of the power of it, the longevity of it as a poem. It has been sung around the world. You can go on YouTube and watch Korean pop stars singing it in Korean. It has an amazing appeal globally, now for 150 years and counting.

But I think I remember our whole sequence of questions here, so let me go back a little bit, a little bit of a sketch of Unitarianism. Unitarianism, there's an English side to it, an American side to it. There are Unitarians in the American colonies in the 18th century. There are some among the founding generation. But that older Unitarianism, by and large, as it emerged and flourished in Boston, still retained a belief in the authority of the Bible, still believed in a very high status for Christ as the Redeemer. That's going to be modified. Even though he's not part of the Godhead for the Unitarians, they still have a very high view of him. The older Unitarians still believed that miracles were real, and miracles were necessary to attest to the truth of Christianity. So the miracles recorded in the New Testament are authentic verifications of the truth of the Christian message. And in a lot of ways, the older Unitarianism participated in the spirit of the Second Great Awakening, its mainstream Christianity.

But Julia Ward Howe plugs in to an avant-garde wing of Unitarianism that becomes corrosive — or not corrosive, but it does become corrosive. It becomes explosive, controversial within Unitarianism. And her two pastors Parker and Clarke, the other Unitarian ministers in Boston refused to have these men preach in their own pulpits. They were ostracized and identified in this way, cast outside of that community. So they became too radical for the liberal

movement. And ultimately, Julia Ward Howe denied every basic teaching of the Christian faith. I cannot think of one part of the Apostles' Creed that she would affirm as an adult.

And that's reflected in some of her poetry. It's a shame that some of her other poetry — her more experimental poetry, more radical poetry, it's a shame that's not better known. She has poems about the person of Christ, the work of Christ that are really deeply disturbing. She was a very troubled woman. I have a certain sympathy for her. She was plagued by depression throughout her life, very dark depression. She had a terrible marriage, a lot of grief in her life. And that often came out in some pretty powerful poetry. So that's part of that Unitarian world.

But when we come to the "Battle Hymn," it is a more — what could we call it a Tom? Is it a more generic Christianity? Is it a more — it's a very vague Christianity, which she is 100% sure that her God, her version of God, is visiting America and the world in divine judgment inside of history, and that the Union cause is a tool of that divine judgment. The Confederacy, the South is being judged and damned by God, by history, by God inside of history. She has a very strong sense of historical dialectic, and this is a working out of an imminent God in history. And yet, it finds this immediate audience among a lot of well-meaning evangelicals of all stripes.

WOODS: All right, Richard, before we go on, I wonder if you wouldn't mind actually reading the text of the "Battle Hymn," partly because I think even American listeners may not know all the verses. And also because, the figure fluctuates, but it's somewhere around 17% of the audience is actually from outside the US, and I wouldn't expect them to know the words. I think it would help inform our discussion a bit.

GAMBLE: Great. I'm happy to do that, Tom. And I will point something out at the beginning here that perhaps we can return to: the version I'm going to read matches what was published in February of 1862, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, but I'm going to read from the published version from *The New York Tribune* from January the 14th 1862. And this has something to do with the immediate popularity of this. It received more publicity than Julia Ward Howe was even aware of in her own lifetime. So let me read through the five stanzas here, and I think listeners should be alert to the violence in this poem and the apocalyptic judgment that is about the Second Coming of Christ and this upheaval, this great, violent upheaval:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.
His Day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.”

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment-seat:
Oh! be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

WOODS: All right, now that may be — it's hard to know what are the best known lines of that, but certainly the ending is pretty well known. Now, at this point with the text in from of us, I'd like to get your thoughts about the theology that's in it, because I have heard people who are religiously orthodox say that "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is just flat-out blasphemy. But at the same time, it doesn't seem like in the long history of Christianity, it doesn't seem on the face of it to be blasphemous to suggest — in other words, it doesn't seem, let's say, out of keeping with what other Christians have written, to suggest that the Lord's will could be carried out through some kind of righteous violence. So what makes this poem so different?

GAMBLE: Yes, this is my favorite topic, and I'll try to be clear and succinct here. Because it sounds so biblical, and because it uses the rhythm and the very vocabulary of the King James Version of the Bible, it sounds so much like the Bible. From "Mine eyes have seen" to "contemners," this old-fashioned language, and she speaks of "the Hero born of woman," all this Christological content to it and even redemptive content, it sounds so much like the Bible that everybody knew in America in the mid 19th century.

But context matters a lot here. She wrote this poem about what she had witnessed visiting the encampments of Northern Virginia, seeing Massachusetts regiments with her very eyes. And she is arguing here, she is celebrating that she is witnessing — one of the things listeners might find interesting is all the personal pronouns. "*Mine* eyes have seen," "I have seen," "I have read," "I have read." She is a witness to this, and she is a witness to the judgment of God inside of history, carried out by the Union Army, a war for — primarily this is a war for reunification for her, and that's true of the governor of Massachusetts and others, but also a war to end the institution of slavery, although she says very little directly about slavery in this poem. So the context matters. She believes that the armies of the North are the armies of the Lord. It is as if she is witnessing the armies of Joshua or the armies of Gideon in the Old Testament, carrying out a decree of Almighty God.

And the imagery here, what she's doing with "the grapes of wrath" — maybe this gets too particular right now, but I think it's very important. If listeners would like to go back to look at the prophet Isaiah and the way that he used the imagery of the wine press of God's wrath, and then look at the book of Revelation — I believe it's Revelation chapter 14, the way that John picks up on that Isaiah prophecy and depicts its fulfillment at the end of history, the coming of God in His righteous judgment — listeners will understand, readers of the book will understand that she is drawing here on some of the most powerful, vivid, violent, blood-soaked language of the Old and New Testament.

And if you take that blood-soaked language out of the hands of a righteous God, of the sovereign God of the universe — you take it out of his hands and put it into the hands of the

United States Army, this is where it becomes blasphemous. This is where it becomes very dangerous to think that, no matter how right or noble our cause might be here on Earth, to claim that this is the will of God being enacted in his righteous judgment, it's a shocking poem.

So that image, if I could just draw attention to the second line, "He is trampling out" — so the Lord, then — this is the Second Coming of Christ, I believe. "He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." There is blood everywhere in this imagery of the harvest of the grapes being crushed. She knows what she's doing here, and she is as confident as she can be that her God, her version of God is achieving his will on the battlefields of Northern Virginia.

WOODS: All right, so that in a way does actually call to mind your work on the Progressive Era and what the social gospel clergy had to say, because they're appropriating biblical language, but also in this case, they're taking imagery that might put us in mind of God giving direct commands in history, and then just more or less assuming that, well, it's kind of like what's going on today, except minus the direct command part. We'll just assume that Lincoln is a good enough stand in for God Himself.

GAMBLE: Yeah.

WOODS: And then, of course, once the US presidents come to take this role, this becomes extremely subversive and dangerous language to be using.

GAMBLE: I agree, and we probably shouldn't start talking about Woodrow Wilson. We'll never stop. But he loved the quote from this poem, as did Teddy Roosevelt. Teddy Roosevelt knew Julian Ward Howe and quoted this poem all the time.

WOODS: Of course, he would. Of course. I mean, I could just imagine the neocons in those days salivating over this. They don't believe a word of it, but they'll use it for their purposes. So tell me a little something about the story of the composition of the hymn, because it's a story she related many times.

GAMBLE: She did. And she embellished it a bit over the decades. And she — how can I put this? She almost melded her own identity with the identity of this poem. I think at first the poem's popularity was a burden to her. She was even called a monopoet by one journalist. Not a flattering thing to say.

WOODS: No.

GAMBLE: But I think she came to embrace it. She came to profit by the celebrity that the poem brought her internationally. But its origin comes from November of 1861. If we refresh our memories here about the sequence of events, of course, Lincoln is elected in November of 1860, takes office in March of 1861. The firing on Fort Sumter, April of 1861; the subsequent calling up of states' militia, additional troops. There are engagements, battles in Northern Virginia in the summer of 1861 that go very badly for the Union forces. And the Union cause is still really struggling by the fall of 1861.

And she and some close friends — she just tagged along on a trip from Boston via train down to Washington. She was not the star of the show. There are much more famous people with her, including the governor of Massachusetts, John Albion Andrew; her own pastor, James Freeman Clarke; his wife. They made an adventure of it. And she saw a lot, especially on the last leg of the trip from Baltimore to DC. She found the entire rail link between those two cities guarded heavily by Union troops. And it was a dreary, rainy night as they entered the city, so she did see the campfires of the soldiers. She was very struck by this. And during that week, she made a number of visits to the Massachusetts regiments stationed in Northern Virginia, right across the Potomac. And she made more than one visit to those troops. Some of the officers were personal friends of hers, and she wanted to help cheer and encourage the troops.

Right in the middle of that visit to DC, she went to see a large military parade. She was going to see a larger one a couple of days later, and some people get all these events mixed up. Some of the soldiers who were there get these events mixed up. But she went to see troop maneuvers. And there was a Confederate skirmish, way down the end of the Union forces, and a lot of the visitors that day who had come out via carriage from DC to see the sites, they had to scramble back to DC. And traffic jams in Northern Virginia and DC are not new. They got caught in an epic traffic jam trying to get back into the city.

And the carriage was moving very slowly, and the soldiers were marching alongside her carriage, and they're talking with her. And she was known for her musical ability. She was a gifted singer, a gifted pianist. She even composed pieces for voice and piano. And the soldiers were singing their favorite marching song. They were singing "John Brown's Body." And in fact, that remained their favorite. It was not replaced by the "Battle Hymn," contrary to a lot of assumptions. So they were singing, and the story she told years later was that her pastor, James Freeman Clark ,said to her, "Well, Mrs. Howe you should write better words to that tune." And that night in her hotel, actually, early the next morning, she woke up, and these words were running through her mind to the rhythm of the John Brown song. And she wrote them out, revised them very little, and they were they were published a couple of months later.

But I am a little suspicious of that story, because it turns out that James Freeman Clarke loved the John Brown song. He talked about it in sermons in Boston in that immediate context of those same days. He praised the words from the chorus of John Brown song, "His soul is marching on," and he said, *Yes, yes, John Brown's soul is marching on. It's marching on now in these Massachusetts regiments. It's marching on in the Union cause*. So I do believe this story was embellished a bit over the years.

But it became popular in the general public. It was published in newspapers from coast to coast, and North, Midwest, West. And it became a way for — I think this is one of the most interesting things I was able to put back together, the story I was able to put back together. The poem as a symbol, as highly symbolic, evocative language, became a way for people to interpret their war. It became a way to explain the Civil War to themselves, to the world. And it was quoted by politicians very soon, by all kinds of preachers. It was quoted by journalists. We see it everywhere. And it was sung at Lincoln's funeral, more than once in those extended observances of his death. And as you mentioned, early on, it just keeps showing up as a way to explain every one of America's wars down to the present day.

WOODS: As we wrap up, let's do just a couple more questions relating to precisely that. Let's first of all start with the process of how it becomes, in effect, adopted during the war itself. What does that process look like?

GAMBLE: It's hard to track. It's an impressionistic story that I'm able to tell there. I've found, thanks to the magic of modern search engine —it's just incredible now with Google Books and all of these resources, the kind of details that we can pull out from the historical record these days. It's showing up in sermons. As I mentioned, it's showing up in speeches. It's showing up in published versions. Music publishers in Boston bring out editions of it very quickly and pair it with the chorus of the John Brown song, a little bit adapted, but people recognized immediately that it matched the John Brown tune. So it's available in sheet music within just a matter of weeks from being published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. And it starts showing up in hymnals very quickly, hymnals for the use of congregations, hymnals for the use of young people's groups, for the use of the Union troops. So it's being sung all over into 1863, '64, '65.

And then, by the early 1870s, Julia Ward Howe is going on the lecture circuit. She had an agent, and she maintained a very active public speaking career across the United States and even internationally. She lectured in Paris; she lectured in Athens; she lectured in Istanbul, Constantinople. And the poem just expanded and expanded and expanded.

And it reappeared in future wars, so predictably. It became — and how we know — we know *that* this happened; it is very hard to say how something like the "Battle Hymn" actually acquires its symbolic power. I think that's beyond the grasp of any historian, but we can watch it happening. We can watch Julia Ward Howe taking the Bible and turning it to her own purposes. And then we can watch future generations taking the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and applying it in turn to future wars. In 1898, as the Senate and House are debating the war resolution to enter the Spanish-American War, suddenly the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" appears on the front pages of newspapers all over the country without comment, as if it were some self-evident truth that you must start seeing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" again because America is going to war.

WOODS: So after that, I remember seeing in your book the discussion of the Preparedness Movement around the time of World War I, it's Teddy Roosevelt who wants to resurrect it that time, so it's resurrected during World War I, it's resurrected during the Cold War. What does that look like? At that point, it is a bit far removed from its historical context, but as we've said, the words to the hymn are not tethered to any one historical episode, so it can be called into service. But after a while, it would seem anachronistic; it's shocking to me that they're still using it.

GAMBLE: Right. Well, it requires — if I can put it bluntly, singing this song today requires biblical illiteracy. And, you know, when this was still part of living memory into the late 19th century, early 20th century, editors, newspaper editors, magazine editors, were still debating the exact meaning of the precise words and where did they come from in the Bible. But as that generation passes way, the poem is cut loose from any theological, philosophical, historical context. And as you've mentioned, the poem is surprisingly general — if you know what she's writing about, it's very specific, but if you step back, there's no North, no South, no, Virginia, no Washington DC, not the name of a single general or the name of a battle. And if it weren't for that, it would not have survived being a period piece, a curiosity. I draw a connection to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address from '63, two years after the "Battle Hymn." He does achieve the same thing with the Gettysburg Address. There is no North, no South, barely

an allusion to slavery. And think about how phrases from the Gettysburg Address — "government of the people, by the people, for the people" — that has an immortality, achieves an immortality, is quoted all the time. And the same thing happens with the "Battle Hymn."

WOODS: So as we finish, then, what is the significance of this? And why write a book about it?

GAMBLE: [laughing] The most prosaic answer is: I was asked to write a book about it.

WOODS: Okay, and there's nothing wrong with that answer. But then let's go back one level. Why did they ask you to write it? What did they see?

GAMBLE: And little did I know it would consume about six years of my life.

WOODS: Oh my goodness.

GAMBLE: Well, I ended up in the archives, and they were so rich. So rich. Her papers are massive. I was learning so much about her. And I hope at some point to do an intellectual religious biography of her. Nobody knows any of this material about her, and that needs to be put together.

Well, I wrote it to contribute to a series from Cornell University Press called *Religion in American Public Life*, and this is the first volume in that new series. And part of the purpose of that series is to show how religion has been made to function in public life. And I was asked by one of the series editors, just casually said, "Have you ever thought about writing a book about the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic'?" I thought, well, that fits in with what I do; I could do that. And here we are in 2019, and I think I have emails about this all the way back from 2012, so it's been a long, long haul.

And I hope that readers — and by the way, maybe it's not my place to say this, but I want to reassure listeners that while this book is published by an academic press, it's what is known as a trade book. The University Press wanted this book to connect with an intelligent, general audience. And I've been told that it does that. I won't say that about my own work, but I've been told that it is readable, accessible. It doesn't assume a lot of knowledge about theology, philosophy, military history. So my goal is to make it very accessible. And what I would like readers to come away with, something I talk about at the very end of the book, we — we, broadly American culture, American scholars, especially Christian scholars. The tendency has been to write books about how America has been influenced by the Bible. And they go back and look at George Washington, Tom Paine, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and we always ask that question. *Wow, look at what a big influence the Bible had on all these famous people*. I turn that question inside out. I turn it around. I am much more interested, and I think we learn more, by asking the question: what have Americans done to the Bible?

WOODS: That's a good question.

GAMBLE: Thank you. I think dozens and dozens of books could be written with case studies of what America does to the Bible. For instance, Tom Paine, by the time he's done with the book of Samuel I, it's unrecognizable. So we need to be alert. And I would appeal —you know, I

think there's something for everyone to learn from this, Christian, non-Christian. But I would hope that Christians who take their faith seriously, take their Bible, their church seriously, ought to be on guard. And I hope this book puts people on guard, and they will do a better job policing the boundaries between the United States of America and the kingdom of God. We need to remind ourselves constantly of the difference between those two things, and one is temporal and one is eternal.

WOODS: And incidentally, when you're talking about examples of this, you have many examples drawn from popular culture and from what ordinary people do. We think about bumper stickers comparing the American soldier to Christ. That goes all the way back to the Progressive Era, and that's still being done.

GAMBLE: And for the record, Julia Ward Howe is a card-carrying progressive in every way imaginable.

WOODS: No doubt, no doubt. Or these billboards that I'm seeing about how Trump has finally brought God back into the White House, and I just — what on earth is going on here? So I do want to say that the book, as I know from personal experience, is indeed quite readable, quite accessible. But another thing that you need to say when you tell people that it's from an academic press is that, thank goodness, it's not $475 like a lot of these books.

GAMBLE: [laughing] I was so happy with the price when I saw it.

WOODS: Yeah. It's like a normal book [laughing]. It's great.

GAMBLE: It is. And it's available in Kindle and hardback. You can find it on the usual places, Amazon. And I hope people enjoy it and learn from it.

WOODS: Well, I will have it linked up on our show notes page for today, which will be TomWoods.com/1405. And Richard, I know you're heading out of the country for about a month today, so Safe travels, and thanks for your time.

GAMBLE: Thanks, Tom. I always enjoy talking to you, and I learned from our conversations, and I thank you for the opportunity you give me to articulate my thoughts.