

# The fiery, freethinking gospel of Frances Wright



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

**A** number of years ago I was attending a multiracial congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Those folks stood with me when I was ordained. Rev. James Noel, the African-American pastor, was a professor at my seminary and gave stirring sermons. Black or white, the congregation frequently shouted an “Amen!” when he spoke “The Word” with a powerful emphasis on civil rights, justice and compassion.

One Sunday, James (as most of us called him) was working into the crescendo of his homily when a scruffy-looking white man with a beard, sitting right in the middle of the sanctuary, began to speak loud and rough. The preacher paused and continued. The voice interrupted again.

Some in the congregation turned to look, a little nervous at what would come next. Others sitting by the man, touched his arm and calmly whispered to him. Preacher James looked down from the pulpit at the man and said in a firm but gentle voice, “John, keep quiet now, this is My Time to speak.”

John sat back and settled down, squeezed between two elderly black women.

At it turned out, the church welcomed poor and homeless folks. They all knew John; he was an adopted member and they were used to his outbursts. It was one of the images, one of the stories, that nudged me toward chaplaincy in the jails and on the streets of that community.

When James received another call, I worked with a committee composed of black and white members as they hired their first African-American woman pastor. Even with her Baptist background (this

was a Presbyterian church), we decided she was the best candidate and a great preacher, like James.

We find some voices are warm and welcome; others are disturbing and disruptive. Some make us feel comfortable; others make us squirm. Some tell us what we want to hear; some tell us what we need to hear.

When we are listening to these different voices it can sound like a cool, calming stream, or a chilling cascade. Maybe we need both.

Almost 200 years ago, a woman appeared from Scotland with a voice that was both inviting and incisive. Her name was Frances Wright (1795-1852), and she brought a revitalizing message for our young nation that inspired many, while firing up fierce opposition. She conversed with Thomas Jefferson and befriended Revolutionary War hero, Gen. Lafayette.

One biographer tells us that “Wright’s liberating influence had affected many aspects of American society from its religious to its educational institutions” (Susan Adams, foreword to “Reason, Religion and Morals”). Her achievements included working to end slavery, an experiment with interracial community near Memphis, advocacy of universal education and equal rights for women, supporting the rights of working people and challenging capital punishment.

A major theme for this firebrand reformer was a call for citizens to return to the “shrine of human liberty” — the Declaration of Independence. What most energized Frances was that America wasn’t living by its basic document, its fundamental principles. Denying rights to anyone because of race, gender, religion, no religion, or for any reason, was unreasonable and was denying the spirit of the “shrine.”

Frances Wright had no tolerance for anything or anyone who stood in the way of reform and

progress toward equality. In her mind, religious superstition and the power of religious authority were huge obstacles damming the stream of progress. She once said, “the true Bible is the book of Nature.”

In her public speeches (some of the first speeches in this country by a woman before a male audience) she was scathing in her exposure of religion’s affect on the public mind:

» “Let superstition spread her mists, and thick clouds of darkness; they shall be dispersed by the sun of knowledge.”

» “Orthodoxy owes all its strength to the disunion of the people [with its] silent and sectarian [congregating].” (Wright converted an old church in New York to a “Hall of Science” for popular assembly).

During her eloquent speeches in Philadelphia and New York she unrolled a copy of the Declaration, held it up and proclaimed,

» “Thus let us associate; not as Jews, not as Christians, not as Deists, not as believers, not as skeptics, not as poor, not as rich, not as artisans, not as merchants, not as lawyers, but as human beings, as fellow creatures, as American citizens, pledged to protect each other’s rights — to advance each other’s happiness” (“State of the Public Mind,” 1829).

That’s a voice strong enough to echo across two centuries. It’s a voice and a “secular sermon” worthy to be preached. It may interrupt and disrupt, but doesn’t Frances Wright’s freethinking “gospel” have something to teach us today? Isn’t it her time to speak again?

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