

**SOBER THOUGHTS ON THE  
STATE OF THE  
TIMES ADDRESSED TO THE  
UNITARIAN COMMUNITY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649335831

Sober Thoughts on the State of the Times Addressed to the Unitarian Community by Henry Ware

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Cover @ 2017

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*By Henry Ware, Jr.*

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BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY ISAAC R. BUTTS.

1835.

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## SOBER THOUGHTS

ON THE

## STATE OF THE TIMES.

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TWENTY years of controversy have just passed by. It has been a season, we may suppose, much like that of all controversies, but it has had its own characteristics, and, what is worthy of special observation, it is likely to be followed by more distinct and lasting results than generally happens. A theological discussion of great severity is oftentimes carried on for years, and yet it would be difficult to trace its consequences anywhere, excepting in the books which have been written, and which are themselves soon forgotten. But in the present instance a broad mark has been left upon the very face of society, a permanent change has been effected in some of its institutions, and in the relations of its members. For it has been one of that series of struggles for liberty and light, which began at the open-

ing of the Reformation in Germany three hundred years ago, and which is pushing on step by step toward the completion of that immortal work. Society advances in opinion, in knowledge, in institutions, by some great effort of its powerful minds, and then pauses for a time, — as if to secure and consolidate what is gained. Then another effort, agitation, and advancement, and again another pause. During these pauses, it may seem stationary, it may even appear to the apprehensive mind, retrograde; but it is certainly true that revolutions do not go backward; and though the tide of improvement as it rolls up its glorious waves, may appear to be occasionally retreating, it is only to gather up its might and come on with a firmer swell; — while dame Partington and all her maids brandish their ancient mops in vain.

It is the rolling in upon the shore of one of these larger swells that has attracted our attention during the last twenty years. The Reformation has been making a vigorous advance. The commotion has been extensive, the tossing has been fearful, the alarm and bustle of those exposed to the spray has been loud and earnest. At length the height of the swell seems to have past. There are symptoms of greater quiet and repose. To change



the figure, the heat of the warfare is over; the great battle has been fought; and it is time to look about us and see what is the result, where the world stands, and what use is to be made of the losses and the acquisitions of the contest. I know no more instructive inquiry to the impartial seeker of truth. Who will undertake the investigation? Perhaps the day for it is not yet fully come; in order to a satisfactory decision, we must perhaps wait for the termination of several most interesting discussions in various unconnected portions of the christian church, which are now in fervent progress, — all of them growing out of the great action of the principles of the Reformation, all a part of the mighty struggle of the times for liberty and light, all portending salutary change throughout the religious world, and giving to the thoughtful observer auspicious pledges of the sure advent of a day of complete and established reform. Let the people praise thee, O Lord, let all the people praise thee!

It is no part of my design to look at the whole of this most extensive subject. I confine myself to that division of the church, which has stood in the front rank during the recent contest, which has carried furthest the principles of the Reformation, and has conse-

quently suffered (as the leading corps in this cause have always done) from the suspicions, the opposition, and the anathema of the general body of the believers. The majority of those who have reformed to a certain extent, has always been seriously inimical to those who desire to reform further. "They have come to a period in religion," to quote the significant expression of the immortal Robinson, and they call it Orthodoxy. To go a step further, and read the next sentence, is heresy, and heretics of course are not to be tolerated. This intolerable class at the present age is that of Unitarians. They are desiring to press the Reformation beyond the orthodoxy of the present times, just as the Puritans desired to press it beyond the orthodoxy of the English church; and are therefore to be regarded and treated no better than those unfortunate schismatics were treated by the powerful sects around them. Happily, indeed, no *secular* persecution is possible in these days; but doubtless the wicked Puritans of King James's time were not worse in the eyes of the monarch and the church, than the wicked Unitarians now are in the view of the leading powers in church and state.

The recent controversy has been not simply a discussion of opinions, but a contest for

rights ; it has involved questions of reputation for piety, claim to the christian name, and, in some instances, questions of property. It has been the cause of various trying changes in the domestic and social relations ; it has rent asunder long united communities ; it has touched, in all parts of the land and sometimes with a most ungentle hand, many of the tenderest interests and charities of life. With so many circumstances and occasions of exasperation, is it strange that it sometimes, on both sides, took an unhappy tone of bitterness and recrimination ? Are we to wonder, when the excited disputant sat down to his task of argument or defence, and remembered that not only his most sacred opinions were to be shielded, but that momentous results of immediate tangible good and ill, happiness and wretchedness, were at stake, — are we to wonder that he sometimes spoke too warmly, accused too fiercely, answered too indignantly, and was over valiant in the use of provoking and irritating missiles ? There is much of this to be lamented and forgiven on both sides. Must I not add, there were some specimens of debate so coarse, so insulting, so unprincipled, so after the school of the great calumniator, rather than that of Christ, that the writers themselves, can look back upon them only with as-