THEODORE PARKER, "THE TRANSIENT AND PERMANENT IN CHRISTIANITY," BOSTON, MA (19 MAY 1841)

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Abstract: Ever riven by sects and schisms, American Protestantism has always been concerned with the distinction between God's eternal truth and the artificial corruptions of human vanity. As they have argued over doctrines and dogmas, canons and creeds, American Protestants have worked to separate the mortal from the divine, or, as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker once put it, "the transient" from "the permanent." Delivered in 1841 and subsequently expanded into a book-length treatment, Parker's sermon made an eloquent case for a broad, simple, and inclusive Christianity, thereby drawing the ire of contemporaries invested in their own particular strictures and exclusions. The resulting controversy marked an important moment in definitional debates about American Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, as well as a new stage in Parker's deepening radicalism.

Keywords: Theodore Parker, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, Evangelicalism

In May of 1841, at the outset of a tumultuous decade, West Roxbury, Massachusetts Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered a sermon that would establish his reputation as a combative and controversial preacher. Titled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," the address sought to distinguish the timeless truths of the Christian faith from the temporal accumulations of human creation throughout history. In Parker's view, the essential elements of the tradition were simple and few, contained within and shared between the myriad shades of religious belief that divided believers into factions. He argued that, by identifying and isolating the fleeting fabrications of human intellect, Christians might find assurance in the remaining ties that bind. Though in this obvious sense a unifying message, Parker's argument was received coolly by those with a stake in theological distinction, both within and outside of the Unitarian fold. In the months that followed, the sermon would inspire accusations, pamphlets, and prominent calls for his dismissal from the Church. Reprised and distributed as *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,* it would spark debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Ultimately, it would assume a position of distinction alongside William Ellery Channing's "Unitarian Christianity" and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address" as a definitive statement of Unitarian idiosyncrasy.[1]

This conclusion was anything but foregone. In 1819, Channing had tailored his Baltimore sermon for broad influence, delivering it in a carefully managed setting, surrounded by dignitaries, with publication plans already established. Conrad Wright has thus designated the address as one "made memorable, at least in part, because those who planned the occasion were resolved that it should be made so."[2] In such cases, publicity, having been sought, arrives to no surprise. But there are others in which prominence and longevity are traceable to factors incidental and unplanned, such as unforeseen hostility or enthusiasm in the audience, or exceptional merit in the speech itself. Parker's address falls somewhere within this category. Delivered on a Wednesday in an undistinguished church before an unexceptional audience to ordain a perfectly ordinary preacher, "Transient and Permanent" was never destined for

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headlines. The content was typical of the author, and the delivery was somewhat impaired. Parker's biographer John Weiss noted that the address "was not one of his most energetic sermons, by any means, for he had written it during a week of languor and illness." It was "diffuse, and too rhetorical."[3] The audience did not react to Parker's claims in any noteworthy way, and the response from the other ministers was muted at best. Indeed, had the speech been delivered, received, and processed only by the Unitarians in attendance, it would have almost certainly been lost to history. But there were others in the chapel that day desirous of further conversation.

Specifically, the service was attended by a group of three Trinitarian clergy who listened to Parker's remarks with some quiet consternation. Sensing an opportunity to sow discord in the Unitarian ranks, they co-authored a letter that was quickly published in a series of evangelical newspapers. After briefly summarizing what they believed to be the heretical elements of Parker's address, they pressed the body of Unitarian clergy in and around Boston either to endorse or disown his claims. This challenge prompted a vigorous exchange of pamphlets, including Parker's own print-version of the address, which sold out within a week and had entered its third printing by September.[4] The resultant notoriety filled Parker's pews with curious auditors while also compelling him to reexamine and refine his ideas. Thus began an especially productive stage in his ministry.

This essay seeks to contextualize and analyze "Transient and Permanent" as an important artifact of the Unitarian-Transcendentalist divide in the late 1830s and early 1840s, as well as an influential statement on behalf of free thought in liberal Christianity. It does so in three parts. First, I will provide background on Parker's biography, situating his sermon within the wider trajectory of his life and learning to that point. Second, I will establish some context for the speech, focusing particularly on the intellectual currents flowing from German theological schools into New England by way of Transcendentalist speakers and writers. Third, I will perform a close reading of Parker's sermon, with attention to his understanding of Christian truth and innovation within and across time. I will close with a postscript on the significance of Parker's address in his era and our own.

Parker's Biography

Theodore Parker was born on August 24, 1810, in Lexington, Massachusetts. The eleventh child of John and Hannah Parker, he arrived when his mother was forty-seven years old. Then as now, Lexington was renowned as the flashpoint of the American Revolution, and the Parkers could claim a share of that legacy. Captain John Parker, Theodore's grandfather, had commanded the militia on the fateful day, and was renowned locally for his courage and conviction. Biographer Henry Steele Commager has cited these qualities as part of the great preacher's birthright, noting that Captain Parker's musket would hang for many years on the wall of his grandson's study, and recalling the immortal words he was said to have spoken as the redcoats advanced: "If they mean to have a war, let it begin here."[5] Cast against the trajectory of that grandson's life and ministry, the sentiment appears in two senses *familiar*.

Parker's parents, too, may help explain his combative liberality. Biographer Dean Grodzins has written that Parker's father espoused views typical of "most religious liberals of the time," and that his intense passion for learning provided "the model for Theodore's own awesome self-education." His mother was a woman of "extraordinary inner resources, a remarkable capacity for hard work, and a constitution of iron," and seems to have passed each of

these qualities on to the youngest—and most ardently adored—of her many children. Her religious opinions were closely held but "undoctrinaire."[6] Though Hannah Parker died when Theodore was only thirteen years old, her influence lived on in her precocious son. After several years spent working with his father on the family farm in Lexington, he left for Boston in 1831, to start a teaching job and to take classes at Harvard.

With little money and no friends, Parker's arrival in the city was somewhat less than triumphant. His impressive exams had earned him entrance to the college, but his lack of funding consigned him both to "non-resident" status and to six hours in the schoolroom each weekday. In the afternoons and evenings, he studied voraciously, typically for 10-12 hours at a stretch. On Sundays he had access to sermons from a cast of future legends—Channing at Federal Street, Emerson at Second Church, George Ripley at Purchase Street, Lyman Beecher at Hanover Street, and Hosea Ballou at Second Universalist.[7] He enjoyed this lifestyle for more than a year, expanding his mind and diminishing his body through a routine at once dynamic and sedentary. When it became clear that his young scholars could not pay him enough to realize his goals, Parker moved out to Watertown where he was better connected. There he would find a higher wage and nineteen-year-old Lydia Cabot, who in two years became his fiancé. Parker returned to Harvard as a divinity student in 1834, resuming his rigorous study schedule and focusing in particular on German theology. When he graduated in 1836, he preached as a candidate at Barnstable, Greenfield, and Northfield, and considered several offers before accepting a call to Spring Street Church in West Roxbury. He married Cabot in April of 1837, and settled into a house with his new wife and her aunt—an unhappy arrangement that would litter his journals with a great many embittered entries.

In West Roxbury, Parker's years of study culminated in a furious literary output. His writing appeared regularly in the *Christian Examiner* and Orestes Brownson's *Boston Quarterly,* as well as the *Dial,* the new Transcendentalist organ edited by Margaret Fuller. He spent the better part of five years translating, annotating, and interpreting the Old Testament writings of German theologian Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette. He expanded his command of languages, eventually learning to write—if not quite to speak—a wide variety.[8] And he was never without access to conversation, close as he was to Elizabeth Peabody's famous bookshop and Brook Farm with its cadre of intellectuals and oddballs, including the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne.[9] When Emerson's "Divinity School Address" cut a rift through the Unitarian fold, Parker was ready and waiting to engage. Writing under the pseudonym "Levi Blodgett," he took Emerson's part against the scathing criticisms of Unitarian sage Andrews Norton, defending and even amplifying the "Transcendental" turn. His pamphlet and subsequent orations won him a reputation as unorthodox and instigating, such that he soon had trouble finding pulpit exchanges.[10]

By 1840, when he took part in the unusual "Chardon Street Convention,"[11] Parker was well-known in and around Boston, widely respected for the quality of his mind and generally suspected by clerical gatekeepers for his willingness to dabble in heresies. Emerson had by then left his pulpit behind, and Ripley was soon to follow, both to explore their individual flights and romantic inclinations. But if his critics believed that Parker would be next to abandon Unitarian strictures—such as they were—he was not to oblige them. Parker remained firmly committed to the faith even as he pushed at its boundaries and confronted its leading minds. The issues varied widely but tended to fall along that Unitarian-Transcendentalist axis. In 1840s Boston, most everything of importance did.

Unitarian and Transcendentalist

Drawing their title, first, from a popular epithet and, second, from an informal discussion club formed by Frederic Henry Hedge, the Transcendentalists were an amorphous group known for their diverse and provocative viewpoints on previously settled questions. Though broadly famous and canonical afterward, the membership—including Emerson, Ripley, Brownson, Channing, Peabody, Fuller, and Parker, as well as Henry David Thoreau, James Freeman Clarke, and Bronson Alcott—were at the time recognized primarily for their eccentricities.[12] Because their opinions were various and often at odds, and because they were uniformly committed to free thought and speech, the group was stubbornly difficult to characterize. In his attempt, Philip F. Gura has observed that members were bound by three qualities in particular: first, they were "New Englanders, with ties to Harvard College and the Boston area"; second, they "had been associated with Unitarianism and thus were considered 'liberal Christians'"; and third, they demonstrated a "philosophical bent toward German Idealism rather than British Empiricism."[13] Barbara L. Packer likewise traces the movement back to "Unitarian beginnings," and that connection is especially pertinent here.[14] Having matured in opposition to the harsh Calvinism of their forebearers, the Transcendentalists were moving even beyond the Unitarian outskirts.

At stake was the legitimacy of all doctrine—the authority of theological precepts over the minds of individuals and the conformity enforced by their clerics. Instead, the Transcendentalists touted the power of *intuition,* arguing that each nineteenth-century mind retained the capacity to receive and to speak revelation. Channing had written earlier that "our ultimate reliance is and must be on our own reason," adding, "I am surer that my rational nature is from God than that any book is an expression of his will."[15] Emerson had endorsed that sentiment before the Divinity School, and would write in 1841 that "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius."[16] Originating with Unitarian clergy, this emphasis on reason and self-reliance was quickly diffusing among congregants and readers, and so inspiring many to a sort of spiritual self-liberation. The defenders of the Unitarian ramparts thus found themselves in the same position as their Puritan ancestors before the likes of Anne Hutchinson, assailed by public prophets who spoke confidently and often without formal sanction. Though their church was famously accepting of alternative viewpoints and welcoming of debate, even Unitarian dons like Henry Ware thought it time to draw some lines in the sand.[17] When Norton launched his salvos against Ripley and Emerson, the neutrals began to choose sides, and Theodore Parker became Levi Blodgett. After attending a debate over whether "differences of opinion on the value & authority of miracles, [ought] to exclude men from fellowship & sympathy with one another," Parker reported feeling "horrified" that the prospect was even up for discussion. He went home and wrote in his journal, "I intend in the coming year to let out all the force of Transcendentalism that is in me, come what will come."[18]

Whatever else Parker may have meant by this line, his rhetorical output in the following months was remarkable for its quantity, quality, and boldness. Grodzins notes that Parker's sermons from 1840–1841 had become markedly more emphatic, and his publications even less constrained. In both, Parker began to push for some of the radical social reforms that would quickly occupy others in the Transcendentalist movement, including temperance, universal education, labor rights, pacifism, and anti-slavery.[19] As these concerns pulled him ever further into the movement—and away from a Unitarian establishment that was becoming increasingly conservative in reaction—Parker found himself standing astride a different sort of divide. He was

pulled, on one side, toward Emerson's individualism and, on the other, toward Ripley's communitarianism. Not wanting to further factionalize the still nascent faction, Parker sought a middle ground by advocating both individual self-cultivation and collective social action. He never joined Brook Farm, but neither did he concern himself solely with his own mind and soul. In the spring of 1841, he began work on a sermon—recorded as #238 in his sermon book—titled "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" that aimed to split the difference.[20]

In the sermon, Parker sought to distinguish between the works of divinity and humanity, affording both a particular degree of truth and goodness but insisting that the distinction was important nonetheless. If he was ill during the writing process, he was further hampered by final revisions on his De Wette manuscript, which was due to the printers in April, and by the untimely passage of President William Henry Harrison, which prompted his work on a sermon for the National Fast Day (#239) to be held on May 14. In any case, Parker completed the address on time and arrived at South Boston's Hawes Place Church on a cold Wednesday, May 19, to deliver the ordination sermon for young Charles C. Shackford. He was flanked by Boston-area ministers from around the doctrinal spectrum, a line-up that may have been intended either to gloss over differences or to make peace between them. The scene was subdued, and apparently no one anticipated any controversy. But then Parker spoke.

"The Transient and Permanent in Christianity"

Parker's sermon was composed in twelve sections and delivered over approximately 90 minutes. He devoted much of the address to diagnosing the many "transient" elements in Christianity, and the remainder to emphasizing the few "permanent." Along the way, he needled doctrinal gatekeepers for their apparent insecurity when faced with readings and interpretations that challenged their own. At its core, Parker argued, Christianity is simple and solid and invulnerable to the machinations of infidels and critics. Clerical fears of heresy were thus traceable to other, more corporeal sources. They were indicative of the frail defensiveness propping up a brittle, all-too-human scaffolding of theological concepts.[21] Authentic Christian practice was not to be found in sects and factions or doctrines and dogmas, he argued. It was found, rather, in humble devotion to God and neighbor, facilitated by openness and devoted to broad intellectual liberty. It was kind and generous, not critical and exclusive. Parker delivered this message with conviction and spirit; his immediate audience received it with quiet attention. But his Boston peers would soon brand him a heretic.

Like Channing in Baltimore, Parker focused his remarks upon a single brief but profound verse. His text was Luke 21:33, "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away." It was significant, he argued, that Jesus placed such strong emphasis on language, claiming for his words a durability surpassing that even of heaven and earth, even though "nothing seems more fleeting than a word" (2). This was especially notable since these words were not committed to writing, for posterity, but were simply spoken into the air, wherever "occasion found him an audience—by the side of a lake, or a well; in a cottage, or the temple; in a fisherman's boat, or the synagogue of the Jews" (2). With supreme confidence in God and in truth, Jesus scattered his insights like seeds upon the wind. And yet, despite this apparent carelessness, the Christian message had achieved incomparable influence across nearly two millennia of world history, surviving and flourishing while the written words and established works of countless other "great men" had fallen lost and obscure (3). Essential as they were, the

public and political impacts of Christian influence were still surpassed by the personal commitments made by millions of individuals and families who had turned to the gospels for enrichment, guidance, beauty, and inspiration. The consistent dedication of these people across that time had proven the endurance of those eternal truths.

In acknowledging this legacy, however, Parker also noted that the nations and centuries had not secreted Christianity within a vacuum. Each place and time had situated it in particular cultural circumstances, and so added elements that had not been included before. Consequently, the Christianity of seventh century Greece was in many ways dissimilar to that practiced in twelfth century France, which was itself dissimilar to that practiced in nineteenth-century New England. This much was undeniable, and it posed some important questions. "How do we know that there is not a perishing element in what we call Christianity?" Parker asked. "Jesus tells us *his* word is the word of God, and so shall never pass away. But who tells us that *our* word shall never pass away? That *our notion* of his word shall stand forever" (4). The answer, he would suggest, lay in the distinction between divine permanence and the human transient; between "the eternal truth of God," and "the folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notions, the impiety of man" (5).

Perhaps appropriately for a Transcendentalist, Parker suggested that God's truth and man's folly could be distinguished with help from an analogy to nature. Clearly, he said, nature exists, and is defined by truths that humans are in a position to observe and to understand, albeit imperfectly, through limited senses and fallible reasoning. "If observations may be made upon nature, which must take place so long as man has sense and understanding, there will be a philosophy of nature, and philosophical doctrines." Some of this philosophy was sure to be correct, while some was just as sure to be incorrect, consistent with the successes and failures of mortal beings charged with making absolute judgments. The resultant body of knowledge, popularly termed "natural philosophy," would thus take on a separate character from that of nature itself. It would be interesting and imaginative, often insightful, and yet very often mistaken, subject to revision and correction by the natural philosophers of the future. Its practitioners must therefore remain humble in their work, pursuing the truth as honestly as they could, through merely human minds, in the face of a subject incomparably vast and beautiful and invariably true. The same applied to the relationship between religion and the philosophy of religion, between the "Infinite God" and the "numerous systems of theology" with their "creeds, confessions, and collections of doctrines," any of which may be "baseless and false," the reasoning "defective" or "illogical," and "therefore the deduction spurious" (7). To cast doubt on that human discourse is not to cast doubt on the existence or perfection of God, Parker argued. It is merely to appraise critically the rhetorical creations of imperfect men, and to guard one's mind against the malignant pride that so often infects the earthly purveyors of supposedly divine truth.

Such skepticism was warranted by centuries of Christian history, each fraught with destructive errors and enthusiasms. Anyone who reviews this record, Parker said, "will see that nothing changes more from age to age than the doctrines taught as Christian, and insisted on as essential to Christianity and personal salvation. What is falsehood in one province passes for truth in another. The heresy of one age is the orthodox belief and 'only infallible rule' of the next" (9). This absurd inconsistency had often lent itself to violence. "Men are burned for professing what men are burned for denying," he quipped (9). The clear moral of that long and notorious story was that Christians in every land and every succeeding age should cast a critical eye upon the inheritance of their fathers, recognizing the obfuscating gloss painted by each generation upon an initially transparent surface. Like a stream running downhill toward the sea,

Christianity had "caught a stain from every soil it has filtered through," leaving the "pure water from the well of life" unfortunately "polluted by man with mire and dirt" (9). With this understanding, believers may be equipped to distill from the accumulated mass of Christianity some essential essence of the pure faith. A centerpiece of the address, this claim was stated eloquently in transcendental language. Parker declared that "if we are faithful, the great truths of morality and religion, the deep sentiment of love to man and love to God, are perceived intuitively, and by instinct, as it were, though our theology be imperfect and miserable" (10). Indeed, given the many theological pitfalls awaiting those who would live and die for doctrine, Parker argued that honest religion would abide in the basics. "Since these notions are so fleeting," he asked, "why need we accept the commandment of men as the doctrine of God?" (10).

To illustrate this point, Parker identified a pair of doctrines that, he argued, had originated with men, but were nonetheless widely accepted within Christian churches. The first concerned "the doctrine respecting the origin and authority of the Old and New Testament" (11), the claim that the scriptures were divinely inspired, literally true, and infallible throughout. Parker thought this idea ridiculous, and he critiqued it with characteristic disdain. "On the authority of the written word," he said, "man was taught to believe impossible legends, conflicting assertions; to take fiction for fact, a dream for a miraculous revelation of God, an oriental poem for a grave history of miraculous events, a collection of amatory idyls for a serious discourse 'touching the mutual love of Christ and the church'" (11). Arguing that the many fanciful events of the Old Testament could not be considered factual "unless God is the author of confusion and a lie," Parker dismissed belief in biblical literalism and inerrancy as so much "idolatry" (12), making a god of the Bible itself. Instead, he observed that, "modern criticism is fast breaking to pieces this idol which men have made out of the scriptures" (12). Indeed, the Germans had shown "that here are the most different works thrown together," that their authors were "by no means infallible" and that these ancient writers must be understood as "men who in some measure partook of the darkness and limited notions of their age, and were not always above its mistakes or its corruptions" (12).

After giving the New Testament an equally critical treatment and enumerating some of its absurdities, Parker lamented that these books, "which caprice and accident had brought together," had been "declared to be the infallible word of God, the *only* certain rule of religious faith and practice" (13). Thus, to disbelieve any of its content—including the most inconsequential and incredible—was "held to be infidelity, if not atheism" (13). Good and pious men leveled the accusation at comparably good and pious men of slightly different opinions, and acrimony permeated the community to no positive effect. Ultimately, Parker concluded, "the current notions respecting the infallible inspiration of the Bible have no foundation in the Bible itself" (14), such notions were imposed upon the text by its readers rather than its writers. If any good were to come out of this error, it would only be by the grace of God, since "God makes man's folly as well as his wrath to praise him, and continually brings good out of evil" (14).

The second problematic doctrine concerned the nature and identity of Christ. "One ancient part has told us that he is the infinite God;" Parker said, "another, that he is both God and man; a third, that he was a man, the son of Joseph and Mary—born as we are, tempted like ourselves, inspired, as we may be, if we will pay the price" (15). Like other professed doctrines, each of these had garnered a following at different places and times, with each assuming the mantel of absolute truth within the sect that it inspired. As a Unitarian, Parker subscribed to the third view, which he would articulate shortly. But in presenting the positions here, his larger and

more provocative point was that none of them is essential to Christian practice. Indeed, the veracity of Christianity was built upon the content of Christ's *teaching*, not upon the elements of Christ's *nature* as divine, human, or both. "It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus," Parker said, "more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority" (16). Parker went on to insist that, since the content of Christ's teaching was true, it could be entirely divorced from much of the Bible without losing anything in the way of credibility. Dismissing the relationship between most theological questions and lived Christianity as "accidental," he declared that, "if Jesus had taught at Athens, and not Jerusalem; if he had wrought no miracle, and none but the human nature had ever been ascribed to him; if the Old Testament had forever been perished at his birth, Christianity would still have been the word of God; it would have lost none of its truths" (18). Thus, anyone confused or discouraged by the bitterness of ongoing theological debates could find assurance in a faith that was simple and sincere, based on Christ's spoken words. The rest simply did not matter.

Having thus dismissed a pair of very influential views on the Bible and Christ, Parker deftly inserted his own positions as correctives. The Bible, though historically situated, imperfect, and often either mistaken or anachronistic, remained the vehicle of God's "choicest treasure" (21). It was the most influential and important book ever published, having "made a deeper mark on the world than the rich and beautiful literature of the heathen" (22). There was "not a boy on all the hills of New England" or "a girl born in the filthiest cellar which disgraces a capital in Europe" whose lot in life was not "made better by that great book" (22). As long as men did not bow to the Bible or treat it as a "savage his fetish;" as long they did not subordinate their "reason, conscience, and religion" to its worship; as long as they understood the text properly within its historical origins, authorship, and import, the Bible would "sustain men bowed down with many sorrows; rebuke sin, encourage virtue, sow the world broadcast and quick with the seed of love, that man may reap a harvest for life everlasting" (21).

Understood and employed properly, the Bible remained key to human flourishing. Likewise, Jesus had for too long been idolized and fetishized, his humanity subsumed within and so displaced by his supposed divinity. The greatest of all humans, chosen by God as his saving instrument in the world, Christ had been deified by subsequent generations of followers, his relationship to humanity either downgraded or severed completely. "But still was he not our brother;" Parker asked, "the son of man, as we are; the Son of God, like ourselves? His excellence—was it not human excellence? His wisdom, love, piety—sweet and celestial as they were—are they not what we may also attain?" (23). Recognized as a human, Christ became the human *par excellence*, the exemplar to which all other humans may aspire through pious faith and commitment. Indeed, recognized as a human, Christ emerged in both life and death as the ideal of love and self-sacrifice, his virtue and his martyrdom uncompromised by godlike reserves of endurance and strength.

Knowingly or not, the deifiers of Christ could not help stripping him of the superhuman achievement that he had achieved as human. Considered from the "heathen view" that would make him "the Son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense," the significance of Christ's character was effectively lost. "His virtue has no merit," Parker declared, "his love no feeling, his cross no burden, his agony no pain. His death is an illusion, his resurrection but a show. For if he were not a man, but a god, what are all these things? What his words, his life, his excellence of achievement? It is all nothing, weighed against the illimitable greatness of him who created

the worlds and fills up all time and space!" (24). Tragically, he concluded, those who would exalt Christ by imagining him a God necessarily diminished his greatness in proportion. And by emphasizing Christ's nature above his teaching, they necessarily minimized the great and indomitable faith as little more a shallow appeal to authority.

If nothing else, this long history of change, revision, accusation, and error should impress Christians with the vital importance of humility. In Parker's view, it was clearly illogical for believers to invest themselves in the manmade theologies of the moment, given how momentary those manmade theologies clearly were. "Who shall tell us that another age will not smile at our doctrines, disputes, and unchristian quarrels about Christianity," he asked, "and make wide the mouth at men who walked brave in orthodox raiment, delighting to blacken the name of heretics, and repeat again the old charge, 'He hath blasphemed?' Who shall tell us they will not weep at the folly of all such as fancied truth shone only in the contracted nook of their school, or sect, or coterie?" (26). None could make such claims—at least not with disinterested, intellectual honesty. It fell to sincere believers, first, to dispense with the transient, and second, to locate and honor the permanent that remained.

The only permanence, Parker argued, could be located in "the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth," in which "Christianity is a simple thing" (27). Cut through the many layers of theological obfuscation, and one is left with "absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion; the love of man, the love of God acting without let or hindrance." Its one creed is that "there is a God." Its one instruction is to "Be perfect as our Father in heaven." Its one form is "a divine life; doing the best thing in the best way, from the highest motives; perfect obedience to the great law of God." Its one "sanction is the voice of God in your heart; the perpetual presence of him who made us and the stars over our head; Christ and the Father abiding within us." Its end is "to make all men one with God as Christ was one with him; to bring them to such a state of obedience and goodness that we shall think divine thoughts and feel divine sentiments, and so keep the laws of God by living a life of truth and love." Its means are "purity and prayer; getting strength from God, and using it for our fellow-men as well as ourselves." Importantly, it allows "perfect freedom." It "does not demand all men to *think* alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible at truth; not all men to *live* alike, but to live holy, and get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine." Indeed, "Christianity gives us the largest liberty of the sons of God; and were all men Christians after the fashion of Jesus, this variety would be a thousand times greater than now: for Christianity it is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method for attaining oneness with God." It demands, simply, "a good life of piety within, of purity without, and gives the promise that whoso does God's will shall know of God's doctrine" (27). In this way, the tenth section of Parker's sermon was built upon declaratives. Having devoted the bulk of the address to critiquing the transient, he stated plainly the elements that he believed permanent. He praised the "simpleness of Christianity," casting this essence against "what is sometimes taught and accepted in that honored name." One vision, he reflected, "is of God; one is of man" (30). One will last forever; the other is always already falling away. Human beings would do well to distinguish between the two, distrusting the illusion of their unity, as "at a distance the cloud and the mountain seem the same" (31).

Parker closed with a call to action, encouraging the congregants of the South Boston church to be discerning and to encourage their new pastor in his own discernment. "The question put itself to each man," he said, "'Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal?' This question each must answer for himself" (33).

Conclusion

For at least three of Parker's auditors—Congregationalist Joy Hamlet Fairchild, Baptist Thomas Driver, and Methodist Z. B. C. Dunham—this was the wrong question. Instead, these orthodox clergymen were interested in the narrower matter of whether Boston Unitarians as a class were supportive of Parker's views. They quickly authored an open letter summarizing his provocative claims and had it published in a trio of evangelical newspapers—the *Puritan,* the *Christian Watchman,* and the *Recorder.* Noting that no one in the immediate audience had voiced disapproval of Parker's alleged heresies, they called upon Unitarian leaders either to endorse or disown them in public.[22] For his part, Parker found the objections absurd and chose not to reply. Instead, he published the text of the sermon for all to see, albeit after revising certain sections and so making himself vulnerable to charges of dishonesty. The resultant discussion left no one satisfied but did manage to isolate the most critical issue—the question of whether or not Parker had dispensed with the divine authority of the Bible, and whether or not his colleagues were prepared to back him if he did.

For a time, the critics' demands went unanswered in the press, all the while lending credence to their charges of complicity. This irked the Unitarian ministers even as they equivocated on what to do about it. Though Parker had often made unorthodox statements in his speaking and writing in the past, none of these had ever proved so troublesome to his Church. Grodzins writes that the problem in this case was intrinsic to the occasion: "not so much what [Parker] had said, nor what he was accused of saying, but where he had said it."[23] Because he had spoken at a Unitarian ceremony, as part of a company of Unitarian ministers, to ordain a Unitarian clergyman, his unique views were understood to represent the entire body, and this made it difficult for the rest of the group to consign his statements to the protected space of individual opinion. When the replies began to appear, they indicated a growing consensus—Parker would need to be excommunicated.

And yet, though hounded by criticism and hemorrhaging support, Parker did not become less popular. On the contrary, he was quickly invited to give a series of five lectures on his idiosyncratic views in Boston's Masonic Temple and did so to packed audiences on successive Wednesdays in October and November of that year. He then revised and expanded those addresses into a unitary whole, titled *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion,* which he published in 1842. Still enjoying the loyalty of his Roxbury congregation but unwelcome in Boston pulpits, Parker spent much of the next two years traveling with his wife in Europe. When he returned, he delivered a series of sermons at the Melodeon in Boston, and eventually accepted a pastorate with the 28th Congregational Society. This new congregation soon boasted more than 2000 members, and afforded Parker a distinguished audience to his unconventional—and increasingly reformist—ideas.

If nothing else, Parker's "Transient and Permanent" reminds us today that religious ideas exist within a matrix of religious identities, and that these are transgressed at the speaker's peril. In some cases, though, the violation of inflexible boundaries is productive of growth and innovation, making the consequences far less painful than intended. If American religious history is replete with examples of conformity and constraint, it is just as rife with counterexamples of improvisation and creation. Theodore Parker was a bold and innovative thinker as well as a robust and compelling speaker. Together, these qualities empowered to take certain liberties in the interest of intellectual liberty itself.

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Notes

[1] These three addresses are reprinted with a lengthy introduction in Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker,* 2nd Ed (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1961).
[2] Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism,* 5.
[3] John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Volume I* (New York: Bergman, 1969; 1864), 170.
[4] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 249.
[5] Henry Steel Commager, *Theodore Parker: An Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963; 1947; 1936), 4.
[6] Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 5-6.
[7] Commager, *Theodore Parker,* 19-20.
[8] Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 381.
[9] Founded by George and Sophia Ripley, Brook Farm was one among many utopian communities founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. See Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
[10] Ministers commonly "exchanged" their pulpits and spoke to one another's congregations. Aside from exposing ministers to broader audiences and congregations to different ideas and styles, the practice saved clergymen the trouble of writing new sermons every week.
[11] Though a satisfactory focus on the convention lies beyond the scope of this essay, Emerson helpfully described it as a "disorderly" gathering of "madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day-Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, Philosophers." Quoted in Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 231.
[12] For a more focused analysis of Transcendentalist rhetoric, including essays devoted specifically to several of these figures, see Nathan Crick, *The Keys of Power: The Rhetoric and Politics of Transcendentalism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017).
[13] Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 5-6.
[14] Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 1-19.
[15] William Ellery Channing, "Self-Denial," in *The Works of William Ellery Channing Vol. III* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1903), 107.
[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* Brooks Atkinson, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 132.

[17] Son of the Reverend Henry Ware, Sr., Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, and Emerson's predecessor at Boston's Second Church, Henry Ware, Jr. joined the faculty of Harvard Divinity School in 1830, and had broken publicly with Emerson and Parker by the end of the decade.
[18] Quoted in Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 199.
[19] Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 205.
[20] Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 238-40.
[21] The German critique of language informing much of Transcendental thought would soon be taken up to thrilling effect by Friedrich Nietzsche, and a century or so later by rhetorical critics. See Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language,* Sander Gilman, Carole Blair, and David Parent, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 246-257; Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetic of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 131-145.
[22] Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 248.
[23] Grodzins, *American Heretic,* 255.