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“I Object to the Names Deism and Infidelity”

Theodore Parker and the Boundaries of Christianity in Nineteenth-Century America

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Abstract

This article examines the debates surrounding Theodore Parker’s controversial theology as a case study for three purposes. First, it seeks to engage how Christianity’s boundaries were challenged within the “spiritual hothouse” of the early republic. Second, it explores how personal and religious identities were constructed during nineteenth century America. And third, it argues that while the late-antebellum period has been characterized as an era of individualism and innovation, validation and legitimacy – especially in the religious market – still hinged on the ability to tether oneself to traditional categories, especially the important, if ambiguous, title of “Christian.” Together, the paper explores the tensions of identity construction in the tumultuous atmosphere of nineteenth century Christianity.

Introduction

When Theodore Parker delivered his famous April 1841 sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” later followed by the expansion of his ideas in *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion*, he ignited a print warfare in which many accused Parker of opposing Christianity. A Unitarian minister outside of Boston, Parker was consciously stretching the boundaries of Protestantism during a period when Protestantism dominated, making his controversial claims all the more pronounced. Central to his controversial ideas was that in order to maintain the “permanent” features of Christianity, which he identified as charity and divine inspiration, it was necessary to let go of the “transient” aspects, most notably the infallibility of Christ and the New Testament. While such a position was not

unheard of in the early republic – people ranging from Elhanan Winchester and other Universalists to Thomas Jefferson had made similar claims – Parker’s writings drew loud renunciations from his contemporaries due to his claiming the Christian title.

One opposing clergyman, the influential and orthodox minister Noah Porter, wrote that “to a common man, even if intelligent or learned, [Parker’s ideas] seem more like the dogmas of a French or Hindoo deist, or mayhap the more refined religionism of a Persian Soofee, than the Christian theology of a Christian teacher.” Beyond these racial associations, a perpetuation of Christianity as a “white” theology, Parker was also lumped into the Anglo-American tradition of skepticism and dismissed as “nothing more or less than Deism” (1844a: 371-72). Parker, however, boldly denounced the association. “I object to the names deism and infidelity,” he wrote Porter in a private correspondence several months later, noting that such classifications overlook his belief in God, prophets, and biblically patterned inspiration. “The general philosophy which is presupposed in all I teach,” the Transcendentalist minister reasoned, is opposed to the definitions commonly associated with those non-Christian titles (1844).

Indeed, Parker was somewhat of an anomaly – and thus, a menace – to his contemporary religionists. He rejected what were then the accepted boundaries of Christianity – even for the liberal Unitarian denomination – yet refused to forfeit the title of being Christian. Unlike many other Transcendentalists who shared his unorthodox views, most notoriously Ralph Waldo Emerson, Parker did not desire to move beyond the Christian tradition.¹ Rather, he sought to redefine the Christian name and extend the Christian boundaries so as to include the progressive theology he envisioned. At stake in these debates was more than the mere elasticity of the Christian title, or even the question of who held the authority necessary to define that title, but the fact that such a title still held such importance during an era known for religious heterogeneity and individual autonomy (see Albanese; Hatch).

Parker’s battle to redefine Christianity is a significant episode in tracing the development of American Christianity, especially during the period of religious disorder and unrest that was the antebellum period. Indeed, his debate with the more orthodox Unitarian and conservative Christian ministers offers a potent example of early American boundary maintenance; at this critical moment when liberal religion demanded a spot in the religious landscape, what was at stake was nothing less than the requirements for the Christian label – a designation of significant importance in what was then considered a Protestant nation. Parker’s desire to expand the borders of Christianity forced the Unitarians to more clearly define their own limits in an attempt to reassure their own status within the Christian tradition, and it presented mainstream Christianity yet another example for their defense of strict theological borders. Even after Parker’s death, his name and legacy was still debated as competing religious thinkers fought over how he was to be remembered.²

¹ There were other Transcendentalists who also remained within the ministry, including Frederic Henry Hedge, yet they did not espouse (or at least publically support) views as radical as Parker’s.

² James Bratt has written that the decade between 1835 and 1845 – the decade in which Parker entered the public scene – is “less distinguished by the radical extension of evangelicalism’s logic than as the launching

Further, Parker's ministry took place during a period of transition in the American cultural scene, and the debate over his ideas reveals the opposing tensions of independence and affiliation. Though Emerson had famously quipped in 1827 that "it is the age of the first person singular" (3:70), and Daniel Walker Howe defined the early republic as a period brimming with "voluntary chosen identities" (2009: 108), individualism – especially within the religious sphere – remained a latent possibility for most American thinkers; to a large degree, intellectual alliances remained essential for validation. Indeed, as unique as Parker's theology was when compared to his contemporaries, he understood that validation still hinged on being tethered to the Christian historical tradition. In short, the details and tensions in place with Theodore Parker's sparring with his Unitarian contemporaries offers in microcosm the stakes involved when negotiating religious and intellectual boundaries during the tumultuous and innovative climate of antebellum America.

Background and Context

Like many in the Transcendentalist movement, Parker attended Harvard's Divinity School in preparation for a clerical career. Upon completion, he was appointed a Unitarian minister in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1836. Even before graduation, he was associated with unorthodox circles, often taking part in the early meetings of the Transcendentalists club (see Myerson 1972). Once awarded his own pulpit, he slowly inoculated his adoring congregation with his progressively transcendental theology, primarily the emphasis on personal intuition over religious tradition or biblical miracles. "I preach abundant heresies," Parker penned during his early ministerial career in 1837, "and they all go down, for the listeners do not know how heretical they are" (Weiss: 1:101). His entrance onto the Boston scene came in 1841 with his "Transient and Permanent" discourse, and he thereafter remained in the public spotlight for the rest of his life as he continued to promulgate his controversial theology and eventually turned all of his efforts to abolitionism (for his biography, see Grodzins 2002).

His success during the period was staggering to his critics, yet signifies a certain public thirst that his message fulfilled. In 1845, after years of struggle with his fellow Unitarian ministers, Parker's followers established a free church on his behalf – the largest such church in America at the time – and Parker preached in front of nearly three thousand listeners weekly, nearly two percent of Boston's entire population. Despite the time constraints that accompanied a minister as involved as he was, Parker wrote numerous pamphlets, tracts, essays, and books, all of which sold in large numbers. Within a decade after his death, his works were collected and published in fourteen volumes in London and ten in America (Myerson 2003).

The Unitarian and Bostonian context is crucial for Parker's story. Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Boston – previously known for its staunch Puritan heritage – was now a cradle for the growing Unitarian denomination, a movement that countered Calvinism and was based on its appeal to the Bible, the respect for reason, and the honoring of virtue (see Wright; Howe 1970: 4-5). Unitarians did not maintain a reverence for the Old Testament,

ground of new departures" (52-53). Similarly, Jon Butler labeled the period as the "Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse" (225-56), a framework echoed by later scholars like Leigh Eric Schmidt (2000: 11).

but clung to the New Testament as the primary manifestation of Christ's grace. The New Testament miracles served as foundational and empirical proofs for their religious claims, which were coupled, in their view, with good works and righteous living as the cornerstones for Christianity. Early followers did not believe membership entailed a specific theology; according to minister Edward Hall, "a Unitarian is not so much one who believes a particular doctrine or number or doctrines, as one who desires and strives to make his belief an incentive to a particular life and character, a religious, useful life, and a religious and forever improving character" (6). While concise beliefs were not foundational to everyone, their interactions with other Christians forced them to reaffirm their attachment to the sovereignty of God and the redemptive powers of Christ. And with the formation of an American Unitarian Association in the late 1820s came the accompanying need for doctrinal definition, even if that definition remained inchoate and malleable for over a decade (Holifield: 208-209).

Contemporary Protestantism, however, saw them as a slippery slope away from Christianity, and though Unitarianism attempted to distance itself from the more radical British formulation (and its leader Joseph Priestly), they were often the targets of scorn from the rising Evangelical movement. Robert Baird, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and one of the first historians of American religions, placed Unitarianism outside of mainstream Christianity in his influential 1844 text *Religion in America* by grouping them with religious undesirables like the Catholics, Deists, Mormons, Shakers, Jews, and atheists due to their hesitancy toward the Old Testament and dismissal of the Trinity (272). Unitarians, then, were already on shaky ground, and attempts to expand their boundaries from within threatened their establishment's collapse.

Further, the Boston region, along with the rest of the American religious scene, was beginning to witness a growing threat of skepticism aimed to weaken traditional faith. Though the "Deist movement" had presumably disappeared with the religious awakening of the first few decades of the nineteenth century, a new challenge was on the horizon. Christopher Grasso has written that in contrast to the Deist movement, which was largely found among elites and never a viable threat to the common masses, "the 1820s and 1830s" was a period when "religious skepticism was being fused to radical social reform movements, and it threatened to become prominent among the urban working class" (2002: 480). In Boston, orthodox minister Lyman Beecher felt threatened enough to publish a series of six lectures on "scepticism," wherein he warned the public of its origins and dangers. Free-thought promoter Abner Kneeland gained a large audience in the city during a lecture tour in the 1830s, yet his orthodox nemeses succeeded in getting him convicted of "blasphemy," the penalty of which was sixty days in prison (Grasso 2002: 492-93; Levy).

Complicating matters further, the period also saw the rise of the Transcendentalist movement, an intellectual fomenting that rocked the Bostonian intellectual scene. While its most famous figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller are known more for their literary compositions than religious claims, the Transcendentalists originated as, according to Perry Miller, a "religious demonstration" (8; see also Gura 2008: 13). The prime instigator behind the intellectual movement was a critique of religious structure, as Emerson and others argued that each individual possessed a spark of divinity and access to spiritual inspiration. They rejected the hierarchical and sacramental structure of

religious congregations, the epistemological claims on religious certainty, and the reliance on ancient sacred texts in favor of autonomous worship, intuitive knowledge, and personal experience. These claims struck at the heart of Unitarianism, not to mention mainstream Protestantism in the area.

Indeed, by the time Parker began challenging Christian orthodoxy, Unitarianism in particular and Boston in general were in a defensive posture and knew that further clarification was needed. There was at that time, more than any other, a clear need for further definition and rigid boundaries in order to validate their religious and cultural claims in the face of these new critiques. Long faced with the specter of expulsion from the Christian community, their claims were as tenuous as ever.

The Boundaries of Parker's Christianity

By autumn 1841, Parker felt many of the consequences stemming from his controversial and infamous sermon delivered earlier that year. Titled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," he argued that the "transient" elements of Christianity that required dismissal included the historicity of the Bible and the salvific nature of Christ (for the text of the sermon, see Gura 1998). On the former, he posited that the "idolatry" of the Bible stymied a believer's spiritual progress; further, he argued, "the current notions respecting the infallible inspiration of the Bible have no foundation in the Bible itself." On the latter, he remarked how Christ "would have us do the same [as he did]: worship with nothing between us and God; act, think, feel, live, in perfect obedience to Him; and we never are *Christians* as he was the *Christ*, until we worship, as Jesus did, with no mediator, with nothing between us and the Father of all." "Let the transient pass," he urged his audience, and Christianity would finally reach its full potential without the crutches of a text and a savior (1841a: 13-14, 24, 27).

Parker's theological objective was a project in religious restoration: on the one hand, stripping away unnecessary pieces and problems from the fundamental structure; on the other, a reorientation to crucial aspects of the Christian religion. "I have not sought to pull down, but to build up," he explained in his *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, "to remove the rubbish of human inventions from the fair temple of divine truth, that men may enter its shining gates and be blessed now and forever." This admittedly "painful" process required denouncing many "popular delusions" that contemporary Christians held dear and reinstating the "pure" elements of the faith (vi). Much of this was hallmarks of Transcendentalism morphed into religious discourse: the emphasis on individual autonomy, personal intuition, and disregard for traditions and authority. Similar concerns had led Emerson to renounce his Unitarian post in 1832, yet Parker's approach was to revise the Christian tradition so as to accommodate modernity's message.

But other Christians in general and Unitarians in particular were not ready for such accommodation. The ensuing storm that followed his remarks came fast and furious. Numerous opposing editorials and pamphlets denouncing his "heresies" came from Unitarian and non-Unitarian ministers, from local non-religious civic leaders, and from individuals inside and outside Boston. Parker's fellow ministers were now refusing him pulpit exchanges, the furthest step toward dismissal a Unitarian minister could take. This ministerial isolation limited Parker's potential audience and weakened his denominational

support. Though Unitarians were not quite ready to strip Parker of his Christian title, they were anxious to limit his exposure.³

Beyond public challenges and rebukes, Parker also received critiques that were more private in nature; he even maintained a cache of letters he preserved until his death.⁴ One satirical, if poignant, letter received in August 1844 was not only humorous in nature but also representative in theme. The author, identified only as “a true disciple of the D[evi]l & Tom Pain[e],” wrote to express his enthusiasm for seeing Parker so “vigilant & usefull in the service of our common master” in challenging the “Christian Heresy.” Besides volunteering additional volumes for Parker’s “theological library” – including works by Paine, Voltaire, and other “skeptical” thinkers – the author suggested that the next time Parker preach “an ordination Sermon,” he make it clear that his ideas were originated from the devil. “Follow old Tom [Paine],” he counseled, by “unfurl[ing] the banner of [the] Antichrist” (“A Layman”).

This satirical letter offers an acute synopsis of the tensions involved. The association to Thomas Paine was a common rhetorical link made by Parker’s rivals, meant to correlate the Transcendentalist’s ideas with the deceased public figure most despised by mainstream Christianity. Indeed, Paine, whose *Age of Reason* so challenged traditional Christian thought that he lost his lofty position amongst America’s founders, had become a caricature invoked when denouncing heresy. Further, the letter suggested that Parker reveal himself as whom he really was: not a menace within Christianity, but rather a heretical enemy opposed to it. Parker was urged to “come down from [Christianity’s] Pulpits,” remove the mask of a Christian minister, and admit that his theology was not part of the Christian tradition.

Indeed, a primary objective of Parker’s critics was to place him outside the boundaries of Christianity, thereby rendering him inconsequential and less of a threat to Christian faith. An effective and common way to achieve this goal, related to the association with Paine, was the use of the religiously charged term “deism.” As Christopher Grasso’s research on skepticism in early America has shown, Deism was an important, if mostly theoretical, force in defining American Christianity; it “tested Americans’ commitment to religious freedom” and “complicated the connection between religious doctrines and republican virtue” (2008: 43-44). While it served more as an abstract target than an identifiable group of thinkers, it was often employed as a cogent “Other” in religious discourse.

Christians saw deism as rationalism gone horribly wrong: while it masqueraded as a way to maintain belief in a secular world, Protestantism taught, it was merely a mischievous cloak designed to hide religious infidelity and unbelief (Butler: 218-19; Noll: 144-45). Charles Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*, a commonly used reference book in antebellum America, defined deists as “a class of people whose distinguishing character is . . . not to profess any particular form or system of religion”; beyond a basic faith in “the existence of a God,” they

³ On the general fallout after the sermon, see Grodzins 2002. For the role of ministerial exchanges in silencing Parker, see Grodzins 1999. Dorrien notes that this approach “confirmed that the Unitarians were shunners, not excommunicators” (90).

⁴ This collection of private responses is found in the Theodore Parker Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

follow “the law of Nature, rejecting revelation and opposing Christianity” (112). Thus, the term “deist,” similar to accusations of “Arianism” during fourth century Christianity or “Spinozism” in the counter-enlightenment, became a negative epithet that conjured heresy and blasphemy, and when given as a label to competing figures it definitively placed them outside Christianity’s defined boundaries and rendered them inconsequential.

Even though deism had largely been squashed in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the memory and threat of it remained ever-present. Indeed, because deism had been seemingly vanquished, its use as a characterization was increasingly potent because it invoked a precedent of similar past nuisances already defeated. Christianity’s conception of “deism,” though zombie-like in its constant and galling reappearances, was a challenge that had been overcome before and would be overcome again. Thus, by labeling any heretic a “deist,” they were not only placed *outside* of the Christian tradition – and thus less of a threat *to* the Christian tradition – but they were placed within a defeated tradition with little contemporary relevance or conceivable power (see Marty for a similar use of “infidelity”).

This rhetorical tool was quickly invoked after Parker’s ordination sermon, often as evidence of the religious slippery slope Unitarianism represented to contemporary Protestants. Within a few months after his controversial views became public, a pamphlet appeared by the name, *Unitarianism Identified with Deism; Exhibited in a Review of a Discourse Lately Delivered by the Rev. Mr. Parker* – the content of the text could not have been more expressive than its title page (“Junius”). Even before that, a group of local orthodox clergy who had attended the address published an open letter to the Unitarian Church wondering if they “sympathize[d] with the preacher in his opinions as expressed on that occasion,” opinions which they confessed to be nothing different than “deism” (Fairchild: 3). Indeed, Parker was a confirmation to orthodox Christianity of the dangers entailed in Unitarianism’s lack of boundaries, and was held up as the model for heretics fleeing the Christian fold.

Private correspondence with a sympathetic observer exemplifies how Parker responded to such accusations. Patience Ford, a female listener who attended Parker’s discourses, wrote to the controversial minister that his message filled her “with feelings almost amounting to rapture.” However, though Ford felt “vibrated” with the Transcendentalist’s teachings, she had serious reservations about what she perceived as Parker’s desire of “outgrowing” Christianity – the same fear, if somewhat softened, that Orthodox interpreters possessed. Yet, in an immediate and passionate reply, Parker refused the implication. “I *never* said that men would outgrow Christianity,” he assured Ford, because “Christianity is *perfect law* to *man* and *God*.” For Parker, Christ was not only the example for men to follow, but the pronouncer of the most plain and precious truths by which humankind would be judged. “I cannot conceive of a being more good, and beautiful, and holy, and true, than Jesus of Nazareth,” he wrote, and though “I do not worship Christ . . . I [still] love him, and would kiss the hem of his garment” (1841b; 1841c). Even if Christ was no longer the Savior, he was still a divine revelator – and that was enough, at least to Parker, to cling to the Christian tradition.

Parker felt deeply offended with the association to Deism, and often refuted the label in both public and private. In one letter written several years later, he spelled out why he believed such a comparison to be absurd. In response to being compared to Charles C.

Hennell (a confessed Deist), Parker was not amused: “You will please to remember,” Parker wrote, “that he and I differ most amazingly,” primarily because Hennell “has no spiritual philosophy.” Parker’s “spiritual philosophy,” as he defined it, separated him from infidels and deists and placed him safely within the Christian tradition. Specific doctrines Parker singled out included his belief in the immanence of God, God’s “continual and active presence” in daily life, and especially his belief that humanity was entitled to “continuous” revelation (1845). When Parker was invited to join a group of freethinkers to honor Paine’s birthday, he responded that he has not “the smallest sympathy” for “the spirit of [Paine’s] writings on theology and religion” (quoted in Frothingham 1874: 179). During a Unitarian Association conference in 1843, Parker rebutted the claim that his theology was deistic, stating that all Deists “deny the possibility of direct inspiration from God” – a key aspect of his religious belief. Indeed, Parker explained, not only was it “arbitrary” to categorize his theology as deism, but it was a mistake to not recognize it as “most Christian” because it shed the transient aspects while retaining the permanent truths of Christianity – what Parker defined as the “Absolute Religion” (quoted in Grodzins 1995: 82-84).

Parker’s position toward Christianity was a rare approach for the period, but he was hardly alone. As Stephen Prothero has noted, figures like Thomas Jefferson established a rational, if unorthodox, tradition of separating “Jesus” from the “Christian tradition” (41).⁵ Yet Parker’s stance was unique when compared to many of his contemporaries. While colleagues with similar views, like Emerson, left the Christian tradition frustrated and seeking a replacement, Parker wished to remain within the fold and merely strip away things he deemed “transient” – even if what he deemed “transient” were considered by many to be the central tenets of Christendom. His “Christ-less” Christianity, at least in Parker’s own view, promised more truth than merely breaking away from the established tradition.

Indeed, as much as Parker’s theology was an anomaly to his contemporaries, it remains difficult to categorize for religious historians today. Some position Parker as a forerunner to liberal religion, yet his beliefs predate equal advancements by several decades; his theology is, on the one hand, too radical for the later liberal Christianity and, on the other, too conservative for free religion. Further, his later interpreters left the Christian tradition altogether, a development that Parker himself refused to consider (Dorrien: 58-110). A more useful framework is to see him as a leading figure in American spiritualism, yet Parker’s refusal to forfeit the Christian heritage denies even that category a perfect fit (Schmidt 2005). What Charles Capper noted about the Transcendentalist movement almost a decade ago rings especially true for Parker: historians’ inability to define “the character, parameters, and sources of [Transcendental] religion” has left this important aspect of the intellectual movement unclear and, therefore, unable to be situated among larger religious contexts (532-33).⁶

⁵ Prothero wrote further that this Jeffersonian impulse to detach Christ from the Christian tradition and employ Him for one’s religious agenda made Jefferson a “Founding Father . . . of today’s Jesus Nation” (42). Harold Bloom’s thesis of America as a post-Christian nation, though focused primarily on Emerson, is also relevant to Transcendentalism in general and Parker in particular.

⁶ Perhaps an important first step to determine “transcendental religion” may be to deem it plural as “transcendental *religions*,” acknowledging the broad range of different religious views within the movement.

Crucial to defining Parker's religion is engaging the intellectual sources and tensions that influenced it. Shortly before his controversial ordination speech in 1841, and just as he was coming to the decision to take his unorthodox ideas public, Parker journalized what he believed his role to be: to "rationalize Christianity" and "Christianize reason" (1841-1844: March 1841). Such a statement, though brief, offers an important glimpse to his thought during the period in question. First, it demonstrates his frustration with the modern state of Christianity – that it lacked enough "reason" to be respectable. Second, it also reveals his belief that rationality still had to be accompanied with some measure of religious intuition.

Similarly, Parker's deep immersion in German sources convinced him of the limits of Lockean empiricism, the dominant influence on American religion at the time. Unlike his Transcendentalist colleagues – excluding Hedge – Parker's language skills enabled him to bypass British interpreters like Coleridge and read first-hand the intuitive-based theology of theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher. Further, his theology differed from the likes of Emerson in that he still maintained the importance of rational thought and argued that reason and intuition worked together. "Religion is natural man," Parker wrote later in his career, "instinctively we turn to God, reverence Him, and rely on Him. And when Reason becomes powerful," he continued, "when all the spiritual faculties get enlarged . . . then our idea of God rises higher and higher, as the child's voice changes from the baby's treble pipe to the dignity of manly speech" (1856: 3).⁷ Such a balance, Parker felt, was what truth required. Indeed, the language Parker employed in building reason upon revelation appear as if he had Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* in-hand while writing his major works – a text that was specifically shunned by other Transcendentalists.⁸

Parker believed that a shift in religious epistemology was required for overcoming modern critiques toward Christianity. Through his exposure to biblical criticism, Parker became convinced of the ancient scripture's fallibility and the necessity for it to be transcended within a believer's faith. Through his rational thought and the influence of German idealism he concluded that an emphasis on Christ placed a boundary between man and divinity. Thus, both the Bible and Christ – heretofore the hallmarks of the Christian tradition – were required to be set aside in order for Christianity to survive and flourish: "Instead of the Father of All for our God, we have two Idols: the Bible, a record of men's words and works; and Jesus of Nazareth, a man who lived divinely some centuries ago" (1842: 5). Parker's transcendental religion emphasized removing all barriers between man and God, thereby reorienting Christianity from that of "facts" to that of the "individual." Ancient scriptures, while making "a deeper mark on the world than the rich and beautiful literature of all the heathen," proved to be an "idol" if it were worshipped as something more than wise teachings (1841a: 20). Indeed, a focus on either the Bible or Christ fooled

⁷ Similarly, Parker once wrote in a letter to Carolina Dall on September 21, 1846, "I rest the great doctrines of Christianity not on reasoning, but reason on intuition," again showing the required balance of the two (quoted in Weiss: 1:256). And further: "We have naturally a Sentiment of God. Reason gives us an Idea of Him" (1842: 149).

⁸ On Parker differentiating from other Transcendentalists, see Holifield: 447; Dorrien: 96-97; Grodzins 2002: 277. For the Transcendentalists' opposition to Locke, see the essays by Ripley; Brownson (reprinted in Miller: 160-63; 205-9).

believers into “look[ing] back and not forward,” a mistaken assumption that “there is no progress unless we have all the past on our back” (1852: 1:37).⁹

Parker believed that such a balance enabled someone to remain Christian in an increasingly secular world. Parker foresaw the problems that biblical criticism and historical scholarship would bring to those who rested their faith on either the Bible or the historical Christ. Further, he feared what rational thought could do to traditional belief in inspiration, divine intervention, or even the soul. As a preemptive shield, Parker’s theology provided a place to retain an individual’s faith before slipping into skepticism; by holding fast to what he deemed as the “permanent” aspects of Christianity, Parker believed he could salvage the tradition as the “transient” parts were chipped away. As he penned in the introduction to *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, a compilation of lectures he delivered after his ordination sermon in which he further explained his ideas,

It is the design of this work to recall men from the transient shows of time, to the permanent substance of Religion; from a worship of Creeds and empty Belief, to a worship in Spirit and in Life . . . I have not sought to pull down, but to build up; to remove the rubbish of human inventions from the fair temple of divine truth, that men may enter its shining gates and be blessed now and forever (1842: v-vi).

This outlook was not only tenable to many of his followers, but fulfilling. Charles K. Whipple, Francis Power Cobbe, and Henry Wilcox, individuals from radically different background, offer just three examples. Whipple, raised in a religiously orthodox home in New England, abandoned his childhood faith when he concluded that its teachings did not square with his increasingly rational thought. Then, in his early thirties, he attended several lectures by Parker and was immediately drawn to his theology. He admired Parker’s ability to accept rational thought while still providing an “able defense of the great doctrine of Inspiration.” Parker proved to him that God “has lost neither the capacity nor the disposition to inspire men *now*,” even in an “age of reason.” For the first time, Whipple concluded, he had “heard the true preaching of the Gospel” of Christ (1858: 22).

Likewise, Cobbe, an Anglo-Irish woman who lived in Dublin, came upon the London printing of *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion* and immediately became a follower – albeit by long-distance – of Parker’s teaching. She later reflected that the main thing that drew her to his theology was his ability to show that God’s involvement was not miraculous “and therefore incredible,” but rather “normal, and in accordance with the natural relations of the infinite and finite spirit” (1894: 1:97-98). Henry Wilcox, an Illinois farmer and an antithesis of a Bostonian intellectual, stumbled upon Parker’s teachings when in a period of personal religious skepticism. “I feel like one that has just awoke from a horrid dream,” he wrote Parker in 1856. “I have found there is something to live for, and that instead of my pocket I have a mind to cultivate” (quoted in Weiss: 1: 440). For many like Wilcox, Whipple, and Cobbe, Parker’s heresies served more as divine truths than anything else antebellum

⁹ Parker’s exposure to biblical criticism came largely from his translation and extension of De Wette’s work (1843). Parker’s Christology was influenced by Strauss; Parker’s review of *Life of Jesus* was the first notice in America of the influential (and controversial) book (1838).

America had to offer, and provided a path back to God while wading through the mists of modernity.¹⁰

For Parker and his followers, his Transcendentalist theology was not an alternative to Christianity, but a corrective to the Christian tradition. It stripped away the transient principles – no matter how central they had hitherto been – in order to maintain the “absolute” qualities necessary for true faith and divine inspiration. Parker emphasized his position within the Christian fold, even if that required a redefinition of what the title of Christian implied. Most significantly, he understood that whatever his theological innovation entailed, it was critical that it was, at least in some form, Christian, for any other position would not achieve any status in the Protestant environment that was antebellum America. Even if boundaries, identities, and theologies were in flux and confusion, legitimacy still hinged on Christian association.

The Boundaries of Unitarianism’s Christianity

Despite how Parker or his followers defined his theology, many in the Unitarian faith considered it to be outside their theological boundaries. Already accused of pushing the limits of the Christian tradition, Unitarian ministers rightly surmised that association with Parker’s preaching would confirm those assumptions. While the faith was initially established as an anti-creedal movement, they were now forced to restrict and define their borders in an attempt to legitimize their status as Christian. With the growing importance of American Evangelicalism, which further Christianized an already Protestant nation, a denomination could not afford to be labeled as outside the mainstream. As a result of Parker, the Unitarians were required to confirm their position within Christendom, and reaffirm their distance from “heresies” like Transcendentalism.¹¹

At the heart of the debate over the title “Christian” was an acute anxiety over one’s identity and the concomitant desire to create and denounce an “Other.” There has never been an objective definition of “Christianity,” as the label has always been the result of contestation and debate; within any religious tradition, any idea of normative orthodoxy belies the fact that denominational boundaries are social constructions that reflect desires of particular traditions. Debates over who decides – or, to use a common phrase from early American political debates, debates over who decides who decides – the limits of orthodoxy and beginnings of heresy implicate deep tensions within destabilized cultures. This was very much the case in early America, as the disestablishment of religion forced citizens to re-conceptualize what religion and, especially, Christianity meant in an era of denominational proliferation (Fluhman: 9-20). The designation of Parker as “non-Christian” and “non-Unitarian” is thus a descriptor bred from anxiety and meant to reaffirm the Christian identity itself.¹²

¹⁰ Grodzins succinctly notes that Parker provided “a paradigm for how to live a religious life – how, in other words, a modern saint was supposed to relate to the world” (2002: 291).

¹¹ It is important to note that a number of Unitarian ministers defended Parker, even if a more vocal conservative majority drowned out their voices.

¹² “Identity’s constitution,” cultural theorist Stuart Hall has explained, “is always based on *excluding* something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles. . . Identities can function,” he wrote, “as

An important reaffirmation for Unitarianism came from clergyman Samuel K. Lothrop, an editor for the Unitarian periodical *Christian Register*, who delivered the Charge to the Congregation after Parker's controversial ordination sermon in 1841. When the conservative ministers published their notes on Parker's "Transient and Permanent," Lothrop was singled out for not silencing the "deist" (Fairfield: 3, 13-17, 36-44).¹³ As a result, he became one of the foremost Unitarians in distancing the faith from what he called "Parkerism." Using his position as editor, as well as publishing various pamphlets of his own, Lothrop represented one extreme that saw Parker not only as an individual with a heretical theology, but a serious threat to disrupting Unitarianism's tenuous position within the Christian tradition.

Shortly after the publication of Parker's massive *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion*, Lothrop delivered a sermon titled "The Christian Name and Christian Liberty," which he later published as a pamphlet. Written in response to a congregant's question – no doubt at least partially motivated by the Parker controversy – Lothrop identified what he considered "the measure of faith that constitutes a man a Christian, that is, gives him a claim to the Christian name and privileges." Of central importance was a correct definition of "Christianity," which he specified as "a religion of facts." Directly challenging Parker's redefinition of Christian boundaries, Lothrop reasoned that Christianity "is not a theory of abstract principles logically arranged and proved . . . [or] an eclectic system of ethics, a selection of the best parts of all systems, [or even] the essence of truth." Rather, relying on traditional empiricist reasoning, the orthodox minister argued that "its authority rests on facts," specifically Christ's divinity and the New Testament's historicity. "Disprove these facts," Lothrop warned, "and Christianity is no longer entitled to our serious regard as revelation. It loses its authority" (1842: 5, 8-9).

By positioning Unitarianism as tethered to the "facts" of Christianity, Lothrop aimed to locate the Unitarian faith within mainstream Christianity while distancing the movement from dissenters like Parker. Lothrop, though perhaps being more creedal than most Unitarians, was indeed following the faith's tradition of strong reliance on the New Testament. Their rejection of the Trinity, for example, was largely based on what they saw as an incompatibility with the scriptures. As one historian summarized, they saw themselves as the "pure biblical faith unmarred by the later corruption of Augustinian and Calvinist deviations," and that "no other theological movement in nineteenth-century America expressed greater solicitude for the New Testament, devoted itself more fully to the defense of the rationality of Christianity, or contended more earnestly that a reasonable form of Christianity would define virtue as its end" (Holifield: 197). They often accused mainstream Christianity of departing from the scriptural, practical faith of the New Testament by

points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, [and] to render 'outside,' abjected" (5). Literary scholar Susan Friedman similarly argued, "Identity is . . . unthinkable without some sort of imagined or literal boundary" (3). American culture in general had been filled with this anxiety, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg characterizes these types of debates as stemming from "the instability of Americans' national sense of self. . . . The creation of these Others," she continues, "was designed to give European Americans a sense of national coherence that the reality of their lives did not support" (x).

¹³ Lothrop was called out in Fairchild (1841: 3). Several of his replies to the accusation were also printed in the pamphlet (13-17, 36-44).

focusing on philosophical metaphysics and speculative theology. Yet their refusal to establish a strict dogma or doctrinal boundaries opened the door to problems for those who wished to take Unitarianism's liberal theology a step further.

When the young Calvinist minister Noah Porter reflected on Parker's radical theology, he saw it as nothing less than liberal Christianity taken to its logical conclusion. Porter, then a pastor for the small town of Springfield, Connecticut, eventually became renowned for his defense of orthodox theology and his later appointment as president of Yale University (see Merriem). Arguing that the theology of Parker was not "the movements of an individual, but also those of the public mind," and that the Parker "is but one of many in the same school of philosophizing" among the Unitarian movement, Porter's rhetorical aim was beyond Parker and toward the entire Unitarian faith. Specifically, Porter identified liberal Christianity's pitfall as the "opposition to creeds." Rather than detracting from the emphasis of scripture, Porter reasoned, the rejection of creeds implied an uncertainty of the scriptures because it left open the question of correct biblical interpretation. Acknowledging Lothrop's sermon on "The Christian Name" to be perhaps the first creed of liberal Christianity, Porter concluded that it was too little, too late. Critiquing Lothrop's positioning of Unitarianism on the "facts" of Christianity, Porter concluded that the "*facts* have proved the [Unitarian] hypothesis to be but a fine abstraction" (1844b: 528-34, emphasis in original).¹⁴

The Unitarian newspaper *Christian Register*, with Lothrop as editor, was quick and decisive in its rejection of Porter's accusations. Five articles, the first four most likely written by Lothrop himself, were published in the next two months, refuting the idea that Parker's "heresies" were the result of the Unitarian system, and in turn defended Unitarianism as a legitimate Christian faith. Titled "The Tendencies of Liberal Christianity," the editorials stressed that Porter "fails to . . . make Liberal Christianity responsible for Mr. Parker's transcendentalism," largely because he failed to recognize the foreign accent of the theology in question. Parker's views "are not the growth of a New England soil," it explained, but "they are an imported article." Parker's point of departure from Christianity (and, importantly, Unitarianism) was when he learned "the German language, and launched forth at once upon the great sea of German mysticism and metaphysics." Indeed, German theology was to blame, not the "tendencies" of liberal Christianity (1844a: 182).¹⁵

Blaming foreign thought for the Transcendentalist controversy was a common tool among Unitarians. When Francis Bowen critiqued Emerson's Divinity School Address, he claimed that the problem with the new school of thought was that "it is a revival of the old Platonic school," and that it replaced empiricism with German Transcendental philosophy. Beyond making Emerson and his "like minded" thinkers florid and discursive in language, it

¹⁴ Besides opposition to creeds, Porter also identified such things as Unitarianism's emphasis on natural religion (1844b: 537) and the moral government of God (1844b: 537) as other important steps away from the Christian tradition. Porter had written a critique of Parker's *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion* several months prior, which has been quoted above.

¹⁵ I accept the authorship of these anonymous editorials offered by Grodzins (2002: 569, n. 78). James Freeman Clarke also offered a revealing refutation of Porter; significantly, Clarke's editorials were as much a response to Lothrop as they were to Porter, for he argued for a more inclusive view of the Unitarian faith (though radical beliefs like Parker's would still be considered outside the mainstream).

also made their ideology vague and arrogant – nothing less than a return to Platonism or mysticism. Such is a mistake, wrote Bowen, for “there are few, very few, who would not do better to look at [an] American rather than [a] Grecian sage, as a model of the philosophical character” (quoted in Miller: 173-75). When Andrews Norton denounced Transcendentalist theology, he pointed to its German roots and explained that it was a mixture of “atheism . . . pantheism, and . . . the other irreligious speculations” common in Europe (1839: 10-11, 21-22, 39). Even Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous description of Transcendentalism utilized the same tension: while “his form, his features, his substance, and his nature generally” could not be defined, it could be legitimately concluded “he is German by birth” (1974). Indeed, countering the Transcendentalist notion that their theology came naturally and therefore within the intrinsic boundaries of religious thought, orthodox Unitarians employed a symbolic geography in order to not only locate Parker and Emerson’s theology outside the border’s of the American nation, but of the American Christian tradition; it also reaffirmed Unitarianism as not only Christian, but solidly American.

Beyond depicting Parker’s theology as the product of neither Unitarian theology or of American thought, respondents to Porter also attempted to solidify Unitarianism within the Protestant tradition. Continuing the argument from the first editorial, the second part of Lothrop’s editorial series claimed that it was unnecessary to set up visible creeds for Christianity because there are already obvious theological boundaries. Claiming Unitarianism as the true followers of the classical Protestant creed *sola scriptura*, the author claimed that the only true “*fundamentals*” in religion were “the Scriptures, individually interpreted.” If religious seekers were to look outside of scripture for creedal truths, they are better off facing toward Rome rather than Protestant Christianity. Such a stance was not only useful in the debate with Parker, but also acted as a reminder to mainstream Christianity of the importance Unitarianism placed on the scriptures. Most importantly, however, it presented a clear, definable boundary between the Unitarians and “Parkerism,” for it was no longer “a question of *interpretations* . . . but a question of *fact*” (1844b: 186, emphasis in original). The same reasoning was invoked the previous year during an attempt to expel Parker from the American Unitarian Association. Nathaniel Frothingham, who once denounced Parker’s theology as “vehemently deistical” (1843), argued that while “the difference between Trinitarians and Unitarians is a difference in Christianity, the difference between Mr. Parker and the Association, is a difference between no Christianity and Christianity” (quoted in Weiss: 1:192-93). Such definite borders solidified the distance from Parker and offered safety within the Christian fold.

A few Unitarian ministers, however, agreed that Unitarianism’s lack of strict dogmatic guidelines set the stage for Parker’s heresies. Even Frothingham recognized that the controversy could have been avoided if clear boundaries were in place. He became so convinced, in fact, that he worked toward establishing a Unitarian creed – an idea that would have been utterly unheard of a decade earlier. In a pamphlet titled *Deism or Christianity* – again using the non-Christian epithet as a theological distinction – Frothingham argued that time had come to define Unitarianism’s “articles of faith.” Acknowledging liberal Christianity’s past hatred towards the idea of an established set of beliefs, he countered that such a liberal stance “opened the door” for heretics like Parker. Specifically, an established creed would firmly cement the Unitarian faith’s position within Christianity (1845: 23, 29).

Conversely, the then-eclectic Unitarian and Transcendentalist preacher Orestes Brownson viewed Parker as the natural end of not only Unitarianism, but Protestantism as a whole. The pattern of dissent, diverging theological interpretations, and lack of ecclesiastical authority led Brownson to what he felt was the only logical religious haven: Catholicism. Though Brownson's religious journey out of Unitarianism (and Protestant Christianity) witnessed several transitions, his exposure to Parker's "Absolute Religion" seemed the last straw. Brownson devoted the entire October 1843 issue of his self-published *Boston Quarterly* – the last issue of the periodical's short-lived experiment – to a blasting critique of Parker's *Discourse*. In his memoirs, he wrote that "as soon as I listened to [Parker], I perceived that . . . there was and had been a radical difference between us," and that Parker's theology would reduce "all religion to mere naturalism" (157).

The debate over Parker's relationship to the Unitarian faith, and the position of Unitarianism itself, continued long after the dialogue between Porter and Lothrop. Indeed, Lothrop later lamented that the Parker controversy was a "blow from which Unitarianism has not, and probably as a religious denomination never will recover" (1888: 202). Eventually, Parker's former church moved closer towards the theology they originally denounced as "deism," but by that time there was a clearer niche and place for liberal Christianity. During the antebellum period in which the debating took place, however, there remained deep tension and significance surrounding the boundaries of Christianity. Though Unitarianism had seceded from mainstream Christian creeds and offered a new interpretation of God, Christ, and the scriptures, their dismissal and distancing of Parker signified their understanding of the importance of association with the Christian tradition; and, though Protestantism had become the dominant religious empire of the early Republic, their use of the Transcendentalist/Unitarian conflict as a warning lesson signified their lasting desire to establish clear religious boundaries.

The Boundaries of Parker's Legacy

Questions over Theodore Parker's theology did not end with his death; indeed, his early demise only brought the debate to a broader scale, as his legacy became a larger symbol of significance. In 1863, though the Transcendentalist minister had been dead and buried for just over three years, biographer John Weiss wrote that "the soil of no grave was ever more fertile." Weiss, a second-generation Transcendentalist writer, had been an ardent follower of Parker's teachings and had taken it upon himself to publish a comprehensive account of the controversial minister's life and theology. In doing so, he was aware that his subject was an individual many deemed heretical and unworthy of serious attention. Weiss specifically addressed these concerns, arguing that "men, who expected that [Parker's] influence would become extinct," must now recognize the religious genius Parker really embodied. "The best men have asked for him," Weiss proclaimed, claiming that "Parker grows upon us" and that his seeds of spiritual "revolution" were now being spread. This was not only the case in New England, Weiss continued, for even "foreign thinkers are very quick to perceive the drift of his mind, and very enthusiastic to recognize his capacity for entertaining righteousness." This was all because, according to Weiss, those at home and abroad were finally recognizing the religious "pioneer" Parker was, clearing the way for a more rational American theology (1:vii-viii).

Conversely, after Parker's death in 1860, Christian ministers quickly took advantage of his silenced pen to point out the Transcendentalist's flaws, errors, and shortcomings as a means to diminish the theology he proclaimed. Most notably, within a month of Parker succumbing to tuberculosis, three eminent Methodist clergymen in Boston gave well-attended lectures evaluating Parker's life, teachings, and position within American history. The speakers, William F. Warren, Fales H. Newhall, and Gilbert Haven, represented the growing trend within Methodism, according to historian Mark Noll, to "[abandon] the movement's early convictions in order to become [more] intellectually relevant" (362). Though the religious movement was founded on a charismatic platform, they were now implementing the common-sense empirical approach to religion that they originally attacked, coupled with an increased emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible. Warren, later president of Boston University and dean of the university's School of Theology, took an especially prominent role in developing a systematic dogma. In their attempt to develop a more reasonable Methodist belief, the three educated clergymen used Parker's life and teachings as an example of the boundaries between faithful and skeptical theology; these and other evaluations helped set the boundaries of Christian and heretical intellectual sources in America for years to come (on the transition in Methodist thought, see Noll: 348-63; Holifield: 258-60; Wigger: 173-96; Chiles: 49-58; on Warren, see Chiles: 55).

While acknowledging Parker's abolitionist activity – Warren even pronounced that “the death of Theodore Parker is the cessation of one of the great forces of the moral . . . culture of the American people” – they did not miss the opportunity to portray Parker as a heretical straw-man in order to strengthen their boundaries of orthodoxy. Specifically, one of their main criticisms, and a common tool of dismissal, was connecting Parker to the naturalistic intellectual circles many Christians found unacceptable. Newhall, a professor at Wesleyan University, claimed that Parker embodied the “gross ignorance or gross misrepresentation of the doctrines and preaching of the Church of our day.” Haven, later elected as a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, presented Parker as a lesson of the slippery slope following the questioning of salvific truths: “He started with denouncing some theoretical and some practical truths of the Gospel; he ended with denouncing the Bible itself, and its Divine Author. He ridiculed the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection of Christ, even the Holy Spirit of God.” The result, Haven argued, was Parker's theology embodying “the incarnation of the skepticism of the age” (Warren et al.: 11, 70, 81, 104).

Beyond dismissing Parker's “heresies,” these ministers also diminished Parker's success as merely a result of an increasingly secular age in which any heretical claiming “rationality” gained a following. For instance, Warren claimed “circumstances have contributed more to the growth of Mr. Parker's reputation than to that of any other religious teacher whom I know,” and that “500 other people” could have done the same thing if given the opportunity. Warren argued that Parker's success in foreign countries like Germany should be no surprise, but that “most of the German theologians who have looked over his writings seem to regard him as a rather spicy rehasher of their earlier rationalistic literature” (Warren et al.: 18-19). Parker was a mere representative of a broader movement, they argued, and was significant only in his redundancy.

Haven was more willing to credit Parker's genius, yet more condemning in his critique: Parker was “by far the ablest opponent that the Gospel has ever seen in this nation,” but this

merely set him along mighty infidels of the past of foreign fame. To Haven, Parker was “the first great man our culture has produced, who has set himself front to front with the Bible and the Son of God.” While many of the European nations had produced sophisticated “infidels” like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, “this land, with all its sins, has been preserved from this shameful honor” – until now. Theodore Parker, Warren concluded, “stands beside the great infidels of Europe in culture” and is “that first great American infidel.” Methodism, then struggling for a more systematic and intellectual theology, knew that such intellectual association would prove poison to Parker’s Christian claims, and separated their own systematic thought from that of the school of skepticism (Warren et al.: 81, 112-13).

Parker’s followers, on the other hand, viewed the connection to previous rational thinkers as a positive one. Influential postbellum, liberal theologian Samuel Johnson placed Parker in the tradition of Luther, Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, presenting the Transcendentalist preacher as the fruition of many centuries of theological progression: “the free thought of all ages had ripened its harvests for this strong reaper’s hands, so strenuous to gather them all in, so skilled to convert them to their next and noblest uses.” Though this approach made Parker’s thought appear “less spontaneous and original,” Johnson reasoned, he is still credited as possessing the “personality that could transform all these materials into a [systematic theology].” To the minds of Parker’s followers, his connection to these former “liberal” thinkers did not diminish his significance, but rather strengthened it (16, 22).

French theologian Albert Reville felt Parker’s theology was so insightful that he published, both in French and English, *The Life and Writings of Theodore Parker* within five years after the Transcendentalist’s death, explaining that Parker’s thought epitomized a “movement replete with promises, which carries the human race onwards in the way of religious, moral, and social progress,” and therefore deserving of a much wider audience (2). Biographer Octavius Brooks Frothingham, writing in 1874 when liberal theology was gaining a stronger footing, wrote that “the clearing-away of the war-cloud displays once more the figure of Theodore Parker as one of the nation’s true prophets, and at the same time reveals a country prepared in some degree to receive the best results of his thought” (iii-iv).

Johnson was perhaps the most insistent on Parker’s importance for American religion. Best known for his work in religious anthropology, Johnson was, along with Frothingham, considered Parker’s theological heir. While he graduated from Harvard Divinity School and was placed in a Unitarian congregation, he did not consider himself part of Unitarianism and had his church reclassified as a Free Church. He thus saw Parker as an important step in humanity’s ever-developing conception of theology. Building on the idea that Parker was the culmination of centuries of progress, Johnson wrote that his controversial theology “was what America was waiting to hear; what the founders of her *political* liberty, her Jefferson and her Franklin, had hinted but left unspoken.” To Johnson, Parker was a modern-day Moses whose mission was to lead God’s people to a more natural, rational, and personal religion; it was the religious culmination of the entire American project. Though Parker was not understood during his own era – never is a Prophet recognized in his own village, Johnson reminded his readers – Parker’s influence was sure to be noticed in the future:

America will honor her prophet, who, looking through the Red Sea he discovered in her path, pointed to the rights and duties of her laboring men and women as the first matters for settlement on the shore beyond; who made his creed of God in Man mean the claim of every one of her children to freedom and opportunity; and who dared to set forth the characters she idolized, so that their good should live and teach, and their evil have no force to harm. His memory will mingle with all coming liberties, as a sublime religious and political resurrection is even to-day thrilling the air that breathes around his grave (64, 77-78).

However, as appreciative as Parker would have most likely been of his successor's praise, he would have been disappointed in their lack of desire to broaden Christianity's boundaries; rather, most of those who followed Parker followed the path of Emerson by leaving the Christian tradition altogether. Though Parker believed that one could never outgrow Christianity, many who later embraced "Parkerism" took the theology to what they felt was its logical conclusion: a post-Christian, humanist faith. Unlike their esteemed "prophet," Parker's successors, specifically Frothingham and fellow enthusiast Francis Abbott, felt that Christianity was merely one step in a spiritual progression, eventually leading to the humanistic "Free Religion." It was "in the gradual growth of mankind out of Christianity into Free Religion," Abbott wrote, that "lies the only hope of the spiritual perfection of the individual and the spiritual unity of the race" (123-25).¹⁶

In this sense, Parker's theological inheritors agreed with his detractors that his theology did not belong within the Christian tradition. Indeed, even if the debate over Parker's importance and significance continued unabated, the fight over Christianity's borders went with Parker to his grave. This was an important shift, representative of the larger culture of postbellum America, where attachment to Christianity was not as essential for groups as it had previously been. The second half of the nineteenth century gave rise to Free Religious movements, Spiritualist gatherings, increased interest in eastern religions, and even prominent skepticism and free thought. Indeed, Parker's death coincided not only with the transitional period of the Civil War, but also with America's dependence on association with the Christian tradition. The boundary debates that were so crucial during Parker's life were now giving way to more liberality in religious identity (see Dorrien: 335-92; Albanese: 257-495; Tweed; Turner).

Conclusion

The debate between Theodore Parker and the Unitarian church is easily overlooked when navigating antebellum religious history. Indeed, it was merely a single sparring between one unorthodox minister and a far-from-mainstream religion, and yet it represents important religious tensions at play during the decades leading up to the Civil War. It showcases one of the many theological innovations that took place during an era of religious tumult as well as

¹⁶ See also Frothingham 1875. For the debate within liberal Christianity over Parker's legacy, see Gura 2008: 299-301; Dorrien: 103-110. I disagree with Gura (concerning Johnson) and Dorrien (concerning Frothingham) that Free Religion was the necessary and "logical step" from Parkerism; instead, theirs were innovations from Parker's theology similar to Parker's theology was an innovation from Unitarianism.

the politics involved when attempting to situate that theology within the larger religious society. It demonstrates the importance of boundary maintenance among theological innovators and the strenuous effort required to legitimize one's belief as part of the larger, if porous, Protestant nation on the eve of post-Civil War America's intellectual dispersion. The debate over Parker's theology challenged an American nation struggling for religious identity and definition, and the encounter with transcendental theology helped further define Christian thought throughout the nineteenth century.

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