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THC 3007 History of World Christianities

27 November 2012

Preaching Abundant Heresies:

Examining Theodore Parker's Role in the Transcendentalist Revolt

On May 19, 1841, at the South Boston ordination of Charles Shackford, Theodore Parker delivered what he initially thought to be a poorly written sermon, composed in haste amid many life distractions.[1] "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," was, according to Dean Grodzins, the culmination of Parker's attempts to find a "middle ground in most of the Transcendentalist disputes about reform. He was neither an individualist like Emerson nor a communitarian like Ripley; he avoided both the anarchism of Alcott and the institutionalism of Hedge."[2] But what Parker thought would be nothing more than a lackluster addition to his catalog of writings set off a firestorm of controversy that would bring Unitarianism the closest it has ever come to putting someone on trial for heresy, and left Parker repeatedly distraught at the loss of his ministerial community at the same time his career as a popular preacher soared. This paper intends to explore: (1) how the Unitarian and Transcendentalist communities reached such a tipping point; (2) why the Unitarian "old guard" felt the need to stop their liberalism at Parker's radical theology; and (3) how Parker's manifestation of Transcendentalism and his refusal to leave ministry like Emerson not only caused a shift in the future of Unitarianism but also had a later impact on the political landscape of the antebellum United States of America.

One of the primary concerns of Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie's Unitarian Universalist history and polity classes at Starr King School for the Ministry is instilling an awareness for how white privilege has tainted how we view ourselves as a denomination. In the big picture of the history of Christianities, a room full of white men making each other yell and cry about whether Jesus's

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[1] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 5684-5695.

[2] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 5664-5665.

miracles or his words are more important[3] pales when compared to the atrocities done both to Christians and by Christians. However, while the controversy might seem insignificant in the larger context, when looked at as a microcosmic picture of a community's growing pains, and how that community eventually became a force for anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism, it serves as an example of how insular privilege might be broken open when the community turns on itself. In *Teaching Community*, bell hooks writes extensively about Parker Palmer's theory of experiencing dislocation and uses a direct quote to explain:

> In *The Active Life* Palmer writes about the empowerment that can emerge when we shift a set position, when we dislocate, explaining: "If disillusionment is one of life's natural forms of contemplation, the experience of dislocation is another. This happens when we are forced by circumstance to occupy a very different standpoint from our normal one, and our angle of vision suddenly changes to reveal a strange and threatening landscape... the value of dislocation, like the value of disillusionment, is in the way that it moves us beyond illusion, so we can see reality in the round--since what we are able to see depends entirely on where we stand."[4]

By ostracizing Theodore Parker from ministerial fellowship at the same time the public was attending his lectures and sermons by the thousands, the Boston Association of Ministers was creating the displacement Parker needed to take his radical thoughts out of theology and eventually put them full force into the ongoing controversy over slavery,and also made Unitarianism confront its own exclusionary tendencies. But before we can pursue that further, it is necessary to explore a basic timeline to lead us from anti-Trinitarianism and Unitarianism as a persecuted minority to established holder of power in 19th century New England.

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[3] Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker's 'Conference with the Boston Association, January 23,' 1843," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXIII (1995): 66-101.

[4] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21.

The Nicene Creed of 325CE establishes Trinitarianism as dogma and labelled Arius and his Christology as a heresy. In 1539, Katherine Vogel is burned at the stake for denying the Trinity. Michael Servetus, technically a Modalist but still taught and revered in the Unitarian tradition, is burned at the stake by Calvin in 1553. In 1579 Transylvania, Francis David dies in prison for refusing to cease "innovation" of theology and doctrine. John Biddle, considered by some to be the founder of English Unitarianism, is banished in 1654. Four years later, the Socinians as a whole are banished from Poland.[5] 1703 finds Thomas Emelyn imprisoned in Ireland for "anti-Trinitarian beliefs. It is not until the late 18th century and beyond that forms of Unitarianism are seen holding places of power or influence for more than a few years at a time. In what would eventually become the United States, 1787 is the ordination of James Freeman at King's Chapel in Boston[6], and the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia is planted in 1796. The "oldest Pilgrim church in America," founded in 1620, converts to Unitarianism in 1802.[7]

But these are the exception to the rule of the time, which is Puritan churches being forced into more and more liberal theologies, including Unitarianism, via congregational polity and the Puritan theocracy of mandatory public worship supported by community taxes, regardless of membership in the church. In a preview of what was to come in the 1840s, Unitarianism as a denomination grew out of a widening divide within existing Congregationalist churches between the members of the parish, who tended to be more liberal, and the members of the church, who

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[5] John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), Kindle Locations 1685-1690.

[6] This created a fascinating hybrid congregation that survives to this day as Anglican in worship/liturgy, congregational in polity, and Unitarian (and Universalist since the 1961 merger) in theology.

[7] John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), Kindle Locations 1691-1696.

tended to be more orthodox.[8] In 1819, William Ellery Channing preached his famous "Unitarian Christianity," a sermon that would come to be seen as unifying event that emboldened Unitarianism to come out into the open and organize into a proper denomination. The following year, the parish vs. membership issue came to a head in Dedham, Massachusetts, when the majority of orthodox church members left over the parish's choice of minister and took the church silver with them. The liberal minority claimed they owned it, by the right of the mandatory taxes paid, and the court agreed.[9] As more and more New England churches experienced similar divisions in their congregations, another change caused a shift in churches that was related to class as opposed to theology: Disestablishment in 1821.[10]

Whatever we have to say about government-mandated support of and attendance at church, the subsidies enabled by the taxes paid by the parish meant that everyone had access to the church regardless of class or income. Before 1821, there was no such thing as the "community ministry" outreach to the poor (first attributed to Joseph Tuckerman) because it simply was not needed; they had the same access as the well off residents of the parish. After Disestablishment, however, churches were no longer supported by public money and became dependent on the tithes, and therefore the income level, of their congregation. The problem was "solved" by renting the pews of the church as property. Suddenly churches that had been liberalizing themselves via its inclusive congregational polity was at the mercy of the richest people in the population. That created a huge shift in the power balance; while a congregational church always has the power to call its own minister, when the survival of the church relies on

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[8] David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 35-36.

[9] David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 36.

[10] Susan Ritchie, "Unitarian Universalist Polity: General Assembly Immersion." (lecture, Starr King School for the Ministry, Phoenix, AZ, 20-24 June 2012).

donations and continued renting of pews, a threat of leaving due to controversial topics coming from the pulpit can mean the end of that congregation should enough rich congregants decide to leave.[11] The poor simply disappeared from the equation, as they could no longer afford a place in the church at all. Separation of church from the state allowed Unitarianism to emerge from inside the orthodox Congregationalist population, but it did so at the expense of its first experience with inclusivity.

This is the state of Unitarianism going forward: young as an organized community, still experiencing attacks from Orthodox circles, and claiming a majority of the high-class members of New England society.[12] The creation of Harvard Divinity School as a liberal training ground in response to the creation of the orthodox Andover Seminary was a concrete investment in the future of liberal Unitarianism. And while the faculty of Andover were required to sign a formal creed every five years, in order to preserve the "traditional faith", the liberals of Harvard objected to "not only the content of the creed but the idea of having to sign any creed at all, whatever the content" and "the liberals were careful not to burden the school with any sectarian interests or to make any explicit ties between the school and their own emerging denomination."[13] Like all belief systems, however, it looks and sounds perfectly acceptable until it is tested, and the rise of the Transcendentalists in the 1830s forced the Unitarian establishment to look at both their own history of persecution and their current reliance on money and power.

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[11] Susan Ritchie, "Unitarian Universalist Polity: General Assembly Immersion." (lecture, Starr King School for the Ministry, Phoenix, AZ, 20-24 June 2012).

[12] Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, "Whose Right Hand of Fellowship? Pew and Pulpit in Shaping Church Practice," in *American Unitarianism 1805-1865*, edited by Conrad Edick Wright, 181-208 (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989).

[13] David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 34-35.

Parker's landmark sermon was not the instigator of the controversy, and the intense reaction to it on the part of the community was a direct result of a pre-existing war between the traditional Unitarians who insisted that Christian fellowship required a belief in the unique and divine revelation of the religion via the miracles of the New Testament, and those who were leaning towards a definition of Christianity wherein Jesus's message, validated by human reason, was more important for the definition of fellowship. What had heretofore been kept in private discourse exploded into the public arena in 1836 in the form of a printed battle between George Ripley, budding Transcendentalist and close friend of Theodore Parker, and Andrews Norton, a traditionalist. Norton was apparently so angered by the liberal theologies Ripley presented in a book review printed in *The Christian Register*--a format for testing radical theologies suggested by Parker himself[14]--that, when Norton's rebuttal letter was rejected by the editor, he felt the need to send it to a secular newspaper for publication. This, according to the Isleys in an article from the Unitarian Historical Society, "from a man who had long maintained that free inquiry and a liberal expression of views were the basic characteristics of the Unitarian family, was like calling on mob violence to execute one's own son."[15] At the same time, the Isleys argue, Norton and his conservative colleagues felt they had no choice; the need to be validated as an emerging denomination in the face of continuing criticism from Trinitarians was stronger than the distant history of persecution or the refusal to have a creed. The basis of the Trinitarian attack was that by not having a creed, there is an inherent tendency to think oneself all the way out of

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[14] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 1979-1982)

[15] Jeter A. Isley and Elizabeth R. Isley, "A Note on George Ripley and the Beginnings of Transcendentalism," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society* Volume XIII, Part II (1961): 82.

Christianity itself into "infidelity."[16] Norton feared that Ripley and others who ascribed to the same line of thought would prove the Trinitarians right, and in the cultural time and place of these events, accusations of infidelity meant no one of status or money renting pews. In order to keep Unitarianism alive, Norton believed that the Transcendentalists needed to be kicked out or the whole ship would go down by association. The key point that caused the uproar and led directly into Emerson's 1838 Divinity School Address is summed up by Dean Grodzins: "If the sacred writers could be regarded as divinely inspired simply because they knew religious truth, then any person who knew religious truth was also divinely inspired, and inspiration was not, as most Christians believed, supernatural and limited to a few historical characters who had special religious authority, but rather was, as the Transcendentalists held, natural and universal."[17]

Ralph Waldo Emerson, probably the most famous Transcendentalist due to his presence in the American Literature canon, had done Andrews Norton et al a favour by already removing himself from Unitarian ministry in 1832. His subsequent publications of Transcendentalist-minded works, such as *Nature*, did not seem to concern anyone in the traditional camp because he was not preaching those views from the pulpit and therefore was not tainting the public opinion of Unitarianism. He was, therefore, allowed to "be recognized as the leader of the Transcendentalists," and with that came a direct influence on Theodore Parker[18], who was in the audience for the infamous Divinity School Address in July 1838. It is significant that Emerson had been invited not by the faculty of Harvard Divinity, but by the senior class itself--a 19th

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[16] Of course, the Trinitarians were correct; Unitarianism has reformed itself right out of being a Christian-only denomination.

[17] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 1984-1987.

[18] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 2709-2710.

century example of bell hooks's pedagogy of teaching community: the younger generation leads the progressive movement when given the training to think critically as opposed to being indoctrinated into dominator thinking.[19] According to Grodzins, the class "had wanted something eloquent; at least two of them admired Emerson's oracular style and tried to imitate it in their own Visitation Day speeches that year. What they got from him was not merely an eloquent speech, but a Transcendentalist manifesto."[20] Parker was no longer a student at Harvard Divinity, but he was just as affected as the graduating class; his reaction to Emerson's address was to write in his journal that "In this he surpassed *him*self as much as he surpasses others in the general way. I shall give no abstract, so beautiful, so just, so true, & terribly sublime was his picture of the faults of the church in its present position. My soul is roused, & this week I shall write the long-meditated sermons, on the state of the church & the duties of these times."[21] Parker was now only a few short years from his own controversial sermon. The difference between him and Emerson, however, and what would make it so much more painful for Parker, is that Emerson could simply ignore the controversy and go back to being the literary sugar daddy of Concord. Parker was still a minister, one who loved the call and had no intention of leaving[22], and that is why the fallout from "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" brought Unitarianism to the brink of a heresy trial.

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[19] "And the more they expanded their critical consciousness the less likely they were to support ideologies of domination. Progressive professors did not need to indoctrinate students and teach them that they should oppose domination. Students came to these positions via their own capacity to think critically and assess the world they live in."--bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

[20] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 2721-2723.

[21] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 2759-2762.

[22] Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker's 'Conference with the Boston Association, January 23,' 1843," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXIII (1995): 69.

In his article about the role Harvard Divinity School played in the development of Unitarianism from 1830-1859, Gary L. Collison argues that "For a time Unitarianism seemed destined to split into two. War between the conservatives and the radicals never came, however. Instead, over the next forty years, a relatively peaceful evolutionary process of addition, modification, and attrition gradually stripped Unitarianism of much of its elitist social and political philosophy and nearly all of its traditional theology."[23] For Theodore Parker, however, this supposedly peaceful evolutionary process ostracized him from his community, including rejection from people he had considered dear friends. Frederick May Eliot agrees that the different reactions were due to Parker's continued presence as a Unitarian minister: despite the fact that Emerson had said it all first, "the conservative Unitarians had been lulled into a somewhat doubtful acquiescence. After all, Emerson was a poet! […] But with Parker, 'the Orson of parsons,' it was different, and only lovers of peace at any price could shut their eyes to the real issue." What had theoretically started out as Calvinism vs. Unitarianism had reformulated itself internally into "Orthodoxy of any kind vs. the essential liberalism which had all along been implicit in Unitarianism but which was only now becoming explicit."[24] Emerson had started the fire and walked away from it; Parker not only recognized the need for the fire to exist in the first place but was the best combination of mind, charisma, and calling to fan the flames until no one could ignore the blaze anymore. While "Emerson was the founder of this new form of

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[23] Gary L. Collison, "'A True Toleration': Harvard Divinity School Students and Unitarianism, 1830-1859," in *American Unitarianism 1805-1865*, edited by Conrad Edick Wright, 209-237. (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), 209.

[24] Frederick May Eliot, "Tensions in Unitarianism One Hundred Years Ago," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society* Volume VIII, Part I (1947): 8.

revolutionary morality, Parker was its prophet and redeemer."[25] Truman Nelson continues in his comparison of the two men to say that "We see in the trials of Theodore Parker what might have happened to Emerson if he had replied to his public humiliation not with peace, but with a sword."[26] Indeed, the rest of Nelson's article consistently uses the imagery of battle to detail Parker's struggle with his former colleagues and the reception of his sermon: "hold the fort," "entrenched position," "massive target," and "trained his fire" are just a few examples.[27]

Grodzins shows us with raw numbers how clearly Parker was shut out of ministerial fellowship: "The year before 'Transient and Permanent,' Parker had preached 105 times, 45 of those on exchange; four years later, he was to preach 108 times, and make only eight exchanges. No one was to ask him to preach at another ordination for fourteen years, and Unitarianism was to be split for a generation."[28] Other factual aspects fill in the picture of a man rejected by his colleagues but embraced by the people: "The controversy over 'Transient and Permanent' was very painful to Parker personally, but it made him famous. Whenever he spoke, now the hall would be filled; the notoriously unsalable *Dial* would now sell out whenever he published an article in it. In the mid-1840s, he moved to Boston, where the largest congregation in the city gathered around him; he drew thousands of listeners a week. He remained a public figure until his death in 1860."[29] This fame came at the same time "the Attorney General was called on to

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[25] Truman Nelson, "Parker as Revolutionary Moralist: From Divinity Hall to Harpers Ferry," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society* Volume XIII, Part I (1960): 71.

[26] Truman Nelson, "Parker as Revolutionary Moralist: From Divinity Hall to Harpers Ferry," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society* Volume XIII, Part I (1960): 74.

[27] Truman Nelson, "Parker as Revolutionary Moralist: From Divinity Hall to Harpers Ferry," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society* Volume XIII, Part I (1960): 75.

[28] Dean Grodzins, "The Transient and Permanent in Theodore Parker's Christianity, 1832-1841," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXII, Part I (1990-1991): 1.

[29] Dean Grodzins, "The Transient and Permanent in Theodore Parker's Christianity, 1832-1841," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXII, Part I (1990-1991): 2.

prosecute, the grand jury to indict, and the judge to sentence Parker to three years in the State prison for blasphemy."[30] But as is the case with most significant events of human history, the truth lies somewhere in the middle between the binaries of peace and war.

The in-fighting came to a head in January 1843 during a meeting of the Boston Association of Ministers. Grodzins, using Parker's own detailed but still biased account of the conference, attempts to piece together both sides of what happened amid descriptions of anger and Parker's own bursting into tears. Parker "sees himself as a persecuted martyr to freedom of religion and as a prophet standing alone against hypocrisy," while his opponents "thought that […] he had embarrassed and insulted them, and that they were doing their best to deal with him in an honorable and liberal manner."[31] A key factor is how each side perceived the conference itself; while Parker saw himself outnumbered twenty to one and in the authoritative presence of his elders, the rest of the Association saw themselves trying to give him a way out by asking him to resign instead of electing to cast him out. His fame, and the schedule that resulted from it, had in the minds of the ministers put him in control of the conference; they had to wait for an opening in Parker's schedule to plan the meeting at all.[32] Even when faced with the threat of Parker's radical theologies becoming the first thing people thought of when hearing the word Unitarian, due to his massively attended Sunday sermons at the Boston Melodeon, voting to remove him from the Association would have the de facto effect of implying a creedal test, however basic it might be, and that was the point at which the Unitarian conservatives balked. It

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[30] Truman Nelson, "Parker as Revolutionary Moralist: From Divinity Hall to Harpers Ferry," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society* Volume XIII, Part I (1960): 76.

[31] Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker's 'Conference with the Boston Association, January 23,' 1843," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXIII (1995): 67.

[32] Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker's 'Conference with the Boston Association, January 23,' 1843," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXIII (1995): 76.

is essential to note, however, that based on the responses to Parker's few ministerial supporters, one hypocrisy can be more palatable than another: "'If we deny Mr. Parker fellowship,' his supporters wondered, 'how are behaving differently from the Orthodox [who denied us fellowship only a few decades earlier]?'" The conservative response is not to acknowledge the hypocrisy as presented, but to agree with the Orthodox labelling of Transcendentalism as infidelity, and therefore setting a bad example by endorsing such ideas coming from the pulpit. The difference in their minds was that the Orthodox had claimed Unitarians weren't Christian at all, while they still believed Parker to be "Christian in life"--just not suitable for Christian ministerial fellowship.[33] Had he gone the way of Emerson, dismissible as an oddity, they would have had little problem with his identification as a Unitarian.

Parker's fame with the population at large vs. his presence in a fellowshipped pulpit also puts into sharp relief the issues of class, access, and money set up by Disestablishment back in 1821. Parker was denied pulpit exchanges by his friends and colleagues for fear of the fact that "Although Parker seems to have had at least a few supporters or sympathizers in almost every congregation—the breadth of his following is indicated by the numbers that flocked to hear him lecture—in almost every congregation his detractors held the power."[34] Grodzins continues with a particular definition of ministry espoused by the old guard of Unitarianism: "Pastors liked to operate by consensus whenever possible; none wished to alienate a section of his congregation, especially not when it included, as the anti-Parker group almost always did, a disproportionate

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[33] Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker's 'Conference with the Boston Association, January 23,' 1843," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXIII (1995): 70.

[34] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 7209-7211.

share of the oldest, wealthiest, and most active members."[35] This is where Parker's radical theology, combined with his very different definition of ministry, sets the stage for him taking on the pulpit not just for theological reform, but for social reform as well. While the rest of the Boston Association of Ministers considered a faithful member of their body to be "a shepherd and pastor, which missions they conceived of as conservative," Parker believed a "faithful minister must be a prophet and therefore a radical."[36] His dislocation from fellowship amplified this belief, and constantly being on the outside from that point on make him an expert at identifying hypocrisy in all its forms. Eventually, he turned his critical eye to the slave trade, endorsed by the Unites States government, and became one of the most prominent and vocal abolitionists until his death in 1860. The tension between minister as pastor and prophet and how to keep those two aspects in harmony despite their different manifestations is now an integral part of Unitarian Universalist spiritual formation[37], and Parker's insistence that people must question from within the established order to make change happen in the face of dominator culture, as opposed to walking away like Emerson did, is a major factor in what holds modern Unitarian Universalism together despite the lack of a common set of beliefs. We fight the good fight better together than apart, and can therefore share in the joys and sorrows that arise from that fight.

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[35] Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press), Kindle Locations 7212-7214.

[36] Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker's 'Conference with the Boston Association, January 23,' 1843," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Volume XXIII (1995): 76.

[37] Susan Ritchie, "Unitarian Universalist History: Boston Immersion" (lecture, Starr King School for the Ministry, Boston, MA, 18-21 November 2011).

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