

The Transient and the Permanent in Unitarian Universalism

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On May 19, 1841, the Reverend Theodore Parker delivered the sermon for the Ordination of Reverend Charles Shackford at the Hawes Place Church in Boston. The title of his sermon was “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity”.

During that period in the mid-19th century there was a great deal of controversy regarding a variety of theological issues, both within the new denomination of Unitarianism as well as between other Christian denominations. These debates dealt with the origin and authority of the Bible, the nature and authority of Jesus, that the revelation of God’s Will through Jesus Christ was absolutely required for the salvation of sinners, and so on.

However, Parker sought to identify the core, the bedrock of Christianity as a religion. That is what he termed “the Permanent”, and to distinguish it from the theological noise of that time, that he termed “the Transient”. He believed that “the great truths of morality and religion, the depth of sentiment of love to man and love to God, are perceived intuitively, and by instinct”. He opined that this religion existed in the facts of human nature and the idea of an Infinite God.

Moreover, he clearly stated that these truths of morality and religion, which for Christianity are based upon the teachings of Jesus, did not “rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly.” Parker goes on to say that “It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes”.

Is Parker’s concept of the Transient and the Permanent in a religion relevant to Unitarian Universalism almost two centuries later?

The challenge that successive generations of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have faced during the subsequent 182 years, has been to articulate the moral and religious truths of their religion in some concise way. A way that did not depend solely upon a single body of religious literature, namely the Old and New Testaments, whose authenticity, accuracy and credibility were clearly questionable, or upon the pronouncements of a central church hierarchical authority.

Another challenge, perhaps unique to Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism, is the evolutionary nature of the religion itself. Namely, the conviction that all moral and religious revelations have not occurred only in the distant past, but that additional insights have occurred since that time, and are still occurring even up to the present day, and not from only one source but from multiple sources. In this regard, Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism are more like a Science than a Religion, that is, we believe that we will get closer to “the Truth” by asking questions, and seeking answers from multiple sources rather than by being certain that we already know all that which is true, and that no further inquiry is necessary.

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As Unitarianism and subsequently Unitarian Universalism, evolved during the last 198 years, beginning in the mid-19th century, it began to cast a broader net in its search for moral and religious truth. The first of these new sources were the ancient Hindu scriptures, the Puranas, the Vedas, the Gita and Upanishads, introduced to Unitarian theology by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Subsequently, the writings of other world religions were explored as well.

In the early 20th century, Unitarianism in particular was strongly influenced by Humanistic thinking, with many of the signatories of the first Humanist Manifesto in 1933 being Unitarian ministers and theologians. And more recently, Earth-based religion and specifically Native American influences have been incorporated.

As Unitarianism and Universalism grew closer together in the first part of the 20th century, each denomination tried to articulate, in a document of principles, those moral and religious concepts that were fundamental to their faith.

In the 1953 Universalist Declaration of Faith, the Universalists clearly expressed Universalism's Christian roots, with statements concerning "God as eternal and all conquering love" and the leadership of Jesus, as well as with statements affirming "the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God." In addition, the 1953 Universalist Declaration contained a statement specifically stating "the supreme worth of every human personality", while sounding humanistic, it was entirely consistent with long standing Universalist theology and is reflected in the first Principle of the current version of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism.

The statement of the Purposes and Objectives of the American Unitarian Association revised in 1959 was more general than that of the Universalists. It did mention the teachings of Jesus as love to God and love to man, as did Parker in 1841. However, its other statements were less specific, appearing to be a compromise between traditional Christian influences and the strong emerging Humanistic thinking within the denomination.

After the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961, the new Unitarian Universalist Association attempted to summarize the central theological and governing concepts of the newly unified Faith in a document of Principles and Purposes, which was subsequently revised and updated in 1985. Many of the concepts in earlier such attempts are reflected in the 7 Principles of 1985, with references to the origins of some of these ideas now listed in a separated document, the 6 Sources.

All these efforts attempt to define the moral and religious core of Unitarian Universalism more clearly; these are what Parker would have termed the "Permanent." The modifications that have been introduced over the years were made to clarify those core values and, in some cases, to incorporate "new revelations", for example, as reflected in the 7th Principle, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part".

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While Social Justice has, since Parker's day, been a major emphasis of Unitarianism, Universalism and Unitarian Universalism, individual causes have never been specifically cited as core elements of the religion. Parker himself was an ardent abolitionist and supported women's rights, as well as penal reform, and a variety of other social causes. Parker never considered these causes as part of the core of his religion. These were social and political issues to be dealt with and resolved. In essence, they were issues he would have considered Transient.

For Parker, it was the Permanent in Christianity, the commitment of "love to man and love to God" which enjoined one to act with "humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith and active love". This was the source of energy to address the Social Justice issues of his day, and in fact, to make them Transient.

If Parker had said instead that the core mission of Unitarianism was the abolition of slavery, - at the conclusion of the Civil War when the slaves were freed, the *raison d'etre* for Unitarianism would have no longer existed.

Likewise, had a similar focus been placed on women's suffrage by a later generation of Unitarians, many of whom were leaders of the Women's Suffrage movement, -when the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution became law in 1920, giving women the right to vote, Unitarianism would have found itself in an existential crisis.

From time to time, I believe that it is appropriate to reexamine the basic tenets of a religion. This is certainly true for Unitarian Universalism, which believes that "revelation" is an ongoing process and new information from the Sciences and other sources should be considered as well. We are not bound by an ossified creed written in 325 A.D.

Indeed, such a reexamination is going on right now by the Article II Study Commission and at the UUA General Assembly. Article II of the Bylaws of the UUA contains the clearest statement of the basic tenets of Unitarian Universalism as articulated in its Principles and Sources.

Some have proposed to do away with the current Principles and Sources entirely. Indeed, the UUA General Assembly has just voted to do so. Others would like to have one-word statements of Values in their place, while still others would like to add statements of commitment to important current Social Justice issues with which our society is currently struggling, most notably that of racism.

I believe that Theodore Parker was prescient in making the distinction between the Transient and the Permanent in religion which, in my opinion, is relevant to the issues that we face today.

What are the core beliefs and values of contemporary Unitarian Universalism that will permit us to address the Social Justice challenges of today, while at the same time meeting the spiritual needs of our members? Can we express those concisely, but unambiguously?

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“The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth in our congregations”. These seem to call one to address the issues of racism, gender inequality, homelessness and other contemporary Social Justice issues.

“A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and the right of conscience and the use of democratic processes within our congregations and in society at large.” These highlight the way in which issues should be approached, with rational thought, and an open mind and resolved by democratic processes.

While a valid argument could be made, to reword or re-order some of the Principles, being able to somehow encapsulate these ideas into a single word with unambiguous meaning would seem to be difficult, if not impossible.

The current Principles are trying to give voice to the Permanent in Unitarian Universalism even, as Parker would have said, “they do so imperfectly and miserably.”

Should the Principles be discarded entirely as some have proposed because of the identity of the people who wrote them, their “messengers”? Parker would have argued that the truths that were the Permanent of Christianity and the truths that we attempt to express as the Permanent of Unitarian Universalism are intuitive, and not dependent on the authority or nature of their authors or messengers.

An attempt to bring greater accuracy and/or clarity to the Principles, the Permanent of Unitarian Universalism, may be a valid and worthwhile undertaking. Abandoning them entirely, is not!

Equally important is the need to recognize the Transient. Those ills currently in our society that need to be addressed, remediated and if possible eliminated, so that they are indeed only Transient. These include most prominently racism, gender inequality, antisemitism and islamophobia, homelessness, income inequality and poverty, voter suppression, immigrant and refugee rights, gun violence and the environment, to name just a few.

As Unitarian Universalists, the energy and commitment to address and overcome current and future Social Justice challenges will be powered by the Permanent in our Faith, our Principles.

May it be so. Thank you.