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Unitarian Universalism and Immigration Justice in the United States:
A Study of Human Rights Rhetoric in the 2010 and 2012 General Assemblies

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
2013
This thesis entitled:
Unitarian Universalism and Immigration Justice in the United States:
A Study of Human Rights Rhetoric in the 2010 and 2012 General Assemblies
written by Danielle Lancellotti
has been approved for the Department of Religious Studies

Dr. Deborah Whitehead

Dr. Ira Chernus

Dr. Celeste Montoya

Date__________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
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Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Deborah Whitehead

Acknowledgements

My interest in Unitarian Universalism's approach to immigration justice work in the United States derives from several places. In the spring of 2012, I was privileged to take a course with Dr. Celeste Montoya entitled “Gender and Global Human Rights” which explored, among other topics, the processes by which human rights are defined and then disseminated into local communities through law and education. It was in studying the Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in this course that I first noticed the similarities in language between these secular human rights treaties and Unitarian Universalism's Seven Principles. Dr. Montoya's course was helpful in urging me to think more specifically about the interactions of religious universalism and human rights work based in transnational feminist thought, which seeks to create space for and to protect human difference and diversity.

It was at about the same time that I discovered Grace Y. Kao's book *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World*, sitting innocently in the stacks of Norlin Library. Although Kao does not discuss specific religious traditions, her clear and detailed enumerations of theologically maximalist and minimalist approaches to human rights work were pivotal in helping me to think more critically through some of the tensions I had already noticed in Unitarian Universalist social justice work.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Deborah Whitehead, my committee chair, Dr. Ira Chernus, and Dr. Celeste Montoya, all of whom have been so supportive of this project despite several setbacks, and who have always been available to offer insightful suggestions and to act as sounding boards to my ideas. I thank my mother, Kathy
Sullivan, and my sister, Cara Lancellotti, who together made it possible for me to attend the 2012 Justice General Assembly in Phoenix personally. My sister, Nicole Lancellotti, and all of my family and friends provided continued support and optimism for this project throughout its many incarnations, and I never could have completed it without them. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my partner, David Vadovszki, for his love, support, and unfailing belief in me.
# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................. iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................. vi

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

- The Trials of Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border ......................... 1
- Rationale, Methodology, and Researcher Background ............... 3
- Chapter Outline ............................................................... 10

CHAPTER 1 ................................................................. 11

- A Brief History of Unitarian Universalism ............................... 11
- The Seven Principles and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights .................. 14
- Unitarian Universalist Involvement in U.S. Social Justice Concerns .................. 18
- Unitarian Universalism and Immigration in the United States .......... 19

CHAPTER 2 ................................................................. 22

- To Stay or to Go: Debate over the Location of the 2012 General Assembly .......... 23
- The Theologically Maximalist Approach of the 2010 General Assembly ........... 27

CHAPTER 3 ................................................................. 30

- Love, Community and Justice: Common Themes of UU Theology at the 2012 General Assembly ................................................. 31
- The Issue of Diversity and the Role of Difference in UU Theology at the 2012 General Assembly ................................................. 37
- Unitarian Universalist Theology and the Definition of the Human ................ 40

CHAPTER 4 ................................................................. 43

- On The Usefulness of Categorizing Unitarian Universalist Approaches to Human Rights Work .................................................. 43
Introduction

The Trials of Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

In 2007, a policy brief entitled “A Humanitarian Crisis at the Border: New Estimates of Deaths Among Unauthorized Immigrants” stated that “various academic and government studies estimate that the bodies of between 2,000 and 3,000 men, women, and children have been found along the entire southwest border since 1995, including at least 1,000 in the inhospitable terrain of southern Arizona.”¹ No More Deaths, a faith-based humanitarian organization dedicated to preventing deaths on the U.S.-Mexico border, reports an additional 1260 sets of human remains discovered between October 2006 and September 2012 in the deserts of Arizona’s border counties.² The increasing number of deaths on the border can be attributed to a shift in U.S. policy in the early 1990s, when efforts at deterrence caused the closure of easier-to-cross portals to the U.S. and the militarization of the U.S. side, forcing undocumented immigrants to make increasingly dangerous journeys across the desert in extreme conditions. Countless numbers died of exposure to the elements, dehydration, and starvation after becoming lost or injured.

The question of how best to deal with immigration into the U.S., especially from Mexico and South America, has become a major political issue in the past twenty years, and the stakes of the debate have only increased since the events of September 11, 2001 reframed all immigrants coming into the U.S. as possible terrorists. The higher level of border enforcement undertaken by U.S. authorities, which can include border militarization, stricter legislation criminalizing immigration, and indefinite detention of individuals suspected of being undocumented


immigrants, seems to offer the best opportunities to assure the safety of American citizens and the security of the U.S for some. However, many human rights organizations like No More Deaths and the Immigration Policy Center argue that stopping undocumented immigrants from trying to cross is not as simple as closing the border: “Unauthorized migration into the United States is the result of many factors: modern-day forces of globalization, economic disparities, binational economic arrangements between the United States and Mexico such as NAFTA, and the long, complicated historical relationship between these two adjacent nations.” By closing the U.S. border, immigrants who are forced to emigrate to the United States due to personal economic hardship are required to risk their lives on the journey, and all too often, to lose them.

Some religious organizations are among those groups who oppose the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border on ethical grounds. No More Deaths was founded by several religious leaders in the Tuscon area, including Catholic bishop Gerald Kicanas and Presbyterian minister John Fife, but it has operated as a ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tuscon since 2008. Indeed, in the past several years, Unitarian Universalists all over the U.S. have become increasingly concerned with the injuries, deaths, and other human rights abuses associated with U.S. control of the border. In 2010, “Immigration as a Moral Issue” was selected as the 2010-2014 Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) of the Unitarian Universalist Association, prompting Unitarian Universalists all over the U.S. to actively wrestle with the ethical and theological issues associated with immigration justice ever since.


Rationale, Methodology, and Researcher Background

The goal of this thesis is to better understand how the Unitarian Universalist (UU) approach to immigration justice in the United States reflects particular, Unitarian Universalist understandings of human rights, including how the rhetoric of immigration justice identifies human rights, how human rights are theologically grounded, and what theological assumptions are being made about the term “human.”\(^5\) I argue that the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, along with many of the Unitarian Universalist Association's other formal statements, contain language similar to that of various declarations adopted by the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). This being the case, some UU religious definitions of human rights and human as categories are also similar to those found in these secular documents. However, despite the fact that UU is a creedless religion with a membership that holds a wide variety of beliefs, Unitarian Universalist core theology and ways of framing the world draw deeply from the historical traditions of American Protestantism.

In part because of this dual reliance on the language of these United Nations declarations and the language of social justice particular to American Protestantism, I argue that a deep tension runs through the entire Unitarian Universalist religious community, a tension between the UU interest in maintaining the mostly-secular rhetoric of support for human difference and diversity while also attempting to create a theologically grounded, universal definition of “human” as being necessarily related to, or in communication with, some form of divinity. This tension is partly historical, stemming from the 1960 merger between the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association, both of which had their roots in Protestantism.

\(^5\) In using the term “theological,” I refer broadly to the religious and spiritual beliefs that frame one's interpretation of the world and of social ills.
Christianity. Surveys have shown that, even today, theological differences between more Unitarian members and more Universalist members exist in UU congregations.\textsuperscript{6} This tension is also theological, deriving from the competing values of secularism and the various religious traditions from which UUs draw their beliefs, perhaps specifically the Judeo-Christian texts and Protestant history from which Unitarian Universalism first grew, as well as the dual backgrounds of religious and secular humanism from which so much of UU theology stems.

Unitarian Universalists have managed to develop a set of uniquely practical responses to these historical and theological tensions. Based on the book \textit{Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World} by Grace Y. Kao, I argue that the Unitarian Universalist approach toward human rights work represents a combination of theological positions reflective of these deep tensions. In the work toward immigration justice undertaken by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), a theologically maximalist theoretical stance on human rights is combined with a theologically minimalist practical approach. Kao argues that theologically maximalist approaches to human rights work tend to rest on religious assumptions of the existence of absolute, universal values for what the category of human rights means and includes, which can contradict secular values of pluralism and diversity. One example Kao cites is the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, which is framed in Islamic law stemming from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Kao writes:

\begin{quote}
The Cairo Declaration names the Islamic Shariah as the ultimate foundation of and reference for all the human rights and freedoms declared therein. This is why 'Shariah-prescribed reasons' explicitly constrain the scope of many of its enumerated provisions, including the human rights to life, to safety from bodily harm, to freedom of movement, to the fruit of one's labor, to various criminal proceedings, to freedom of expression, and
\end{quote}

to assume public office.\(^7\)

Theologically maximalist approaches thus ground human rights in specific, universal, religious frameworks. Many Unitarian Universalist participants in social activism see the work toward universal human rights as part of a larger attempt at creating good in the world which must be grounded in a transcendent notion of humanness. As we will see in Chapter 3, some UU leaders draw specifically on the notions of human love and community to make theological claims about the inherent transcendent nature of all people.

However, as part of their combination approach to human rights work, Unitarian Universalists also commonly use theologically minimalist practical approaches toward human rights, specifically in their efforts to network and combine forces with outside social justice initiatives, which are often secular or based in non-UU religious frames. No More Deaths, a human rights organization addressing immigration issues in the U.S., was founded by a Catholic and a Presbyterian, but now operates as part of a UU ministry, and the work they perform is not framed by a particular religious tradition or theological stance. As we will see in Chapter 3, minimalist approaches are also used within Unitarian Universalist groups as a way to overcome the diversity inherent to UU congregations.

Although both these tensions and the combination theological approaches to handling them are apparent in most Unitarian Universalist social justice work, they are especially exposed in the UU response to the issue of immigration justice. This is partly because the UUA and most UU congregations have only begun to concentrate their efforts on immigration justice within the past five years, allowing for the study of a very recent iteration of UU theology as directed toward the support of immigration justice. In fact, partly because this issue has occurred so

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recently (and is still in progress), UUs have produced a massive amount of material in which their theological frameworks and beliefs can easily be seen. The popularity of social media campaigns and blogs have been used to connect UUs across America, and have generated valuable sources for this kind of study.

Additionally, this media has been produced because of the intensity of the debate about immigration in the United States. SB1070, which I will discuss in detail below, represents only one piece of anti-immigrant legislation, and is certainly not the only example of human rights abuses connected to anti-immigration sentiments in the U.S.. The range and intensity of this debate in the United States has worked to produce a wide range of material from individuals of a variety of theological and demographic backgrounds, which affords us a stronger, more holistic understanding of the historical and theological tensions underlying the debate.

I do not believe that the tensions I have referenced above occur in Unitarian Universalism alone. Rather, they represent issues that run throughout many religious communities within the United States, perhaps especially Christian Protestant denominations and other movements that, like UU, are based in that historical context. Because many religious communities are increasingly working with secular organizations to further social justice, this thesis may also have implications for the study of religion and human rights, and for religion and immigration in the U.S., by providing a case study of one religious community's efforts to further just immigration policies and awareness within their own community and within the greater society of the United States. There is an opportunity for comparative studies with other groups, especially Protestant Christian denominations, in the future.

This thesis also represents an opportunity to consider more generally the many ways that religious organizations are uniquely positioned to act as positive vectors of change for their
communities. Many secular human rights organizations, perhaps especially those most concerned with women's rights and gender justice, view religious groups as barriers to creating better documentation and legislation of human rights and to educating individuals about their rights. In *Human Rights & Gender Violence*, Sally Engle Merry references one example of contention between religious and secular groups in the creation of a document entitled “Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action” at the Beijing Plus Five Conference in 2000:  

The Holy See and some Islamic nations were in constant conflict with the more secular states of Europe and North America at Beijing Plus Five. The latter countries were anxious to incorporate language about sexual rights, sexual orientation, and reproductive choice, while more religiously oriented countries saw this as an attack on the family.  

Certainly there are common sources of contention between secular human rights organizations and some conservative religious groups, but there are similarly common sources of agreement between secular human rights organizations and some liberal religious groups. There are many avenues by which secular and religious organizations can work together to agree upon, define, and protect human rights, and the Unitarian Universalist approach to immigration justice represents one particularly successful example of this. By performing this study, I hope to encourage scholars of global human rights theory and feminist theory to recognize the complexity that diverse theologies and religious organizations can bring to the discussion on the propagation of global human rights.

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9 Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights & Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 44.
justice in the United States included holding a national meeting in June 2012, called the Justice General Assembly (GA). I will discuss this meeting, which I was privileged to attend, in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. Many of the sources for this paper either originate from workshops given at the GA, or are articles written about the GA.

My process for identifying and choosing sources reflects my intention to limit this analysis in large part to the geographical and temporal space of the 2012 Justice General Assembly. To gather sources, I personally attended as many General Assembly workshops and worship services as I could, listened to the audio recordings of others provided by the Unitarian Universalist Association to GA attendees, and read transcripts of some worship services on the UUA website. I then narrowed down these potential sources by focusing on those presented by “big names,” that is, by Unitarian Universalist community leaders, most of whom are UU ministers. I more often chose workshops that focused on immigration justice and Unitarian Universalism more generally, or that offered advice or lessons that could be applied to a variety of congregation models and populations, as opposed to workshops that were overly specific to limited geographic or cultural settings. I tended to choose workshops focusing on immigration to the U.S. over those discussing international immigration issues, and I did not attend any of the business meetings of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I did not conduct any formal interviews with presenters or other attendees, though I did talk with a small number of other attendees informally to help me gauge the general mood of the Assembly.

Partially as a result of these methods, this paper is not intended to represent a comprehensive or complete analysis of the UU approach to social justice and human rights, but rather to provide a glimpse into a small slice of UU work in immigration justice, and to categorize the theological framing of that work as it was presented in the 2012 GA. It would be
extremely difficult to provide a balanced general sample of the UU population considering the theological diversity inherent in the tradition. As I will discuss, Unitarian Universalists draw from a plethora of religious traditions and sources, reinterpret these sources widely to suit their own purposes, and thus form a religious body that is in constant flux. In addition, information gleaned from the General Assembly is itself limited by the fact that not all UU congregations routinely send delegates to these meetings, and those who do attend are often more active in their respective congregation's social justice activities than a “typical” UU. UU ministers receive a discounted rate and are also encouraged to attend GA meetings more than most lay people, which tilts the general religious education level of General Assembly attendees higher than an average UU congregation.

The large majority of evidence for this thesis that is not drawn from the General Assembly is drawn from public speeches, workshops, or articles given or written by prominent Unitarian Universalist ministers, and is intended to showcase specific elements of Unitarian Universalist theology and practice of social justice work, rather than to provide a holistic view of the same. Most of the materials I use are drawn from publications produced by the UUA, including many from the *UU World*, their quarterly magazine. Like the General Assembly sources, these materials tend to present somewhat idealized versions of Unitarian Universalist visions and goals, being written by UUs for other UUs. These sources are bolstered by articles from unaffiliated news outlets.

Finally, a brief note about my background: My work in Unitarian Universalism is motivated by personal as well as professional interest. I was a young child when my family became members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sussex County in NJ, and I remained fairly active in the Fellowship until I left for college at age 18. At the time this paper
was written, I was not a member of any congregation or active in any UU organizations, though I have remained keenly interested in UU social justice work. My approach to this topic reflects my UU upbringing, as well as my subsequent training in the disciplines of religious studies and feminist theory.

Chapter Outline

In order to analyze how Unitarian Universalist approaches to human rights work fit into Kao's descriptions of theological maximalism and minimalism, I will first briefly present some of Unitarian Universalism's primary theological documents, their similarities with some U.N. human rights treaties, and a summary of the most recent UU interest in social justice work in Chapter 1. In my second chapter, I will discuss contemporary UU interest in immigration justice in the United States, concentrating on materials produced at or around the Unitarian Universalist Association's 2010 General Assembly (GA). The 2012 Justice General Assembly will be the theme of my third chapter; here, I will discuss the theological underpinnings of UU social justice work by examining a few of the many workshops, services, and other events held during the GA. Finally, in Chapter 4 I will present Kao's system of categorization for theologically maximalist and minimalist approaches to human rights work, addressing where the Unitarian Universalist response to immigration justice in the U.S. fits in Kao's schema, and whether the current UU approaches to human rights are the most effective ones available to them.
Chapter 1

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information that will serve to contextualize my exploration of immigration justice and Unitarian Universalist theology. I will begin by providing a brief overview of Unitarian Universalism and the major theological implications of its roots in Christian Protestantism. Then, by providing a primer on primary UU theological documents, such as the Six Sources and the Seven Principles, I will argue that the language and values of some UU statements are not only drawn from Protestantism, but are similar to that of some secular declarations adopted by the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Finally, I will briefly summarize Unitarian Universalist involvement in some recent social justice movements in the United States in order to better situate UU’s current interaction with immigration justice efforts.

A Brief History of Unitarian Universalism

Unitarian Universalism is a progressive, liberal religion which emphasizes diversity in religious practice and belief, as well as a set of theologies driven by social justice and activism. As members of a creedless religion, Unitarian Universalists stem from various religious traditions as well as atheistic and agnostic movements. Traditionally, humanism, a worldview in which the importance, agency and value of human beings and humankind is paramount, has been a dominant trait of UU groups. In 2012, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) reported a total congregational membership of 161,502, though many self-identified UUs do not officially belong to the congregations they attend.¹⁰ The majority of Unitarian Universalists live and

practice in the U.S.

Since Unitarian Universalism was founded in 1960 by the merger of the American Unitarian Association with the Universalist Church of America, the Unitarian Universalist Association and individual member congregations have aggressively pursued a socially progressive agenda grounded in pluralism, diversity, and an ethics influenced by human rights discourse. This includes attempts to diversify both congregational membership and leadership; to create space and support for racial minorities, women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals, and those of lower socio-economic class; and to bear witness to human rights violations within UU communities and the world at-large by practicing mindful, non-judgmental listening to try to understand the first-hand experiences of oppressed persons. To date, Unitarian Universalists have had mixed success in their attempts to create an integrated, diverse community. Although over 50% of all UU ministers in 2011 were women, only 11% of all UUs self identified as non-White/ people of color in that same year. Overall, the data shows that the UU push toward inclusivity and diversity has not yet been entirely successful.

Although Unitarian Universalism is now a creedless religion with a membership that holds a wide variety of beliefs, much of its core theology and ways of framing the world still reflect the Protestant Christian history of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, which merged to form the UUA only about 50 years ago. Christian Unitarianism and Universalism have each influenced contemporary Unitarian

13 The American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged at a time when several Protestant churches in the U.S. were reorganizing in response to the many cultural changes of the post-War II era. For example, in 1957, the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches joined to become the United Church of Christ, and in 1960, the American Lutheran Church joined with the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church.
Universalism in different ways. Historically, Unitarianism began as a rejection of Calvinism, and early Unitarian American leaders are noteworthy for their rejection of original sin and predestination, both of which were important elements of Calvinism. Unitarians also emphasized the oneness of God, differentiating themselves from Trinitarian Christians, who emphasized the tripartite schema of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although most Unitarians were Christians, the American Unitarian Association expanded its membership in the late 19th century to include non-theistic churches and individuals, which led to many non-theists claiming a Unitarian identity.

Unsurprisingly, Christian Universalists share much in common with Christian Unitarians, accounting for their eventual merging (though some Christian Universalist churches still operate in the U.S. today). Christian Universalists believe in universal salvation for all people under Jesus Christ, rejecting double predestination and the possibility of eternal damnation. Non-theistic Universalists tend to believe in a worldview in which all human beings share some universality of human experience, and thus prioritize social consciousness and solidarity.

Members of Unitarian Universalist congregations are a theologically diverse lot, but recent surveys suggest that many members have backgrounds in Protestant Christianity. In a 1999 study, Niekro and Casebolt demonstrated that as many as 67% of UUs in one region converted from some form of Christianity. Of those, about a quarter were from Catholic or Orthodox backgrounds, and the rest from either moderate or fundamentalist Protestantism.

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suggests that Christianity is still an important spiritual resource for many individual Unitarian Universalists.

This heritage of Protestant Christianity is also seen within Unitarian Universalist texts. The Six Sources, a primary document produced by the UUA which lists the most important historical and theological sources for Unitarian Universalism, specifically names “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves” as one of the six major influences of UU teaching.17 Although “Earth-centered traditions” and “humanist teachings” are also named in the Sources, Judaism and Christianity are the only two religious traditions called out by name, reflecting their more direct influence in UU thought and practice.18

The Seven Principles and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Although firmly grounded in its history of American Protestantism, Unitarian Universalism relies in equal measure on a framework of secular humanism, a non-theistic philosophy which argues that human morality can exist without reference to a supreme deity. The

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17 On its website, the UUA lists the Six Sources in full:

“Unitarian Universalism (UU) draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

http://www.uua.org/beliefs/principles/.

18 Ibid.
Unitarian Universalist Association provides an interesting case study in how secular human rights language and processes have been not only adopted, but thoroughly integrated into a religious tradition's main texts, social justice work, and theological approaches. This is seen in Unitarian Universalism's central text, the Seven Principles, which is often found alongside the Six Sources. The Seven Principles is a set of concerns that UUs have considered priorities in their discussions of the best ways to achieve practical change in the world. The Principles are not a theological statement of belief, but rather a programmatic vision of social justice and an ethical framework toward which UUs commit to work. The current statement of the Seven Principles was adopted in 1985, and contains a clear attempt to incorporate a human rights framework into the way religion, spirit, and God are conceived. The Seven Principles are quoted in hundreds of Unitarian Universalist documents and are used by a diverse array of UU groups to situate their work within their religious social activist contexts as well as within a larger framework of human rights discourse. I will quote the Principles in their entirety:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:
- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.  

The language and values encapsulated by the Seven Principles are quite similar to those found in various United Nations treaties and conventions, perhaps especially those in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by the UN General

19 UUA, “Our Unitarian Universalist Principles.”
Assembly on December 10, 1948. Created in direct response to the atrocious human rights abuses that occurred during World War II, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights attempts to lay out a comprehensive set of rights to which all individuals are entitled, regardless of their social, historical, or environmental contexts. It was drafted by a multicultural committee composed of representatives from Australia, Canada, China, Chile, France, Lebanon, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States.20

First, the goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles are broadly similar. Both reflect an effort to set universal standards and goals for human rights that are specific enough to offer genuine protection, but broad enough to apply to all individuals. Second, when compared side-by-side, there are strong similarities in the language used by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UUA's Seven Principles. The Preamble of the UDHR affirms “the dignity and worth of the human person,” and is reflected in the Unitarian Universalist First Principle, which upholds “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”21 The Preamble further affirms the importance of “freedom, justice and peace in the world,” like UU's Sixth Principle, which promotes “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Finally, the UDHR's affirmation of “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” found in Article 18, is consonant with the Third Principle's promotion of “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” and the Fourth's appeal to “the right of conscience.” 22


The Seven Principles are also important for the method by which they were created. The original Principles were adopted in 1960 after a contentious debate over wording, and required significant compromise on the part of the Parliaments to pass.23 In 1985, a new gender-neutral version of the Principles was adopted after the 1977 Women & Religion Resolution argued against the sexist language in the original version. Over a number of years, the new Principles were rewritten using a transparent democratic process, with a clear commitment on the part of the committee to source and implement the diverse opinions and perspectives of various social groups (people of color, women, GLBTQI individuals, etc.) into the final language of the Principles.24 This process is quite similar to those used by the various committees tasked with producing international human rights documentation, a task on which Sally Engle Merry elaborates in her study of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) process in *Human Rights & Gender Violence*. Merry categorizes this form of human rights production as “transnational consensus building,” which “describes the global production of documents and resolutions that define human rights and social justice.”25 In this method of building a document, representatives of states and civil organizations undergo long and arduous sessions of debate about the wording and sentence structure of a document in an effort to produce a piece that transcends differences in culture, politics, and ideologies, and which can be legitimated by the final support of all parties. Although the negotiations are difficult, the result is a document achieved by mutual consensus and therefore, at least theoretically, reflecting the views and goals of most participants. Merry writes that the method of consensus-building,


although slower and bureaucratic, often produces stronger and more enforceable human rights documentation: “[D]ecisions are more effective if they are reached by consensus. The global process of consensus building gives documents legitimacy as a tool for social reform by human rights activists.”  

26 Although Unitarian Universalists are not as geographically or culturally diverse as members of the UN General Assembly or the CEDAW committee, they also strive for consensus in building their texts in the hopes that the resulting documents will be inclusive of every member of every congregation.

The Seven Principles emphasize the importance of the democratic process and the recognition of human difference in any work UUs undertake toward social justice. Unitarian Universalists have thus been strongly influenced by secular human rights discourse, mimicking not only the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in their Seven Principles, but also mimicking the democratic, pluralistic process by which other secular declarations, like the CEDAW, have been created.

_Unitarian Universalist Involvement in U.S. Social Justice Concerns_

I have put together a timeline of selected UU social justice concerns from the inception of Unitarian Universalism in 1960 through the contemporary period:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Universalist Church of America and American Unitarian Association merge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>UUs in the Civil Rights movement – at least 2 UUs killed in Selma voting rights struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>UUA adopts Women and Religion resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>UUA adopts current Seven Principles and five of the Six Sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26 Ibid, 47.
From this selection, we can begin to infer an attempt on the part of the UUA to implement a human rights framework conscious of human diversity. We see social activist work in the Civil Rights and Gay Liberation movements, as well as a series of resolutions and other text-based reforms to advocate inclusion of women, GLBTQ individuals, and people of all races. Moreover, the attempt to implement changes that support diversity is comprehensive. The UUA created and adopted strategies and procedures to create safe space and inclusive communities from the UUA at the top down to member organizations below, while also encouraging local UU communities to develop educational and interventionist programs and materials that worked for them in their own contexts. Although it is impossible to touch upon all of the diverse social justice issues addressed by the UUA, however briefly, the timeline is useful in showing some of that variety.

Unitarian Universalism and Immigration in the United States

One social justice issue that has been a high priority for UUs in recent years is that of


28 Walton, “Key Moments,” 29.
immigration into the United States. In the next two chapters I will discuss the most recent explosion of UU immigration justice work beginning in 2010. However, it is helpful to note that the Unitarian Universalist Association has a long history of supporting immigrant rights, dating from 1961, the year the UUA was first formed. “Migratory Workers,” one of the UUA’s General Resolutions in 1961, calls for legislation to improve working conditions for migrant workers, many of whom were immigrants, by setting an agricultural minimum wage, prohibiting child labor, and providing for education, healthcare, welfare services, and housing, among other reforms.29 A 1963 General Resolution simply entitled “Immigration” calls for the passage of Senate Bill No. 747, “A Bill to Amend the Immigration and Nationality Act,” which would have updated the U.S. immigration quota systems originally created in 1952 if it had passed.30

Although these two statements are couched in more secular rather than theological language, later statements issued by the UUA on the same topics are more overtly framed in a Unitarian Universalist theology. “A Call to Conscious, Humane Treatment of Immigrants,” published in 1995, specifically refers to the First and Second Principles as the ethical ground underlying the UU call for “a just application of human rights at both the state and national levels for all people living within our [U.S.] borders.”31 Later statements were further grounded in the language of the Seven Principles. “Support Immigrant Justice,” published in 2006, references the First, Second, Third and Fifth Principles as the ethical framework from which


Unitarian Universalist support of immigration justice stems.\textsuperscript{32}

Many of these statements were published as part of a more complex campaign for immigrant rights, supported by political gatherings and rallies, letter-writing campaigns to elected officials, and community outreach and education. These activities, along with the statements themselves, also serve as forms of “bearing witness”: intentional, non-violent forms of direct action through which Unitarian Universalists feel they can positively affect the world. Although the language of the statements ranges greatly, from being blatantly theological to more similar to the secular treaty language we examined above, all of the statements serve an explicitly theological purpose. As examples of public witness, they are further grounded in a traditional form of Universalism which emphasizes shared human experience and predicts the universal salvation of all people through the process of achieving universal human rights.

In the next two chapters, I will more thoroughly describe contemporary UU interest in immigration justice as shown through the events of two recent UU meetings, the 2010 and 2012 General Assemblies. By studying these Unitarian Universalist responses to immigration justice issues in the United States, I will show that many UU leaders ground their social justice theory in a particular theological worldview that fits Kao’s description of a theologically maximalist approach to human rights, while simultaneously performing their social justice work with a minimalistic eye toward theology.

Chapter 2

On May 29, 2010, more than 500 Unitarian Universalists gathered in Arizona as part of a 30,000-person protest against the passage of Senate Bill 1070.\textsuperscript{33} Reverend Dr. Peter Morales, the first Latino president of the Unitarian Universalist Association ever to be elected, decried SB 1070 as a law that would “harm immigrants and people of color, separate children from parents, make entire communities less safe, and blight the American spirit.”\textsuperscript{34} He further argued that all UUs should rally against SB 1070 as a piece of legislation that contradicts the First and Second Principles of Unitarian Universalism, which call on UUs to affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and “justice, equity and compassion in human relations” respectively.\textsuperscript{35}

SB 1070 is also known as the “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act.” It requires local and state law enforcement in Arizona to request proof of citizenship of any person they have detained for any reason who is suspected of being in the United States illegally. At the time it was passed, SB 1070 was the broadest anti-immigration legislation passed in the recent history of the United States, as well as being one of the strictest. UUs, along with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and many other groups, criticized SB 1070 as encouraging racial profiling by police forces and trampling the civil rights of citizens and undocumented immigrants alike, as well as drastically expanding the powers of the state to deal with immigration issues, which have traditionally been under federal jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{35} UUA, “Our Unitarian Universalist Principles.”

\textsuperscript{36} American Civil Liberties Union, “Arizona's SB1070,” accessed September 10, 2012,
Although the reactions of individual UUs to the bill varied, many of the denomination's leaders voiced dismay at the injustice they felt the bill promoted, and continued to demonstrate against it. Rev. Dr. Peter Morales was one of 80 individuals arrested for civil disobedience outside of the Maricopa County Jail on July 28, 2010, the day that SB 1070 was to go into effect.\textsuperscript{37} The \textit{UU World}, a quarterly magazine produced by the UUA, published a spate of articles on immigration justice and SB 1070 over the course of its next few issues.\textsuperscript{38} Standing on the Side of Love, a UU public advocacy campaign that had previously focused solely on promoting the right of gay and lesbian individuals to marry, expanded its campaign over the next several months to include support for the rights of undocumented immigrants. Although some individual UUs were not supportive of these turns, the larger UU organizations began to expend a great deal of effort on awareness campaigns, monetary drives, and cooperation with secular immigrant rights groups to attempt to take a uniquely UU stand on immigration justice and related initiatives.

\textit{To Stay or to Go: Debate over the Location of the 2012 General Assembly}

Unitarian Universalists faced another contentious issue regarding the passage of SB 1070; should they hold their 2012 General Assembly (GA) meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, as they had originally planned to do, or should they move it to another location in protest? Every year,

\url{http://www.aclu.org/arizonas-sb1070}.


Unitarian Universalists from across the United States meet at a General Assembly, usually held in the summer months and dedicated to the general business needs of the UUA. It is attended by ministers and delegates from a majority of the UU congregations in the U.S., and the locations for the conferences are planned out for years in advance. Upon the passage of SB 1070, a number of UU groups, including the UUA Board of Trustees, Allies for Racial Equity (ARE), and the Latina/o UU Networking Association (LUUNA), called for the UUA to boycott Arizona in 2012, primarily citing fears for the safety of Hispanic and Latino/a members, as well as other UUs of color. However, many UUs, including members of UU congregations in Arizona and UUA President Rev. Dr. Peter Morales, called for the 2012 General Assembly to remain in Phoenix. On June 10, 2010, in a special message published on the UUA website, Morales argued that the best option for Unitarian Universalism as a whole was to hold an expanded General Assembly in Phoenix that would work with local social justice groups, including Puente and the National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON), to bear witness to the unjust effects of SB 1070 and similar pieces of legislation. Responding to an invitation from these organizations to keep the 2012 GA in Phoenix, Morales wrote:

I believe we are compelled morally to accept this invitation. . . I believe we are called to go to Phoenix and create a GA like no previous GA. I want us to experience much more than the convention center. I want us to experience the reality of life for immigrants. I want us to learn and to bear witness. I dream of a GA where we reflect theologically upon what it means to be a faith that can cross the borders of race, class, and culture. I would have us explore together how we make connections with marginalized people in each and every community, in each and every congregation.

When the 2010 General Assembly met in Minneapolis, MN from June 23rd through the

39 Skinner, “Focus on immigration.”

27th, enough Unitarian Universalist delegates had been swayed by Morales’ message and the invitations from the Arizona social justice groups that they voted to hold a Justice GA in Phoenix in 2012, which would focus primarily on immigration justice issues and hands-on work with local social justice initiatives like Puente and NDLON. Although some delegates pushed for an economic boycott or to organize a separate public witness event in Phoenix, many believed that combining social witness with a justice-driven GA was the best way to ensure that the most attention was directed at immigration justice issues in Arizona. An article on the UU World’s website reporting on the discussion gave this example:

Donnis Deever, a member of the West Valley UU Church in Glendale, Ariz., is one of those opposing a boycott. “We definitely want the UUA to come to Arizona,” she said . . . “I’d like you to think about the fact that the people hurt the most by a boycott are the very people we’re saying we’re most concerned about . . . We mistake the idea of a boycott as the only way to express opposition in our state. It’s more important to find ways to vote out the parties that passed this law.”

Many UUs expressed similar feelings, arguing that showing solidarity with immigrants and citizens alike who were negatively affected by the passage of SB 1070 would do more good than an economic boycott of Arizona, especially considering the $615,000 the UUA would pay in hotel cancellation fees in Arizona even if the General Assembly were to be moved to another city. On June 27, 2010, delegates passed the 2010 Business Resolution, in which the 2010 General Assembly “calls on the UUA Board to gather Unitarian Universalists for the purposes of witnessing on immigration, racial and economic justice — a 'Justice' General Assembly, in which business is limited to the minimum required by our bylaws — in June 2012, to be held in Phoenix, Arizona,” effectively agreeing to hold the Justice General Assembly envisioned by


In addition to voting to hold the 2012 GA in Phoenix, the 2010 delegates chose “Immigration as a Moral Issue” as the new four-year Congregational Study/Action Issue for 2010–2014, with the UUA posting an initial study guide on the issue by November 2010. The UUA defines a Congregational Study/Action Issue as “an invitation for congregations and districts to take a topic of concern and confront it, reflect on it, learn about it, respond to it, comment on it[, and] take action—each in their own way. A CSAI is NOT a statement—it is a question.”\footnote{43}{UUA, “Immigration as a Moral Issue – Resource Guide,” accessed on September 10, 2012, http://www.uua.org/immigration/re/moral/index.shtml.} This process of study and action undertaken by UU individuals and congregations is part of a method of social justice work called social witness, in which UUs confront social concerns, develop solutions as a community, and then work to implement those solutions as part of an effort to promote Unitarian Universalist-specific forms of justice in the world. When “Immigration as a Moral Issue” was chosen as a Congregational Study/Action Issue in 2010, UU congregations were encouraged to study the issue of immigration justice on their own and submit comments to help prepare educational workshops to be held during upcoming assemblies, including the 2012 Justice GA. Congregations will continue to hold programs to educate, reflect, and advocate on immigration justice through 2013, when a completed Statement of Conscience on Immigration will be voted on, and, if accepted, implemented in 2014.\footnote{44}{UUA, “Key Dates in the ‘Immigration as a Moral Issue’ CSAI Process,” January 11, 2012, accessed December 7, 2012, http://www.uua.org/immigration/re/moral/172548.shtml.}
The Theologically Maximalist Approach of the 2010 General Assembly

By looking in detail at a few of the many texts produced by or about the 2010 General Assembly, we can see a clear theological approach to human rights and immigrant justice being promoted, an approach centered around “the goal of world community” and the importance of transformative, transcendent love as a method with which people relate and connect to one another. This is shown first in some of the general statements approved by delegates in 2010. Below is an excerpt from an Action of Immediate Witness passed by delegates at the 2010 General Assembly that denounced Arizona SB 1070 and similar legislation under consideration in other states as being against the Principles of Unitarian Universalism. The statement combines theological reasoning based on UU Principles as well as secular human rights language, stating that UUs oppose this legislation:

BECAUSE our Unitarian Universalist Principles affirm and promote:
- the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and
- the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and

BECAUSE we welcome the stranger and we recognize our neighbor, we know that immigrants come to this nation to work hard and provide for their families. The presence of immigrants benefits the nation;

BECAUSE WE FIND that the legislators and governor of Arizona interfered with federal interests, encroached on federal jurisdiction, and created in SB 1070 a law that would press for the deportation of our neighbors or bully our neighbors, especially people of color, and punish their compassionate friends . . . (emphasis in original)

In this statement, the application of the First, Second and Sixth Principles are cited as theological grounds for opposing SB 1070, as is the need for inclusivity and empathy within the greater human community. The case for human rights is clearly grounded in Unitarian Universalist theological notions. However, the statement continues by invoking the difference between

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federal and state jurisdictions in U.S. immigration law, a purely secular line of reasoning.

We also see a notion of human rights dually influenced by secularism and UU theology in the words of individual UU leaders. In the “Invitation to Prayer” held during Sunday Morning Worship at the General Assembly on June 27, 2010, Reverend Sarah Lammert called all UUs together as part of an extended community, saying, “We arrived here with many beliefs and one faith, many ways of expressing that which is worthy of reference, yet as one people.” During the same worship service, Rev. Dr. Peter Morales gave a sermon entitled “Our Greatest Challenge,” in which he discussed the importance of transcendent love as a method with which people relate and connect to one another:

Now, you and I experience transcendence by loving and by being loved. You and I are profoundly, essentially relational creatures. We are hardwired to need one another . . . You and I need love like we need food, water, and air . . . In a world where sectarianism and tribalism and xenophobia marginalize and kill, we [UUs] bring a message of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone. We honor wisdom from all traditions. We bring a life-giving message of acceptance and interdependence. In a world of lonely people looking for real community we offer religious homes where we can grow together, worship together, and serve together. Where we can save our lives and help save the world.

Both of these speakers express a particularly Unitarian Universalist understanding of what being human means, drawn from their historical roots in Christian Unitarianism and Christian Universalism. They imply that humanness is a sort of inherent, shared quality of all people regardless of their race, class, gender, ability, culture, geographical location, or life experience; and furthermore, that this quality of inherent humanness is at least partly defined or created through access to a transcendent force, whether that force be defined specifically as God, or, more commonly in Unitarian Universalism, more generally as love. This assumption of shared humanness buoyed by an equally inherent access to transcendent love is what allows an

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individual Unitarian Universalist to feel interest in and empathy for the plight of the (non-UU) undocumented immigrant, or indeed any other human facing discrimination or other human rights violations. It is also what allows Rev. Dr. Morales to exclaim that UUs “can save our lives and help save the world” -- because of his underlying, UU assumption that all humans share a connection to one another that is both inherent and transcendent.

Although a theological dependence on transcendent love does not seem alarming in most cases, it can prove to be a stumbling block in a religious tradition like Unitarian Universalism, which is also based upon secular values of diversity and pluralism in which difference, not sameness, is emphasized as a major aspect of human identity and culture. Does Unitarian Universalism have enough space in its theology to claim a definition of human that is based in transcendent sameness and difference simultaneously? By continuing the study of the kind of human rights rhetoric used by UUs discussing immigration justice at the 2012 Justice General Assembly, we can gain a clearer understanding of how UUs frame human diversity and difference theologically in this debate, and how that framework interacts with Unitarian Universalist assumptions about what “human” includes and excludes.
Chapter 3

“Justice work for us is religious because we approach it as a form of spiritual practice. We approach our justice work not to save lives, but to serve life.” – Reverend Abhi Janamanchi\(^47\)

From June 20-24\(^{th}\), 2012, the Unitarian Universalist Association joined with partner organizations like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, Puente and Somos America (among others) to hold a Justice General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona. Differently structured than the traditional business meeting, the Justice General Assembly provided opportunities for religious witness, community service, and education with 142 workshops, worship services and discussion groups falling under 21 topics, including “Organizing for Human Rights,” “Dismantling Racism & Oppression,” “Encountering Borders and Migration,” and “Building Cultural Competency” among many others.\(^48\) The business of the UUA was kept to a minimum and several protests and witness events were scheduled for afterhours, including a “National Day of Witness” event, during which UUs visited the “Tent City” Jail, where over 2000 people, most undocumented immigrants, are held in conditions that have been criticized as inhumane.\(^49\) I counted a total of 50 workshops listed in the General Assembly Program that were dedicated specifically to immigration and migrant rights, most of which occurred over the first two days of the five day event.

The idea that work for immigration rights and other social justice issues could best be grounded in and powered by Unitarian Universalist theology was ubiquitous in all of the workshops I attended, but I would like to address a few workshops and worship services


49 Ibid, 40.
specifically in order to better draw out some common theological claims and links made by UU ministers and practitioners working for social justice. By looking more deeply at these texts, we can see that UUs ground their social justice work in a theology based in the transformative love of their Christian heritages, as well as in the secular treaty language and processes embedded in the Seven Principles.

**Love, Community and Justice: Common Themes of UU Theology at the 2012 General Assembly**

One of the richest discussions of UU theology and social justice to occur during the GA was in panel #229, entitled “Be Bold: UU Theologies and Practices of Justice.” The panel included reflections on grounding activism in UU theology from a group of well known Unitarian Universalist activists and thinkers, including Kat Liu, Dr. Dan McKanan, Rev. John Gibb Millspaugh, Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, and Rev. Dr. William G. Sinkford, each of whom had only a few minutes to respond to several questions, including: What are the necessary ingredients for effective social action? How are those ingredients related to UU theology? On a practical, applied level, how does justice work deepen people’s appreciation of the UU faith?

Each respondent shared some valuable insights, but Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, who currently serves as President and Professor of Theology of the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA, presented and commented on five theological affirmations that may ground UU social justice work. The first two are firmly based in UU’s historical roots in Christian Unitarianism and Christian Universalism. Parker said:

> We affirm the goodness of this world . . . in the face of all that breaks our hearts and discourages us, we refuse a stance that regards this world as a fallen realm, a place of evil and corruption, or a wasteland bereft of beauty or goodness from which religion or spirituality offers escape. On the contrary, our activism springs from our deep sense of beauty and love and appreciation for this world . . .
We affirm salvation as a possibility here and now. Because Unitarian Universalists affirm the goodness of this world, we locate the search for salvation, for wholeness, as a this-worldly quest . . .

For Parker, humanness is deeply linked with our experience of the material world within which we live, and in human ability to access a religious or spiritual transcendence through deeper engagement with that material world. She states clearly that Unitarian Universalist social justice work must be based in a theological framework that acknowledges the possibility of achieving universal human salvation through human efforts in the material world.

Her remaining three theological affirmations are framed by the Seven Principles, and show the dual influences of secular treaty language and Unitarian Universalism's Protestant heritage. Parker said:

We affirm the interconnectedness of all life. We not only affirm that life is good and holiness is hidden in plain sight waiting for us to see, we also affirm that all life is interconnected . . .

We affirm the good potential of human powers and capacities and the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We say this over and over again and it's a profoundly important theological and spiritual affirmation. We believe in humanity's powers . . .

We affirm the power of covenant and the importance of religious communities . . . Our social justice work ultimately calls us to root ourselves deeply in love, to grow in love and in wholeness ourselves, which we do through spiritual practice and participation in our spiritual community. It is not enough to try to change the world, we also need to change ourselves . . . We find correction and accountability in covenant. Community is how we become whole. Thus, religious community is imperative for us.

Here Parker refers to the Seventh, First, and Sixth Unitarian Universalist Principles to frame the importance of a theological grounding for social justice work. As we saw above, much of the language of these Principles is similar to that of international human rights treaties, specifically the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, we can also see a clear reference to Unitarian Universalism's Protestant heritage. Parker's focus on covenant as a way to build

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community reflects Unitarian Universalism's heritage in Calvinism. Like many other Unitarian Universalist leaders, Parker calls on the power of transcendent love to be the guiding force behind UU social activism, arguing that human beings must remain rooted in a community bonded by transcendent love in order to achieve earthly salvation.

The themes lifted up by Parker were also addressed in a discussion on Unitarian Universalist theology and social activism that occurred in Workshop #234, entitled “Building Beloved Community as Radical Practice.” The workshop was held by Rev. Deborah Holder, who is currently the Program Consultant and Justice Ministries Coordinator of the UUA’s Mountain Desert District, and Meck Groot, the Justice Ministries Coordinator and Program Coordinator for the Clara Barton and Massachusetts Bay Districts. Holder and Groot argued that Unitarian Universalists must become better at practicing radical inclusivity to effect social change, and that using the model of Beloved Community popularized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King is the best way forward for the UU community. They began their workshop with “Six Bald Assumptions,” in which they stated that Unitarian Universalist “congregations have become political clubs for activists or social clubs for [the] 'liberal-like-minded,’” and that “[o]ur Euro-centric, highly educated Unitarian Universalist heritage socializes us into believing that 'we know best.”

Holder and Groot argue that sustainable social justice work requires both spiritual practice and community, and that religious communities have unique opportunities to contribute to social justice work. In their third “Bald Assumption,” they state, “The purpose of church is to grow our capacity to love the divine, ourselves and each other and to grow our ability to work together for a just world.”

Holder and Groot make the same arguments toward the priority of transcendent love and

community as Morales, Parker, and the other UU leaders we have examined so far. Although they acknowledge the importance of Unitarian Universalist history in creating contemporary UU attitudes toward social justice, they argue for the necessity of bracketing that culture in favor of embracing values of pluralism, diversity, and inclusivity. However, the hope for universal salvation of humanity is still present in the guise of working toward universal justice, situating this theology in the competing frameworks of UU’s Christian heritage and its ties to secular humanism.

After presenting their “Six Bald Assumptions,” Holder and Groot went on to discuss the differences between what they called the “Dominant Justice Paradigm” and the “Beloved Community Paradigm.” The Dominant Justice Paradigm is rooted in an awareness of the political realities of the world, with an emphasis on the assignation and protection of human rights as the basis of a just society. In contrast, the Beloved Community Paradigm is rooted in a religious or spiritual worldview in which the pursuit of “right relationship” is the major goal. Rev. Deborah Holder explains the difference further:

In the beloved community framework, rights are already assumed. We don't focus on what people have a right to, because we already assume the inherent worth and dignity of every person, including the people who are denying people their rights . . . The big point is that what we all long for is right relationship, for our fullness as human beings. We long to be in right relationship with one another. So our efforts at immigration reform are not because undocumented persons should be extended rights, but because we understand the inherent worth and dignity that every single person, however they got here, have human dignity [sic]. So because we know that we're connected to everyone, everyone on the planet, everyone that suffers (including ourselves), everyone that suffers indignity and are treated as worthless, somehow that impinges on my full humanity too. So furthermore, as people who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we are also seeking to remember that Sheriff Arpaio and Governor Brewer here in the state of Arizona, we're also seeking to remember their dignity and their humanity. Our work is to be in right relationship with them as well.

Like others before her, Rev. Holder grounds her interpretation of the Beloved Community
Paradigm in the Seven Principles. Holder emphasizes the need to recognize the difference and diversity of human experience, but argues that the Beloved Community Paradigm offers a set of methods or tools for reconciling differences in a non-violent manner, integral to a UU-specific approach to social justice issues.

Parker, Holder and Groot all highlight the importance of religious community and covenant in part to ground their theology in the practical issues of working toward immigration justice in the United States today. By framing injustice as something that can be overcome by community participation in transcendent love and in the recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, these UU leaders all draw attention to the ways that government policies on immigration and public fear of immigrants work to divide community and create obstacles to the just treatment of immigrants. A little later in the same workshop, Holder discussed what justice means from a Unitarian Universalist point of view, and said, “In the Beloved Community Paradigm, justice is love correcting everything that stands against love. Unitarian Universalists by our very name are called to make manifest this unity, right? There's a unity that exists all around us, and our purpose is to make that realized . . .” Once again, the goal of universal salvation is linked to the creation of a just world through community participation in transcendent love, realized especially by Unitarian Universalists.

Next, I would like to examine excerpts of a worship service entitled “May All Beings Be At Ease: On Co-creation,” event #204. The service was offered by a number of members of the Accountability Group for Justice General Assembly, which was established by the UUA Board of Trustees in the fall of 2010. The Accountability Group was convened specifically for the 2012 GA after some groups expressed concern for their safety in Phoenix, and was “charged with
ensuring the participation of historically marginalized people within our association at this GA.” It was made up of fifteen representatives from the Latino Unitarian Universalist Networking Association (LUUNA), Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM), Equual Access, Transgender Religious Professional Unitarian Universalists Together (TRUUST), Interweave, the Youth Caucus, the Youth Ministry Advisory Committee, the Continental Unitarian Universalist Young Adult Network, the Young Adult Caucus and Allies for Racial Equality.

The themes of “May All Beings Be At Ease” echo the previous themes of love, justice and salvation seen in other General Assembly workshops, grounding social justice work within a strong UU theological framework. The service description reads in part, “Our religious liberalism is grounded in the transformative power of loving relationships, calling us, as individuals and as communities, to seek and serve justice, compassion, and mercy. We ensure the co-creation of this love through shared sympathy and a willingness to be transformed.” Here, transformative love rooted in human community provides the basis for the creation of justice and salvation in this world. However, this service expands on the notion of compassion as part of transcendent love, linking love and compassion with responsibility and accountability as part of a theological approach to social justice.

In the Call to Worship at the beginning of the service, Rev. Sean Parker Dennison alludes to the importance of accountability as part of successful UU social witness:

In this moment, we pray for the wisdom to see that the opposite of injustice is not justice,


but compassion. We are not here to prove the rightness of our cause, but to work in concert with the spirit of love. May we find ample opportunities to bear witness to the beauty of our human family, the dignity of all people, the undeniable reality that we are but one strand in the web of life.

Dennison explicitly grounds his call in the First, Second, Sixth and Seventh Principles, though he arguably alludes to the others as well. His understanding of justice as a result of the practice of love and compassion echoes the definitions provided by Parker, Groot and Holder above. Like Parker, who said in her fifth theological affirmation that Unitarian Universalists “. . . find correction and accountability in covenant,” Dennison links accountability with the Sixth and Seventh Principles, which promote “the goal of world community” and “the interdependent web of all existence.” For all of these Unitarian Universalist leaders, justice cannot exist without the participation of all members of the community in the work of love and compassion.

The Issue of Diversity and the Role of Difference in UU Theology at the 2012 General Assembly

Most of the Unitarian Universalist leaders we have reviewed so far assume that any lack of cooperation or participation in social justice work will come from outside UU circles, while UUs are envisioned as an organized, unified, and consistent front for social justice. However, several workshops acknowledged that dissent within Unitarian Universalist circles can create blockages in effective social justice action, and thus offered tools to help unify congregations around important issues. In workshop #206, entitled “Beloved Conversations: Transforming Church Culture on Race & Ethnicity,” Rev. Kate Lore, Dr. Mark A. Hicks and Rev. Dr. William G. Sinkford discussed a new curriculum on race, cultural identity, and building Beloved Community that they worked to introduce into the First Unitarian Church in Portland, OR, which Rev. Dr. Sinkford serves.
In the beginning of the workshop, Rev. Dr. Sinkford, a past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and its first African American president, introduced the need for a new curriculum in his congregation by discussing a poll taken by the Search Committee that hired him of the congregation’s membership. One issue that the membership hoped Sinkford’s ministry would address was that of diversity. Sinkford framed the discussion by saying:

. . . what [the Search Committee] reported was that the congregation was thoroughly of two minds about the issue [of diversity]. Some individuals were thoroughly of two minds about the issue. So on the one hand, we have a beautiful gospel of good news that should be shared and we should not be happy until our congregations look like the communities in which we minister, clearly. And, we should really be focusing on celebrating the diversities that already exist in the congregation, the diversities of economic circumstance and gender expression and sexual orientation and theological belief. Both, thoroughly of two minds (emphasis in original). 54

The issue of diversity is a particularly thorny one in Unitarian Universalist social justice work in part because diversity, such a highly prized value of Unitarian Universalism, is still somewhat rare within congregational membership. As we saw earlier, women and GLBTQ individuals have made relatively strong strides in UU circles, but diversity of race, ethnicity, language, economic background or even theology is less common, with 10-20% of UUs identifying as non-White (though this can vary widely depending upon the location of any given congregation).

Additionally, as occurred in Rev. Dr. Sinkford’s congregation, more diverse groups of UUs are often unable to agree on which social justice initiatives are most important for their community to work toward, which can leave members feeling frustrated, disheartened, and unheard.

Responding to Rev. Dr. Sinkford, Rev. Kate Lore described the difficulty that the Portland congregation experienced in producing any social action based in multiculturalism, as members had a wide variety of perspectives on whether to prioritize work against racism, sexism, or other

forms of oppression. Sinkford felt that his congregation needed to develop a more full and integrated perspective on the purpose of social justice work, and brought in Dr. Mark A. Hicks, the Angus MacLean Professor of Religious Education and Director of the Fahs Collaborative at Meadville Lombard Theological School, to develop an educational curriculum that would speak directly to this need.

The curriculum Hicks developed is called *Building the World We Dream About*. Available in versions for adults and for youth, the curriculum “seeks to interrupt the workings of racism and transform how people from different racial/ethnic groups understand and relate to one another.”55 The curriculum contains a set of practical exercises designed to help individuals practice having difficult conversations in respectful, open, and honest ways, encouraging participants to connect through storytelling and sharing personal experiences in order to find common ground and become better at listening to one another. Both the curriculum itself and the process of creating it are grounded in Unitarian Universalist theology. Hicks discussed the initial formation of *Building the World We Dream About* during the workshop, describing his thought processes thus:

> What would happen if we started this conversation as a spiritual practice? In a sense, to covenant, to build a sort of a learning community around this, to take some of the anxiety -- and not to avoid the hard work, that's not what I'm saying at all -- but to frame this [conversation] in a way that invites people to engagement, invites people to love people in spite of who we are . . . and to stay at the table when those [difficult] things occur.56

For Hicks, the creation of the *Building the World We Dream About* curriculum was itself grounded in a Unitarian Universalist sense of spirituality. Like Parker, Holder, Groot, and others, Hicks envisions a practical approach to social justice work that is based in community-building


56 Hicks, Lore, and Sinkford, “Beloved Conversations: Transforming Church Culture on Race & Ethnicity.”
efforts and participation in radical, transformative practices of love. Although he does not refer to the Principles directly, his framing of the curriculum he created embodies their spirit. This form of theological framing is also evident in the curriculum itself. Hicks says:

One of the things that we know in our society that is very true is that we talk about living in democratic ways, we talk about having open conversations, but we don't actually have places to practice that skill. So the curriculum provides ways to do that . . . to learn how to accompany each other through joy and through struggle.

Again, Hicks stresses the importance of forming strong communities in order to further social justice goals, and explicitly connects this with the Fifth Principle, which promotes “the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” By enacting the democratic process by developing their community ties more fully, Unitarian Universalists embed their social justice work within a larger theological frame.

Unitarian Universalist Theology and the Definition of the Human

This review of select workshops and services cannot begin to adequately reflect the 142 distinct sessions held over five days at the 2012 Justice General Assembly, 50 of which were dedicated specifically to immigration and migrant rights. However, it does help to highlight a few major themes of Unitarian Universalist theology as they apply to social justice work, and specifically to work in immigration justice. First, many UU leaders draw on Unitarian Universalism's Protestant Christian heritage in order to link social justice with universal salvation for humankind, achieved by participation in transformative, transcendent love, and the establishment of a radically non-violent form of human community. These themes frame a UU-specific, programmatic vision of how to achieve social justice in this world. Second, UU leaders draw equally on the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism to frame their social justice
initiatives. As we have seen, the language of the Seven Principles is similar to the language of the Declaration of Human Rights and other secular human rights treaties. Thus, Unitarian Universalist theology is deeply linked to the values of secular humanism, which include pluralism, diversity, and human difference. Although some UU leaders skim over this tension with broad universal language, many UUs are aware of the difficulties they encounter in combining the goals of universal salvation with those of diversity and pluralism.

The Unitarian Universalist understanding of human rights, and indeed, of humanness, is fraught with contradiction. It seems that human rights are primarily based in the understanding of humanness promoted by the Seven Principles, perhaps specifically the First Principle, which calls for the recognition of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The use of the term “inherent” seems particularly important; it implies that human worth and dignity are more than just common human characteristics, but are in fact attributes that transcend human materiality. Being found in every individual, these attributes are assumed to be universal across human difference and diversity, and point toward the existence and expectation of an equally universal link between humans and the divine, conceptualized generally as love or sometimes more specifically as God. Unitarian Universalist leaders as a whole seem to be promoting this concept of universal humanity when they discuss the importance of world community, and participation in transformative love to enact social justice and universal salvation. However, Unitarian Universalism simultaneously promotes secular values of pluralism and diversity that would seem to fly in the face of any notion of a universal definition of humanness. These values are embodied in the UU commitment to immigration justice, and indeed to social justice in general. They are especially embodied in practical UU approaches to community-building, as we saw in the workshops emphasizing the Beloved Community and Building the World We Dream About.
models. In the next chapter, I will discuss this tension in Unitarian Universalism in relation to Grace Y. Kao's discussion of theologically maximalist approaches to human rights.
Chapter 4

On The Usefulness of Categorizing Unitarian Universalist Approaches to Human Rights Work

In her book *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World*, theologian and ethicist Grace Y. Kao presents two general approaches that theologians and religious practitioners may take to contextualize human rights work within their larger worldviews. The first, theological maximalism, is the argument that the basis of human rights must be located within the inherent worth and dignity of each human being that is assumed by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UU's Seven Principles. This position implies that human beings have some transcendent, divine quality that causes us to be inherently deserving of human rights in order to protect and preserve that divine quality. The second approach delineated by Kao, theological minimalism, is an argument for human rights that is not based on an account of human worth, but rather on the political ramifications that universal human rights legislation could have. Based on the work of John Rawls and other theorists, Kao outlines a theologically minimalist approach in which “the primary function of human rights [is] to govern relations between political communities by setting the limits of tolerable pluralism so that a state's systematic failure to secure them would be sufficient to warrant diplomatic censure, economic sanctions, or even military intervention in extreme cases.”

Kao argues that both approaches have their strengths and faults, though theological maximalism often seems to be the stronger position for religious practitioners interested in promoting social justice causes. They may feel that grounding human rights work in a strong theological framework provides a convincing, authoritative rationale for human worth that theologically minimalist frameworks cannot duplicate. However, maximalist approaches to social justice can be unconvincing to some secular human rights organizations, or

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to activists who are unwilling to promote any universal theory of humanity or humanness, such as those working from some theoretical models of disability studies or transnational feminism, for example. I argue that the recent Unitarian Universalist approach to immigration justice in the United States is based in a combination of theologically maximalist and minimalist models of human rights. Although Unitarian Universalists use elements of a theologically minimalist approach on the practical level of social justice work, their overarching theory of social justice is firmly grounded in a maximalist sense of theology.

Kao describes several kinds of theologically minimalist and maximalist approaches and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses for promoting the work of human rights. In this chapter, I will present some of the approaches she notes and situate Unitarian Universalist work toward immigration justice within her categories. This analysis will be limited to the attitudes toward immigration justice specifically and social justice generally that were expressed in the 2010 and 2012 UU General Assembly materials discussed above. Categorizing Unitarian Universalist social justice work in this manner may help us to better understand how Unitarian Universalism fits into the larger contexts in which religious organizations are working toward human rights. It may also provide us with a clearer sense of whether or not UU's current set of approaches toward human rights work is the most effective way for UUs to achieve the socially just world to which they aspire. In conclusion, I will discuss the larger implications of this work for the fields of religious studies and human rights theory.

On Theologically Maximalist Approaches to Human Rights in UU Immigration Justice

I have argued throughout this piece that the Unitarian Universalist approach to immigration justice in the 2010 and 2012 General Assemblies relied heavily on a theologically
maximalist framework of human rights. For many UU leaders, this approach seems to allow for a stronger, more convincing grounding for human rights. However, after analyzing four distinct theoretical accounts arguing for the need of a religious grounding for human rights, Kao concludes that the theologically maximalist approach only seems stronger than the minimalist because some theorists exaggerate the necessity of a religious grounding.

Kao describes a theologically maximalist approach to human rights as a claim that the case for human rights must be embedded within a larger vision of universal good based in a religious or spiritual view of the world, and reviews several examples of maximalist approaches. The most useful to us is that of Catholic legal scholar Michael Perry, who argues that the premise of inherent human dignity found in secular international human rights documents is “ineliminably religious,” since an assumption of inherent dignity supports “the claim that all human beings are sacred, inviolable, and ends-in-themselves.” For Perry, this claim cannot be substantiated by a secular or nonreligious worldview, but must be situated within a theologically based framework. Indeed, Perry initially seems to provide a strong argument for the superiority of theologically maximalist justifications for human rights. However, Kao argues that Perry’s slide from inherent human dignity to assumed human sacrality is a difficult move for which to provide justification, and questions whether human dignity must be situated within a religious context in order to be a valid justification for human rights.

However, the materials we reviewed from the 2010 and 2012 UUA General Assemblies seem to reveal the UU propensity to make the same theoretical slide between inherent human


59 Ibid, 36.

60 Ibid, 151.
dignity and assumed human sacrality that Perry makes in his version of a theologically maximalist justification for human rights. This is most obvious in the discussions of transformative, transcendent love that we saw, for example, in Rev. Dr. Morales' sermon, “Our Greatest Challenge,” where he strongly states that humans universally have access to transcendence through the power of love and loving, implying that human access to the divine is an inherent quality which imbues the human with the sacred. Rev. Holder and Groot's discussion on the Beloved Community Paradigm reveals the same slide, as Holder claims that the existence of human suffering “somehow impinges on my full humanity too,” implying the existence of a human community that is connected at a metaphysical level. If we agree with Perry and equate inherent human dignity with assumed human sacrality, then the Unitarian Universalist tendency to do the same can be seen to result in a theologically maximalist justification for human rights that is stronger and more authoritative than minimalist models. However, if we agree with Kao that the theoretical slide from human dignity to human sacrality is not necessarily justified, then the question as to whether a theologically maximalist approach is the most effective one possible for Unitarian Universalist efforts toward social justice, or for those of other religious groups, remains open.

Unitarian Universalism and Consensus-Based Approaches to Human Rights

Although I have detailed many examples throughout this paper of Unitarian Universalists using theologically maximalist approaches to human rights, I believe that their theologically minimalist approaches, mostly seen in their more practical work toward immigration justice, are equally important. In the first chapter of this paper, I discussed the consensus-based approach to

61 Groot and Rev. Holder, “Building Beloved Community as Radical Practice.”
forming human rights norms used by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to create treaties and other human rights documents across international and cultural barriers. I noted that Unitarian Universalists had used a similar consensus-based approach to form their Seven Principles. Kao argues that this particular form of consensus-based work is useful in allowing diverse parties to create plural, local foundations for human rights within their own contexts even while contributing to the production of universal human rights norms. By refraining from promoting a comprehensive underlying theory of human rights, this theologically minimalist approach offers an increased space for a diverse array of worldviews, a space that is often necessary in order for a committee comprised of people from multiple cultures and backgrounds to produce useful documentation. In addition, individual parties are then free to develop their own distinct underlying theories of human rights, as long as those theories can be used to uphold the consensus-based human rights norms. In this way, a multiplicity of group ideologies may be supported, both religious and secular in nature.

Kao outlines three related ways that this theologically minimalist approach to human rights may be advantageous. First, she argues that the claim that human rights are grounded in Western liberal perspectives would be overthrown by allowing the non-Western roots of contemporary human rights norms to come forward. This would allow for diverse groups to see human rights precedents in their own histories and cultural heritages. Second, the theologically minimalist consensus-based approach to human rights has greater chances of being accepted by individuals and groups who would otherwise have objections to human rights systems grounded


63 Ibid, 88.
in an overarching theoretical framework that might be alien to them.\textsuperscript{64} Since one of the goals of creating human rights norms is to have them accepted and perpetuated universally, allowing individuals to frame rights within their own contexts is vital. Third and finally, Kao argues that leaving space for a variety of conceptual bases of human rights “might make more transparent the unique contributions that each cultural or religious tradition could offer to others.”\textsuperscript{65} This could create valuable opportunities for cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Unitarian Universalists clearly use a theologically minimalist consensus-based approach to human rights in their practical work toward immigration justice. I have already discussed the production of the Seven Principles. Although the document itself is a set of universal human rights norms promoting a specific vision of social justice and universal salvation, the creation of the Seven Principles is a good example of the challenges involved in performing social justice work within the UUA as a whole. The diversity of Unitarian Universalist backgrounds and interests results in a huge number of smaller organizations within the UUA, all with different goals, which nevertheless must communicate and work together to further justice. Although all UUs agree on the value of the Seven Principles in theory, in practice there is often discord among members, like that in the First Unitarian Church of Portland, OR as described by Rev. Dr. Sinkford. Allowing for theologically minimalist approaches toward human rights work within Unitarian Universalism allows different individuals, groups, and congregations to work together toward social justice goals without necessarily agreeing on one specific underlying theoretical model of justice.

Unitarian Universalists also benefit from a model of theological minimalism in their

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 89.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 90.
efforts to work with outside groups, often secular ones, toward immigration justice. This requires a flexible theoretical framework of human rights in order to be successful. On a local scale, neither the protest against SB 1070 on May 29, 2010 nor the 2012 Justice General Assembly would have been possible without the support and contributions of groups like Puente, the National Day Labor Organizing Network, Somos America, and others. Some of these groups have no religious affiliations, whereas others are affiliated with Catholic or Protestant denominations. If these groups felt it were necessary to agree on a theological model of human rights before committing to the work, neither of these events would have ever been held. Use of a theologically minimalist, consensus-based set of human rights allowed these groups to work together toward a useful end result.

Much of the discussion about how to achieve immigration justice in individual communities and congregations is based on the expectation of diversity and a need for consensus. In Rev. Holder and Groot’s 2012 presentation on using the Beloved Community Paradigm, the method of creating (and the overall purpose of) immigration reform is right relationship, communicating effectively and respectfully with other people. Holder specifically names Arizona's Sheriff Arpaio and Governor Brewer, who are often framed as enemies of immigration justice, as people with whom UUs should strive to be in right relationship. Although Holder frames her discussion of right relationship with Unitarian Universalist Principles, it is a method that has been adopted by a variety of secular and religious organizations, which implies that it does not require a universal, theologically maximalist framework in order to function successfully. Instead, its ability to be integrated into a variety of diverse worldviews strengthens its value. Dr. Mark A. Hick's *Building the World We Dream*
About curriculum represents a similar strategy. The curriculum itself is framed in Unitarian Universalist theology, but it is designed to be used by individuals and groups from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to develop communication and mutual understanding across dividing lines. The curriculum is adaptable and may be used successfully regardless of whether its original Unitarian Universalist theological framework is kept intact.

Although consensus-based approaches to human rights are valuable in allowing groups to achieve social justice goals successfully despite what are sometimes deep and pervasive cultural and religious differences, Kao does not find this theologically minimalist framework to be a thoroughly convincing grounding for human rights. She specifically cites the practices of slavery and torture and the restrictions on religious freedoms and women's rights that have historically been grounded in social norms generated by consensus, although it was consensus arrived at through unfair means. Additionally, there is the widespread contemporary issue of human rights treaties being created by a fair process of consensus, but not being ratified or signed by sovereign states, which has the effect of practically invalidating them.

Kao's Minimalist-Maximalist Compromise and Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Work

For these reasons among others, Kao argues that a successful, minimally theological approach to human rights must still be based in some general, universally-shared understanding of why those rights are important. Instead of proposing a position that is either entirely maximalist or minimalist, she proposes a compromise approach which is “premised on an underlying commitment to the real moral worth of human beings.”

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68 Ibid, 153.
rights justification relies on three assertions. First, human rights production must be dependent on a mindful, essentialist concept of the human being, allowing theorists and activists to retain some agreed-upon understanding of what human beings are or what human beings can or should be able to do in the world. This does not have to be based in a specific religious or philosophical worldview, though of course it may be. Second, human rights must be embedded within an “ethically realistic framework.” As in the theologically maximalist approaches, Kao leans toward an understanding of human rights based in a moral imperative toward human worth and equality, as opposed to the political necessity of the minimalist approaches. Finally, Kao writes, “I see no reason why we could not combine a minimalist-leaning strategy with a maximalist-inspired commitment to realism.” For Kao, controversy could be minimized by promoting the primary values of inherent human worth and dignity, but allowing individual groups and cultures to frame the need for those values in whatever way is most appropriate to their local contexts.

The Unitarian Universalist approach to immigration justice provides a good example of a human rights approach that is similar to Kao's compromised approach. UUs are a culturally and theologically diverse group of people who agree not only on a set of human rights norms which include the value of inherent human worth and dignity (the Seven Principles) but also on why those norms matter in a general sense. However, as we saw above, UUs are still able to promote a range of more theologically maximalist justifications in their work toward immigration justice. These flexible theological approaches allow Unitarian Universalist conceptualizations of social justice to be distributed by secular and religious groups alike, and to encourage the diversity and plurality so valued by UU congregations and leaders. Finally, Unitarian Universalists often enact, as Kao says, “minimalist-leaning” practical strategies while maintaining “a maximalist-inspired

69 Ibid, 155.
commitment to realism.” As we saw above, UU human rights theory tends to be grounded in a maximalist framing of UU theology, while their efforts at social justice on the ground are much more theologically minimalistic. Categorizing Unitarian Universalist approaches to immigration justice using Kao's descriptions of theologically maximalist and minimalist positions allows for a clearer understanding of the complexity, and occasionally the contradiction, of the Unitarian Universalist approach to human rights work.

Thinking about how Kao's compromised approach to human rights functions in relation to Unitarian Universalist immigration justice work also offers us a way to test its strength in real-life, practical situations. UU social justice work provides some evidence that a minimalist-maximalist compromise approach can work very well on the ground for certain groups, and perhaps especially for smaller, diverse religious groups like Unitarian Universalism. However, the compromise approach is probably not convincing to larger religious groups whose members share more theologically-unified worldviews. There, the maximalist approach would better offer religious groups a way to funnel the energy of their spiritual commitments into performance of their social justice work, supported by their larger numbers and relative lack of diversity. Kao's compromise would call on them to be satisfied with the practical good they would create through social justice work, instead of embedding that work in a larger theological context. Frankly, I think many religious individuals would find the compromise approach emotionally unsatisfying, and so would stand to gain little from implementing a more minimalist approach.

Similarly, smaller or more diverse non-religious groups would have nothing to gain from implementing a theologically maximalist approach, whereas the minimalist approach offers the best opportunity for the development of social justice across the lines of culture, ethnicity, gender, etc. Some secular liberal groups like transnational feminists may feel that even Kao's
minimalism is too maximalist, as it requires an essentialist definition of “human” to function. Many feminist human rights workers are less interested in agreeing upon a theoretical definition of “human” and more interested in responding to human rights abuses in their own communities as they occur. In that sense, it is unlikely that Kao’s compromise approach would be successful in converting either maximalists or minimalists who already feel well-served by their respective approaches. However, as the compromise approach is clearly useful to some groups like UUs, it seems valuable as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, the other theologically minimalist and maximalist approaches Kao has surveyed. Multiple theological approaches to human rights are necessary because there is not one approach that will work for all groups.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated how the Unitarian Universalist approach to immigration justice reflects their theological framing of human rights and what it means to be human. I have argued that the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism contain assumptions about human rights and what “human” means that are similar to those found in some secular treaties and conventions. However, the ways that Unitarian Universalists frame human rights and social justice theologically are equally drawn from their heritage of American Protestantism. These multiple influences expose a deep tension between the Unitarian Universalist interest in maintaining a mostly-secular rhetoric of support for human difference and diversity, and their attempt to uphold a theologically based, universal definition of human as being related to some form of transcendent divinity. Based on UU rhetoric in the 2010 and 2012 General Assemblies and Kao’s delineation of theologically maximalist and minimalistic approaches to human rights, I have argued that the Unitarian Universalist approach toward immigration justice represents a
combination of theological positions reflective of these deep tensions: a theologically maximalist theoretical stance on human rights combined with a theologically minimalist practical approach.

Categorizing the Unitarian Universalist approach to human rights work within Kao's framework of theological maximalism and minimalism allows us to recognize several possible applications of the combination model Kao promotes, as well as to identify areas for further study in the future. First, the combination model used by Unitarian Universalist immigration justice initiatives has been successful in allowing religious and secular groups to work together toward the same goals. Combining a theologically maximalist human rights theory with a theologically minimalist practical approach has allowed UUs to network with outside groups like the National Day Laborers Organizing Network and Puente to combine resources, achieving success that they could not have achieved on their own. Some other religious organizations interested in furthering human rights may be interested in adopting this flexible approach, reframed to support their own theological values. Indeed, further comparative studies on how common this combination approach is among other UU social justice initiatives besides immigration justice, and how their methods differ from those of other liberal religious groups pursuing social justice, would be useful.

On a larger scale, the combination model proposed by Kao and used by Unitarian Universalists is useful in considering how international human rights norms set out in treaties and legislation translate into local contexts, and how religious groups can help to disperse those norms into their own communities. As we have seen, theologically maximalist understandings of human rights often seem more convincing than the theologically minimalist frames advanced by secular organizations. Religious groups can pick up where secular treaties and international legislation leave off by reframing theologically minimalist rhetoric into theologically maximalist
systems, providing individuals and communities with stronger justifications and energy for human rights work.

The Unitarian Universalist combination approach to immigration justice illustrates that diverse groups do not necessarily need to agree on a specific underlying theory of human rights in order to propagate them successfully. We saw that Unitarian Universalists, a relatively small and only moderately diverse religious group, struggle to remain unified in working against human rights violations even though their central document, the Seven Principles, can itself be read as a theory of human rights. The dual backgrounds of American Protestantism and secular humanism influencing UU have resulted in competing definitions of “human” and multiple, complex theological frameworks of human rights. Despite this, UUs have managed to overcome many challenges to pursue their theological vision of world peace and justice. This is due in large part to their flexibility and willingness to combine theologically maximalist and minimalist approaches as necessary to complete their work.

This study on the theological framing of UU social justice work may have further implications for scholars of religion and human rights. The Unitarian Universalist case demonstrates that a theological grounding may not be necessary to the success of the international human rights project, but it can provide a powerful motivator for individuals and religious groups. UUs may not need their theological frameworks in order to successfully promote social justice initiatives on the local, practical level, but those frames provide a sense of unifying identity and purpose that might otherwise be missing. Indeed, it seems a pity not to take advantage of the energy that theological motivations can provide. Additionally, the UU iteration of a maximalist theological frame adds a complexity to the debate over whether theological maximalism has the effect of denying pluralism and diversity, as some feminist human rights
theory claims. UUs have managed to create a system in which minimalist and maximalist approaches each reign over a certain theoretical space, and are dropped and picked back up again as they are each needed. Although some thoroughly maximalist approaches may interfere with prioritizing human diversity, the combination approaches seem to leave more room for plurality.

Finally, this thesis is valuable to scholars of religion and immigration in the U.S. by providing a case study of the efforts of one religious community to work toward just immigration policies on the community and national levels. The intensity of the debate over immigration in the United States has caused the production of an incredible amount of data on human rights abuses from people of all theological and demographic backgrounds. This data needs to be studied and interpreted in order for us to build a more holistic understanding of the historical and theological roots of the immigration debate. There is an opportunity for comparative studies with other groups, especially as the concern over immigration grows in the U.S. and other parts of the world.

The processes by which human rights are conceptualized, framed and propagated are tremendously important. Human rights are constantly evolving in response to world events, and the final outcome of this evolution concerns all of us. We cannot afford to ignore the various forms of social justice work produced by religious organizations, the ways in which that work is framed theologically, or how it relates to the global production of human rights norms. The stakes are simply too high.
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