

Unitarian Churches in the British Isles

BY

W. Copeland Bowie

British & Foreign Unitarian Association

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UNITARIAN CHURCHES IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND ¹

I HAVE been invited to give a brief account of the number, organization, and condition of Unitarian Churches in Great Britain and Ireland. Had I been addressing an audience of Unitarians in England, objection might have been taken to the title of the paper, for there are some Unitarians who have a deeply-rooted antipathy to calling their churches by the name which fitly enough describes their worship. The late Dr. Martineau, a robust Unitarian, in a speech at Leeds in 1888, rhetorically said that a Unitarian, who designated his church by his own name, was 'a traitor to his spiritual ancestry.' But no Unitarian who does this (and a great

¹ A Paper read at the International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers, Geneva, 29 August, 1905.

many do) feels in the least like a traitor to any principle of liberty or progress. The distinction has its meaning and value, but its discussion is academic, usually barren, and to one unacquainted with traditional Unitarianism not a little perplexing. The etymology of words carries us only a short way in reaching their real implication. The word 'Unitarian,' first used in English literature in 1687, has passed through various changes in its meaning and application. It has become enlarged and ennobled in its use. In recent years a worse fate has befallen the word 'Free'; for the nonconforming Evangelical denominations in England have applied it to churches and societies from which Unitarians are rigorously excluded. This renders the continued use of our distinctive name not only necessary but useful.

'Churches free in their constitution and open to the laws of natural change'—that is what most of us mean nowadays when we speak of Unitarian Churches in England. At the annual meeting of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, held in

June, 1905, a resolution was adopted unanimously, in which it was laid down that the only way to safeguard the truths of the Christian religion is steadfastly to adhere to the principle of non-subscription to creeds and formularies, so that no restriction may be imposed on the liberty of a congregation to change its opinions with regard to religious doctrines or modes of regulating worship. This principle of non-subscription to creeds is the key to the meaning of the Unitarian movement in Great Britain and Ireland; and, amid many changes and much diversity of opinion, this principle gives unity to its history.

Unitarians at the present time hold divergent views on many questions, and yet they are probably fundamentally more at one than any other denomination. If you attended regularly the Sunday services in any one of the 364 places of worship whose names appear in the Essex Hall Year-Book for 1905, you would discover, among other things, an entire absence of certain doctrines upon which the great

churches of Christendom continue to place emphasis. The doctrines of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Atonement, the Infallibility of the Bible, Eternal Torments, and other orthodox beliefs, would not be mentioned, except by way of disputing their truth or rejecting their validity. Incarnation and Revelation would be proclaimed not as partial but as universal truths. Articles of faith, confessions, creeds, and priestly rites would be treated as of small moment; the worship which is in spirit and in truth would be held to be supreme. The development of character would be insisted upon, and the good and simple life presented as the ideal for this world and a fitting preparation for the next. Truth, goodness, and justice would have no barriers placed in their way; nor would science, criticism, and evolution have any terrors for the worshippers. Unitarian Churches, if they are true to their principles and to their traditions, welcome every fresh gleam of truth and right revealed by God to the human mind and conscience, and seek to cultivate the natural pieties of the

soul which never grow old. They are free because they are Unitarian; and it may be added that some of them would probably never have become free, if they had not first become Unitarian.

ENGLAND

There are in England 285 churches, named in various ways, but now all Unitarian in their principles and worship.¹ The early history of several of them is wrapped in obscurity. Twelve, mostly of Baptist origin, place themselves before 1662, the year in which the Act of Uniformity was passed, the year also when the Unitarian John Bidle died. Twenty-three existing churches give this memorable year as the date of their birth; and to the ten following years thirty-two others belong, so that 116 of the 285 were founded before the close of the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century thirty-eight existing churches were founded, among them Essex Street Chapel, London. In 1774 Theo-

¹ By this I mean that *worship* is ascribed to God alone, not to a Trinity, or to Jesus.

philus Lindsey seceded from the Established Church of England, and opened the first avowedly Unitarian chapel in Essex Street, Strand.¹ In Lindsey's time it was a crime publicly to profess Unitarianism in England, punishable by forfeiture of citizenship and by imprisonment; in Scotland it was a capital offence. The law had not been enforced for many years, and it was repealed in 1813, when civil rights were accorded to Unitarians.² During the first half of the nineteenth century thirty-one Unitarian Churches were founded; in the second half, ninety-one; while from 1900-5 nine new movements have been started. Of course several of the older churches in town and country, owing to various causes, have disappeared; and although the total

¹ The property was sold in 1885 by order of the Charity Commission and the proceeds devoted to the erection of a Unitarian Church in Kensington, opened in 1887. Essex Street Chapel was converted into a Hall, Book-Rooms, and Offices for the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, and the Sunday School Association. Essex Hall was opened in 1886.

² The last Unitarian martyr in England was burned in 1612.

number of Unitarian places of worship at the present time is larger than at any previous period, the increase is not, I fear, keeping pace with the growth of population.

There is now no legal impediment in the way of Unitarians worshipping God as they deem truest and best. Difficulties which had arisen in connexion with some of the older churches, originally more or less orthodox, were set at rest by the Dissenters' Chapels Act of 1844, which provides that where there is no express statement in the deed of foundation as to the particular doctrines for which a church-building was to be employed, twenty-five years' usage shall be conclusive evidence of the legality of the doctrine.

It is difficult accurately to determine the number of members belonging to these 285 places of worship, as statistics are not usually kept. Several of the congregations are very small, and only a few have a membership exceeding 200. There are probably connected with these Unitarian Churches about 35,000 adults, while the 254 Sunday Schools in 1904 had

32,000 scholars, of whom 8500 were over sixteen years of age. These form only a small porportion of those holding Unitarian opinions in England: the Anglican, the Congregational, and other so-called 'orthodox' churches, contain large numbers, and there are many Unitarians who do not connect themselves with any church. I doubt whether the number of members in several of the older churches is so large to-day as it was thirty years ago. The sons and daughters of Unitarians are seldom as zealous as their parents were; and the influences which make against attendance at worship are operative in a peculiar degree among people over whom the old religious motives exert little influence. Tolerance and indifference sometimes go hand in hand. Speaking generally, it is the newer churches, and those that display some measure of propagandist zeal, which attract the largest congregations, especially if the minister be a cultivated and interesting preacher, alert and in touch with living problems of thought and life.

In respect to organization, several of the older churches in England were nominally Presbyterian, while others were avowedly Independent, but the congregational principle has prevailed (sometimes in a narrow and exclusive form) throughout their history, and is now adopted by all. There were in early days Assemblies in Lancashire London, Exeter, and elsewhere, to which some of the churches belonged, but these bodies exerted very little ecclesiastical control over individual congregations. Nowadays, so far as England is concerned, the Presbyterian name is employed by Unitarians as an expression of the undogmatic principle (orthodox Presbyterians vigorously protesting against its use in this way); and beyond this, as the Rev. Alexander Gordon observes, 'it is little more than a London court-dress in which Unitarians, since 1836, have enjoyed a privilege of separate access to the throne.'

The church property is legally held for the congregation by a small body of trustees; and usually the management of affairs is entrusted to officers and a com-

mittee elected annually by the subscribers or enrolled members. The minister in a few cases is appointed by the trustees, but generally by vote of the congregation at a duly convened meeting. His engagement may be for a fixed period, terminable by three or six months' notice on either side. The salary paid to the minister is fixed by the congregation, and varies according to its position and wealth. £750 a year is the highest salary paid at present¹ to any Unitarian minister in England, and few there be that receive so much as £500. The average salary does not exceed £200; and there are at least fifty congregations unable to pay £100 a year. There are no grants in aid from the State, but some of the older churches possess endowments, yielding in some cases a large proportion of the income. The majority of the churches, including those founded in recent years, are supported by the voluntary contributions of the members, aided by grants from local Missionary Societies, Sustentation Funds, and the British and Foreign Unitarian

¹ A few years ago £1000 was the maximum.

Association. The subscription entitling to membership is sometimes as low as one shilling a year, and occasionally as high as two guineas a year; a minimum of five shillings is the more general rule. An offertory or collection is taken at each service in about half the churches, and for special purposes on fixed days in all. Some Unitarian Churches are managed on the most thoroughgoing democratic principles; others by an oligarchy. Both methods succeed; both occasionally fail. In some churches the minister is a member of the committee; in others he is carefully excluded from all participation in the management of secular affairs.

There are sixteen district missionary societies in England with which most of the churches are loosely connected, and through the agency of which aid is given by the richer congregations to the poorer. These local societies, aided by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, originate church extension and propagandist work. There are two chief funds for the augmentation of the salaries of

ministers, and several smaller funds from which occasional grants are made. A Benevolent Society and a Pension and Insurance Fund provide for the needs of infirm and aged ministers. A national Conference of the Churches, formed in 1881, on the model of the Conference of the Unitarian Churches in America, is held every third year, and its meetings are largely attended. It possesses no ecclesiastical authority over the churches. Unitarians are exceedingly jealous of any infringement of their liberty, and are therefore the despair of the church-organizer, as the late Dr. Martineau discovered to his grief. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association, founded in 1825, is the chief national and international missionary organization of the Unitarians of Great Britain. Its income is derived from the annual subscriptions of individuals, collections by congregations, donations, and investments. The Association supports ministers, sends out missionary preachers, assists in establishing and maintaining churches, holds conferences and meetings,

publishes books, sermons, hymnals, devotional works, and tracts, controversial and practical. It is managed by a committee elected annually by the general body of subscribers. Its income and expenditure last year (1904) exceeded £8,000. The office book and assembly rooms are at Essex Hall, London. The secretary had to deal last year with upwards of 6000 letters; the book-room staff are employed in sending publications to all parts of the English-speaking world.

EDUCATION OF MINISTERS

There are three colleges at which Unitarian ministers are educated—one in Oxford, one in Manchester, and a third at Carmarthen, but their combined annual output of students is generally small. The Essex Hall Year-Book for 1905 contains the names of 364 ministers: of these about 100 were educated at the College now in Oxford, 100 at Manchester, 30 at Carmarthen, while 75 were formerly Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, or Methodists; the remainder, among whom

are several very earnest and efficient ministers, received no regular collegiate training. Congregations are free to appoint anyone they like, and their selections are occasionally a little surprising. A man who has had no special education for the ministry is sometimes preferred to one who has spent three or four years at College in Manchester, or six years at Oxford. The freedom of entrance brings into the ministry now and again meteor spirits who light up the Unitarian sky for a few moments and then disappear into the unknown. The same freedom has also attracted to the Unitarian ministry some of its ablest and brightest men.

The Unitarian Churches in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have characteristics and a history of their own, and it is necessary briefly to deal with each country.

IRELAND

In Ireland not only were the Unitarian Churches of the present day Presbyterian in the beginning, but they still remain,

with few exceptions, Presbyterian in their constitution and general management. Of the thirty-nine existing churches, thirty were originally 'orthodox'; twenty-three were founded in the seventeenth, six in the eighteenth, and ten in the nineteenth century. With the exception of Dublin and Cork, and small places in Tipperary and Derry, the congregations are confined to the counties of Antrim and Down.

The Presbyterians of the north of Ireland were mainly of Scotch descent, settlers and exiles, who in their native land had withstood Popery and refused to submit to Episcopacy. In 1726 several ministers and congregations, forming the Presbytery of Antrim, separated from the General Synod, for the purpose of maintaining Christian worship on non-subscribing principles. They were known as the 'New Lights.' In the early part of the nineteenth century, the Arian controversy raged hot and strong, culminating in the formation of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster in 1830, the members of which refused to insist on subscription to the Westminster Confession

of Faith. The Remonstrants maintained that the Bible was the only infallible rule of faith and duty, and that it was the inalienable right of every Christian to search the Scriptures for his own instruction and guidance; to form his own opinions in regard to what they teach; and to worship God agreeably to the dictates of his own conscience 'without privation, penalty, or inconvenience inflicted by his fellow-men.' Five years later the Association of Irish Non-Subscribing Presbyterians was established for the protection of its members, and the maintenance and extension of the principle of non-subscription.

For thirty or forty years onward the non-subscribing congregations in Ireland were exceedingly active and eager in the promotion of their work; they were led by able and devoted ministers; and many of the laymen exercised a deep and widespread influence upon the thought and life of the community. In more recent years there has not been much missionary activity displayed. Dr. John Campbell, in an address at the annual meeting of

the Association of Irish Non-Subscribing Presbyterians, held 20 June, 1905, said :— 'We badly want some of the old fighting instincts of our forefathers, and their determination to make their opinions felt in the world.' A few churches are largely attended, but the majority have only sparse congregations, and several are decadent. There are probably at the present time about 10,000 members and adherents holding Unitarian opinions connected with the thirty-nine non-subscribing churches in Ireland. In their theology the ministers and congregations, speaking generally, adhere more closely to what may be called primitive Christianity than their English brethren; although complaint has recently been made that emphasis is not now laid on the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ and the future consequences of sin, after the manner of the old Remonstrants.

Since 1870 there has been no State Church in Ireland. The bulk of the population is Roman Catholic. Protestantism has a very limited existence outside Ulster and Dublin.

Presbyterian Scotland has never taken kindly to Unitarian Churches, but in no other part of the British Isles, during recent years, have the faith and principles held by Unitarians made greater progress. The land which owed its theology in such large and deep measure to John Calvin, and which remained true to his teachings for a longer period than any other country in Europe, promises to become thoroughly liberal and progressive in its religious thought and life.¹ There is little danger from the United Free Church expelling from its ranks any future Professor Robertson Smith; and now that Mr. Balfour's Government has made it possible for the Established Church to relax the terms of subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith for its ministers, progress is not likely seriously to be impeded.

It is evident that for the younger Presbyterian ministers of Scotland, as well as the educated and thoughtful laity, the theology of Calvin has lost its hold,

¹ In Scottish literature this is evident; also in sermons and speeches of leading Presbyterian ministers and professors of theology in Scotland.

and is rapidly being replaced by a wider and more humane religious faith, which in its essential spirit closely resembles the teachings of Unitarians like Dr. Channing and Dr. Martineau. The sturdy character and high intelligence of the people, along with their keen inborn interest in questions of theology, the thorough and systematic education of all accredited Presbyterian ministers, the absence of creeds and fixed liturgical forms in their religious services, place Scotland in a most enviable position, and mark her out for leadership in the greater reformation proceeding in our own day. Many of her sons are eagerly devoting themselves to the task of reconciling reason and religion, criticism and faith, nature and God.

There are seven Unitarian Churches in Scotland. The date of the establishment of the oldest, in Edinburgh, is 1776: the present church was erected in 1836. There are churches in Glasgow (1810, with a second church in 1871), Aberdeen (1833), Dundee (1866, with an earlier movement in 1785), Kirkcaldy (1890). The church at

Kilmarnock, springing from the mother church of the Evangelical Union movement in Scotland, drifted into Unitarianism in 1885, under the influence of one of its ministers, but its strength departed, and it is still doubtful if it will grow into a strong centre of Unitarianism. At Paisley, Perth, and a few other towns, religious services by Unitarian ministers were held at intervals, but with no permanent result so far as the establishment of churches was concerned. Each congregation manages its own affairs, although only two are entirely self-supporting, the other five being aided by substantial grants from the McQuaker Fund. The total number of members in the seven Scotch Churches is about 1000; and the returns for 1904 show that there were 486 scholars and forty-four teachers in the Sunday Schools. There is a Unitarian Association in Scotland, but its operations and the support it receives are very limited. Apart from the efforts of the ministers and congregations, the duty of maintaining and diffusing the principles of Unitarian Christianity in Scotland is now

discharged chiefly by the Committee of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, to whom Mr. McQuaker, of Glasgow, bequeathed in 1888 a sum of nearly £30,000. The annual income of the Trust is used in supplementing the salaries of ministers of congregations, where the personal contributions of the members attest a living interest in the work; in the support of missionary preachers; in printing and circulating Unitarian literature; and in various other ways. As showing the interest taken in Unitarianism by so-called 'orthodox' ministers, students, and teachers in Scotland, it may be mentioned that a few months ago, in response to an advertisement offering certain books expository of Unitarian Christianity, five hundred applications were received in the course of a few days. It is also reported that Dr. Martineau's 'Seat of Authority in Religion'—his most radical and outspoken theological pronouncement—had a larger sale in Scotland than in any other part of the British Isles.

If I read the signs of the times aright,

the church of the future in Scotland will gradually approach more and more closely in its theology to what may be described as Christian Theism, that is to Unitarian Christianity. The churches will probably retain their own names, and follow the line of national development, ultimately to become 'Free' in a far wider and truer sense than the leaders of the Disruption of 1843 conceived.

WALES

Unitarianism in Wales, as a distinct movement, had its origin in the revolt of Jenkin Jones, of Llwynrhydowen, in 1726, against the doctrines of Calvinism. His Arminianism became Arianism in the preaching of his successors, David Lloyd and David Davis, the famous bard of Castel Hywel. Dr. Charles Lloyd and John James were the pioneers of Unitarianism at the beginning of the nineteenth century; and it has ever since kept in close touch with the Unitarianism of England and America, and has followed the same general lines of development.

There are at the present time thirty-four Unitarian Churches in Wales. Several of these churches were originally 'orthodox'; one, that of Ciliau-Aeron, has 1650 as the date of its foundation; but the majority were Unitarian from the start. They are confined to South Wales; and all except three to the counties of Cardigan and Glamorgan. It is almost the dominant sect in central Cardiganshire, to which it has imparted the name of 'The Black Spot.' The congregations have had to contend against bitter and sustained attacks from the orthodox bodies. It is estimated that the Unitarian Churches in Wales have at present about 5000 members and adherents. The Rev. W. James, of Llandyssul, to whom I am indebted for aid in preparing this brief record, says that this number would have to be multiplied by five if all those in Wales who hold or sympathize with Unitarian opinions are to be included. In twenty-five of the churches the Welsh language is employed; in nine English is spoken. There are twenty-eight Sunday Schools, with 1961

scholars and 174 teachers; 903 scholars are upwards of sixteen years of age. Each congregation manages its own affairs. There are two missionary societies—one in connexion with the Welsh-speaking congregations dating from 1802, a survival of 'The Society of Believers in the Divine Unity,' the other with the English-speaking congregations, founded in 1890. The South Wales Association publishes a monthly magazine, 'Yr Ymfynydd,' with a circulation of 1200 copies.

Several of the ministers in Wales take charge of two congregations; their salaries do not average £150 a year. Few of the congregations are wealthy, and were it not for the grants received from the Sustentation Fund it would be impossible for them to retain the services of educated ministers. Students for the ministry in Wales were, some years ago, educated mainly at the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen, an institution open to all denominations, and dating from the latter part of the seventeenth century; at the present time, many are educated along with English

students at the Unitarian Home Missionary College, Manchester, and at Manchester College, Oxford.

CONDITION OF THE CHURCHES

There is no ecclesiastical organization or priesthood which fixes the theology, or defines the work, or moulds the character of Unitarian Churches. They are made what they are by the men and women connected with them. When a strong, eager man, belonging to one of our churches or societies, tells me that he is disappointed with the poor achievements of the denomination, I immediately reply: 'Set to work yourself, lend a hand, strive to make the Unitarian body what you would have it be.' We are not lacking in candid critics. The trouble is that our critics are oblivious of the fact that responsibility for failure rests as much on themselves as on anyone else, and that they are so often smitten by paralysis when it comes to doing any work.

It is not easy, therefore, to indicate in a few words the condition of these

churches. Many of them are a strong and vivid influence for good in the towns and villages in which they are placed; some are somnolent, only dreamily conscious that they are alive. The late Charles Wicksteed, after travelling for nine years in all parts of England as a missionary minister, testified that the mere existence of a Unitarian congregation in a place exercised a marked educational influence, and insensibly enlarged the views and leavened the ideas of the neighbourhood. In Parliament, on municipal bodies, on school boards, as Poor Law guardians, as workers on behalf of social reform, Unitarians have always been represented far beyond their numerical proportion in the community. They have laid emphasis on character not on creed, and have shown a readiness to cooperate with men of all churches and of none in promoting the public good. The Domestic Missions in London, Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, and other cities, and several of the Churches and Sunday Schools, in Lancashire and Cheshire more

particularly, are hives of industry, and centres of an uplifting moral and religious life.

On the practical side of religion there are few who would question the earnestness and strength of Unitarians; on the devotional side they are sometimes represented as defective. There may be a degree of truth in the complaint; and yet you will find among the older Unitarian families of England beautiful examples of reverent trust, of strong tender piety. It is a type peculiarly Unitarian: calm, self-contained, unobtrusive, optimistic, thinking no evil—a type which may be a little out of touch with present-day thought and life, but its passing away will leave the world poorer.

In theology there have been many and deep changes, and the end is not yet. It is sometimes said that if the Unitarians of a century ago had found the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly taught in the Bible, they would have believed it. I have my doubts about this. Their rationalism would have discovered some other way out

of the difficulty. To-day, Biblical perplexities have no disturbing influence upon Unitarians. The method, spirit, and results of modern criticism are accepted, and produce no alarm. Conceptions of the person and mission of Christ open a wider field of difference. Some ministers and congregations hold opinions and employ language concerning Jesus which others have abandoned. The Communion, or Lord's Supper Service, is observed in the majority of the churches, but only a small proportion of the members participate. The rite of infant baptism is generally, but not universally, observed among Unitarians : a few General Baptist Churches, holding Unitarian views, adhere to adult baptism, at least in theory.

What the future of these Unitarian Churches will be, no one can tell. I do not even venture to prophesy. I do not know that the problem need disturb us, for each succeeding generation has a way of settling its own questions and providing for its own needs. But of this I am convinced, that our country would be

benefited if there were more of these churches ; and if those that already exist could renew their strength. Many of them have done heroic service on behalf of civil and religious liberty ; they have helped to cleanse and sweeten public and private life ; they have brought the inspiration and joy of faith and hope and love to many perplexed and troubled souls ; they have made the thoughts and emotions which centre round the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man more vivid and real ; they have sought to infuse into the thought and life of men the strength and tenderness of a reasonable religion.

A NEW RELIGION COMING

Dr. C. W. Eliot, formerly President of Harvard, in addressing the Summer School of Theology in 1909, said :—

RELIGION is not fixed, but fluent—changing from century to century. A new religion is coming, not based on authority either spiritual or temporal; for the present generation, while willing to be led, will not be driven. In the new religion there will be no personification of natural objects or deification of remarkable human beings. Faith will be not racial nor tribal. A new thought of God will be characteristic of the new religion, which will be thoroughly monotheistic. God to his creatures will be so immanent that no intermediary will be needed. God will be to every man the multiplication of infinities.

With a humane and worthy idea of God as the central thought of the new religion, creed, dogma, and mystery will disappear. Its priests will strive to im-

prove the social and industrial conditions. The new religion will not attempt to reconcile people to present ills by promising future compensations. I believe the advent of a just freedom for mankind has been delayed for centuries by such promises. Prevention will be the watchword of the new religion, and the skilful surgeon will be one of its ministers. It cannot supply consolation, as did the old religions, but it will reduce the need for consolation. It may be difficult to unite the world's various religions under this new head, but I believe it can be accomplished on the basis of love of God and service to one's fellow man.

OUR UNITARIAN FAITH

*The Fatherhood of God
The Brotherhood of Man
The Leadership of Jesus
Salvation by Character
The Progress of Mankind
onward and upward forever.*

OUR UNITARIAN WORSHIP

☞ In the love of the truth, and the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man.

THE NAME 'UNITARIAN'

Rev. H. M. Simmons, U.S.A., speaking of modern Unitarians, said:—

We hold the name 'Unitarian' in no narrower sense than that of a movement to UNITE the best spirit and method of all denominations in a peace that might be universal. Unitarian is etymologically opposed to sectarian. Its root and fundamental idea is unity. We are turning to the root of the word in which its historical meaning and real spirit lie: we proclaim our faith in unity—the unity of religion in righteousness, the unity of men with each other and with nature, and the unity of all in God.

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