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CHRISTIANITY
AND THE
TWENTIETH
CENTURY

by

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It is well known that we are in the midst of a vast movement of change in religious thought and life, a movement of mingled construction and destruction, whose beginnings, if we can date them at all, are from the Reformation, and whose end no man living can foresee.

(i) *Authority and Spiritual Freedom*

Four centuries ago the Church Catholic had spread out her arms to clasp, if it might be, the entire world in her embrace. There was no part of human life from the cradle to the grave which she did not control and direct. Her power was the result of long ages of gradual growth, and it had taken a firm hold both of the heart and the intellect of man. The essential characteristic of the Church was the note of the Absolute and the Eternal sounding through her dogmas, her ordinances, her ritual. In this spirit she set herself to crush the slightest dissent from her doctrines, the least sign of resistance to her authority.

Then the spirit of the Modernists of old time broke loose from the tombs their disciples had built for them; but, more than in an earlier age, it impelled them to destroy as it inspired them to create. Luther in Germany, and Calvin in Geneva, and Knox in Scotland, and the Sozzini in Italy, and others elsewhere, arose and declared that there was no more help in the Saints, that the Pope was Antichrist, and the Catholic Church full of corruption and wickedness. Such words were often uttered with wrath and bitterness, and to many a tender heart, many a pure conscience, seemed horrible blasphemies. But the abuses of the Papal system were many and were confessed; and the mind of man could not remain for ever in leading-strings to the Pope and his emissaries.

In place of the Church, the Reformers pointed to the Book. Here is the paradox of historic Protestantism. Assuming that the Bible throughout not only contains, but is, the Word of God written, Protestantism initiated an era where in one genera-

tion creeds were produced which, in the voluminousness and minuteness of their dogmatism, exceeded all that the ancient Church had done in the first three hundred years of its life. At the same time, Protestantism recognized that the preservation of historic continuity and corporate unity may be too dearly bought; since all the historic abuses of ecclesiasticism may defend themselves under this plea.

In setting conscience free from servitude to the Church, Protestantism turned religion back on its sources in the soul. And in setting reason free to move in religious things within the limits of the Word, it forced to the front the further question of what those limits are, and prepared the way for another reformation, quite equal in importance to the former one, though not attended with so many dramatic circumstances: a reformation which has completely undermined the authority of the Bible as an infallible rule of faith and life.

If, then, there is no infallible Church to which to appeal in all matters of human controversy, if there is no infallible Book to guide us in all matters of belief and conduct and tell us with authoritative voice what we must believe and what we must do, what remains? Only this: as James Martineau contended in his last great work, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, we must throw ourselves back upon the Reason and Conscience of Mankind as the only sure path to Truth and to God.

Unitarian thought has been deeply involved in this transforming change. Heretical opinion on the subject of the Trinity, in the various shapes which it took in the sixteenth century, simply represented a thorough-going appeal to the Bible as against ecclesiastical authority. The early Unitarians took their stand on the written word. Their conflict with their opponents was not over the authority but the interpretation of Scripture. Their anti-Trinitarianism and other apparent negations really rested upon and grew out of a great positive affirmation, that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the supreme and sufficient rule of faith and life; and therefore they rejected theological doctrines which they did not find in the Bible or which were inconsistent with the character of God as revealed therein. The Bible is still with us: no longer an infallible rule, but a unique instrument of religious instruction and inspiration, with the effective working value naturally

belonging to a literature moulded by the powerful religious genius of Hebrew lawgivers and prophets and primitive Christian apostles. We can no longer use the Bible as our forefathers did; but when they took their stand upon the written Word, they read it with entire mental and spiritual independence in the light of Reason and Conscience alone. That is our spiritual heritage; but to-day it compels us to seek for the things of God not only within the pages even of the best and broadest of books.

(ii) *The Dogmas of the Past*

How, then, in the light of this sacred heritage of spiritual freedom, may we deal with the past? There are some who love the past, because it is ancient, and who find in the traditions and practices of the historic Christian Churches a mine of wealth whence we may draw, not fetters for the spirit, but precious symbols of spiritual realities. No wise man will neglect the testimony and experience of the past. Consider the work of the great apostle of the nations, Paul of Tarsus. He took every account of the past; but how? He read it in the light of his own life, and the life of his own people. He mingled it with his own original dreams, experiences, reflections—passed it through the fire of his own personality; and then gave it forth. The ideal of true progressive thought makes a great demand upon us. We have to preach the truth as it is in ourselves; not breaking with the past, but showing that in ourselves its force has been regenerated, recreated, redirected, made fruitful for the life the world is living now.

The root of the matter is this. Formerly the sources of religion were not only separated from human life, but regarded as being outside the utmost range of humanity, and were found in infallible persons and infallible books; but now the sources of religion are sought for in human life itself. The presentation of religion is now subject to all the uncertainties that belong to life, with its multitudinous variety, its illimitable possibilities, its unscaled heights and unsounded depths. Here in this manifold of human life, and here alone, are we to find our answer to the continual cry of the human heart—"Show us the Father." The desire of all the ages is concentrated in those words. We would see the Father at work; see in the blind

struggles of men his eternal judgments, in man's persistent effort after wider truth his revealing wisdom, in man's ever-renewed devotion and loyalty to good his redeeming love. We would see him through the mighty and majestic order of nature, so as to be able to say, "I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee."

An Anglican theologian of the "Modernist" school has said that the task of Christian thinkers consists in "the application of criticism to the ancient dogmas in order to disengage their vital principle, and prepare for this vital principle a new expression"—in setting free their living principle from the decaying form in which it is enclosed, and preparing for it new forms in harmony with modern culture. With this he contrasted the attitude of the modern Unitarian, who is supposed to apply to dogma only the solvent power of a destructive criticism. The question then is, Does Unitarianism, as a matter of method, theory, and principle, necessarily imply this attitude to the traditional dogmas of the Christian Church? I answer that it does not. It is true that much evidence might be produced apparently in favour of such statements; but those who are in touch with the actual facts can see that their significance is other than what it appears to be.

The attitude of mere denial is not usually the expression of a general theory about the history of Christian dogma. The reaction against traditional dogmas in their rigid orthodox form is often a reaction against personal experience of their insufficiency for life and their conflict with conscience, reason, and knowledge; and perhaps more often against experience of personal bigotry and intolerance on the part of orthodox men. I need not dwell on these things. No man knows the full extent of the indifference, infidelity, atheism, which has been directly created and promoted by that narrow-heartedness of the bigot which makes his very sincerity hateful.

As to the historic aspect of the question, we may say with Phillips Brooks that "it is not conceivable that any Council, however constituted, should so pronounce on truth that its decrees should have any weight with thinking men save what might seem legitimately to belong to the character and wisdom of the persons who composed the Council; personal judgment is on the throne, and will remain there—personal judgment,

enlightened by all the wisdom, past and present, which it can summon to its aid, but forming finally its own conclusions, and standing by them in the sight of God, whether it stands in a great company or stands alone."

(iii) *A Twofold Tradition*

Unitarian Christianity, therefore cannot be traced to any single teacher or any specific date. It had its sources in the thoughts of many minds in many lands. But the fundamental condition in every case was the same: the *circulation of the Bible in the vernacular*. Official Protestantism rejected the authority of the Church of Rome; but it read the Bible in the light of the ancient creeds; and bigotry and intolerance were not exorcised at the Reformation. The first religious reactions against traditional ecclesiastical dogma took shape among men and women who insisted on reading the Bible in the light of reason and conscience alone. The historical affiliation of Unitarian Christianity with the free study and interpretation of the Bible can be traced both in England and America.

Events in the religious world in England in the seventeenth century afford a convenient illustration. For several generations the independent study of the Bible had been a source of many "heresies," which at length threatened to destroy the whole ecclesiastical order of the National Church, doctrinal, governmental, and ceremonial. To silence these conflicts, the "Act of Uniformity" was passed and became law in May, 1662.

In addition to the imposition of Episcopal Ordination, this Act insisted on Assent and Consent to everything contained in and prescribed by the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The Prayer Book itself had been hastily revised, immediately before the passing of the Act, and many of the six hundred alterations made appear to have been devised with the express purpose of driving the Puritans out. The result was that over two thousand beneficed clergymen and a number of endowed schoolmasters were deprived of their livings. By far the most famous among them was Richard Baxter, who represents the spirit of the Ejected at its best. He stood for pure Christianity against sects and parties. He adopted an ancient maxim: "In things essential, unity; in things not essential, liberty; in all things charity." He had indeed no idea of complete toleration.

Socinians and Papists were regarded by him as "intolerable." But his outlook widened. His intellectual keenness, honesty, and self-criticism, his desire for comprehension, his recognition of degrees of certainty, and of the difference between essentials and non-essentials all led further, and went on working after his death. He stood for the attempt to *find a basis of agreement by reducing the number of essentials and fundamentals*; and this was the first step on a great adventure. In Baxter and all the best of the ejected ministers there were germs of enlightened conviction, which time and experience have since fructified to greater issues than were dreamt of in their day.

They were called "Presbyterian," but the name has no proper application to them. Baxter used it mostly as a vague negative term meaning "non-episcopalian." By many others it was often used as a political rather than an ecclesiastical designation: "Exit Jack Presbyterian," wrote a courtly Anglican after the Act of 1662. The ejected ministers were essentially Puritans, but Puritans at their best. On the other hand, they are not to be confused with the Independents, who, agreeing largely with them in religious belief, voluntarily stood aloof from any National Church, and who are represented, in essentials, by the first Puritan settlers in New England. The "Presbyterians" were excluded from the National Church by the setting up of new, arbitrary, and tyrannical terms of conformity. Eventually they made common cause with the Independents, but this was due to circumstances of a later date.

Among the various influences forming the tradition of Unitarian Christianity there are two which stand out as equally characteristic, distinctive and essential: the demand for *personal spiritual freedom*, and the demand for *clear, definite, and coherent religious thought and teaching*. The demand for personal spiritual freedom, so far as England is concerned, can be traced directly to the great upheaval of 1662. Indeed the actual history of a considerable number of Unitarian Churches in England is linked to the passing of the Act of Uniformity. But in order to create these Churches, it was necessary for another tributary stream to bring another influence into the main current of the river: leading to the demand for clear, definite, and coherent religious thought and teaching.

Many of the ejected clergy were hopeful that the National

Church might become comprehensive enough to include them once more. But some of them in the exercise of their freedom and independence were giving up their allegiance to the ancient creeds. They were coming to regard "the Trinitarian scheme" as a corruption of primitive Christianity. By "the Trinitarian scheme" they meant not only the doctrine of the Deity of Christ, but the whole "Scheme of Salvation" and the doctrines on which it rested—Original Sin, Eternal Punishment, and Vicarious Atonement. They perceived the harm that was being done to Christianity by the orthodox theology still maintained in the great bodies around them; and this prepared the way for a more human Christ, for a more rational view of the Bible, and for a larger hope of salvation for all mankind. Meanwhile, whether they spoke or remained quiet, their views were attacked, and they were excluded from Christian fellowship.

The demand for *lucid and definite religious thought and teaching* took shape under these circumstances during the course of the eighteenth century, and gained in strength towards its close. It came from the minds of men who had been influenced by the almost too logical and sharply reasoned theology of the famous Polish Unitarian thinkers. There were many among the Liberal Dissenters who felt the need for a definite and coherent theology plainly stated. The powerful advocacy of Unitarian Christianity by Joseph Priestley, himself brought up as an Independent, and the withdrawal of Theophilus Lindsey from the Church of England to establish a Unitarian Church in London (Essex Street, 1774), aroused the Liberal Dissenters to consider their position, and to a large extent they found that they had grown into Unitarian Christianity. The pamphlets and letters of the time show a deep sense of the duty to make their convictions known.

(iv) *The Essential and the Non-essential*

These historical observations indicate the most concrete and fruitful way of dealing with the question of what Unitarian Christianity means to-day. We must, for the moment, disregard the denominational or institutional side of the question, and concentrate on the meaning of Unitarian Christianity as a system or method of belief.

It is evidently useless to attempt to answer the question by naming some principle which is held or professed by every type of Christian thought. If we say, for instance, that "Unitarianism stands for belief in God," we have failed to distinguish it from any monotheistic religious system, Christian or non-Christian. We must therefore make the question more precise. What is *distinctive* of Unitarianism as a system or method of belief? Several things might be named as distinctive, but which of these is the most important, the most central and fundamental? What we are asking for, I repeat, is something which distinguishes Unitarian Christianity from other types of Christianity.

The distinctive factor may be something held by Unitarians and denied by Christendom at large, or vice versa; or it may be some great belief or principle of religious faith which is at least professed by Christendom at large, and also held by Unitarians: but by them placed relatively to other principles and problems of faith in a position different from that in which most Churches place it.

This second possibility proves to be the reality. Unitarians take the time-honoured distinction between the essential and the non-essential, and apply it to the problems of faith so radically and thoroughly as to create a distinctive outlook on religion. The non-essential is not necessarily false: it is not despised or rejected: it is to be understood, valued, used—for what it is worth; but it is never to be used as the essential is used. A creed-bound type of Christianity is not free to do this, unless the creeds are treated so freely that they cease to be a real bond of union and cease to give any indication of the real beliefs held by the members of the Churches where these creeds are professed.

Here we begin to see the positive meaning of Unitarian freedom. *It enables us to lay the emphasis upon the essential things.* The expression seems commonplace. And yet, "emphasis" is of absolute importance in the practical affairs of life. Indeed, systematic lying on a vast scale could be carried out by simply emphasizing some truths to the neglect of others; while, on the other hand, the deepest and most helpful truths can be made effective by an emphasis in the right direction. Emphasis makes all the difference between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, sanity and madness.

(v) *What are the Essentials?*

The very essence of the Unitarian gospel, the foundation on which the whole structure is built, the binding force which alone gives it whatever cohesion it possesses, is the Fatherhood of God. The Fatherhood of God: not as an object of lip-service, not as a comfortable generalization to be listened to, or a vague theme of merely emotional assent; but as a great Ideal, whose meaning demands realization alike in personal, social, national, and international life: carrying with it, spiritually and even logically, the Divine Sonship and Brotherhood of Man—and this, once more, not merely as a Truth to be assented to, but as an Ideal to be realized, a task to be achieved.

The great thing needed for our deliverance is that our divine sonship shall be to us not only a truth to be acknowledged, but a reality to be enjoyed. This is the heart of vital religion. But this contact with God—which for want of a better word I have thus called "enjoyment"—though it is necessarily individualized, can be no exclusive possession. It must be continuous, pervasive, purposive. Continuous: it is not to be found in any mere moments of ecstasy. Pervasive: there is no place where God can be left out; in buying and selling, something in what you give or receive is part of the price of a human soul; and to neglect that is to leave God out. Purposive: it must have an object—the moral transformation of the world by means of the transformation of individuals. Whatever else it may be, this is no cheap and easy gospel. None the less, we affirm that it is the first among the essential things.

It is a gospel which prompts our rational nature to raise questions, theological, philosophical, even speculative. To these questions, some of the greatest minds of our race have devoted earnest thought; and the historic creeds of Christendom offer answers. Neither the questions nor the answers are to be despised or neglected; but they belong to the non-essentials. They are to be understood, valued, used—for what they are worth; but never to be used as the essential thing is used. And to use them to divide and exclude from one another men who are at one in the essential thing is to sin against the light.

This Gospel of the Fatherhood of God is essential Chris-

tianity. It is the essence of the Galilean Gospel. Jesus of Nazareth, so far as our knowledge goes, first made of the Fatherhood of God not merely an idea but a force in life. It is the influence of his personality and teaching that makes the New Testament to-day the richest mine of moral inspiration and insight that has been given to the world.

In confessing the ideals which are central in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, we acknowledge his leadership. But the philosophical interpretation of what that leadership implies in reference to his personality—and it is this kind of interpretation which largely occupies the historic creeds of Christendom—this, we affirm, is for religion not primary but secondary.

“What think ye of Christ?” The question was never more vital than it is to-day. A typical Unitarian answer is given in the words of Theodore Parker’s hymn:

O thou great Friend to all the sons of men
Who once appeared in humblest guise below,
Sin to rebuke, to break the captive’s chain,
And call thy brethren forth from want and woe,

We look to thee: thy Truth is still the Light
Which guides the nations, groping on their way,
Stumbling and falling in disastrous night,
Yet hoping ever for the perfect day.

Yes, thou art still the Life; thou art the Way
The holiest know: Light, Life and Way of heaven;
And they who dearest hope, and deepest pray,
Toil by the Light, Life, Way, which thou hast given.

This is a confession of the religious value of Jesus; it is an acknowledgment of his leadership. But a Christology as a formed and fixed theological conception, as it were a *definition* of the personality and power of Jesus, is a conception of another kind. It raises questions of history, psychology, philosophy. It shares the imperfection of all human definitions. It cannot belong to the things which are for religion essential.

(vi) *Was the Word “made Flesh”?*

This brings us directly to the doctrine of the Incarnation. The doctrine of the Incarnation, as held by modern Evangelical

Christians, is expressed in the Pauline phrase, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,” and from this point of view a serious criticism is brought against Unitarian Christianity. The following is a typical statement:

“The Unitarian conception of Christ is one which, if adopted by Christians generally, would enormously lower the vitality and saving power of the Church. . . . Whenever and wherever the Christian Church has made little of Jesus Christ, it has failed as a saving power. Whenever and wherever the Christian Church has made much of Him, it has been vital and vigorous.”

These are serious statements, and must be brought to the bar of logic and fact. Unfortunately, the meaning of the most important words, on which their force depends, is left in doubt. What is the “Unitarian valuation of Christ” which is thus destructive of moral and spiritual energy? What is meant by “making much” of Jesus or “making little” of him? What is meant by “saving power”? During the half century now past, events have taken place which will not soon be forgotten; and the Church, which for twenty centuries has placed the Pauline phrase or its equivalent in the forefront of her teaching, was no more capable of influencing the course of events than a cork floating on the waves could divert the currents that carry it. The impotence of the Church is an astounding fact in the modern world. Is this because “much” or “little” has been “made” of Christ?

After explaining that there is not a vast gulf between the Divine nature and human nature; that God and man are akin; that God reveals himself to man not through the abnormal but through the normal (“with the eye of faith He is seen . . . supremely in human personality”), the author stated that “it is these convictions which lead the Modernist to believe in a perfectly human and non-miraculous Christ, but yet a Christ no less truly Divine. And the Modernist holds that in the light of historical and scientific research this Gospel of the Divine Humanity is not only more credible to the modern mind, but presents a more adequate conception of the Incarnation than does the mediæval view.”

Such statements are closely akin to characteristic utterances of the leading Unitarian thinkers of England and of America.

Martineau's attitude is specially noteworthy; because while these principles evidently appealed to him and seemed to him to be of real religious importance, they fall into the background in his technical philosophical treatises. None the less he repeatedly dwells on them in letters to friends; they are many times set forth in the *Seat of Authority*, especially in the great central chapter on "Natural and Revealed Religion"; and in his ninetieth year were repeated once more, in a plea for the extension of the Incarnation idea from the *person of Christ* to the *nature of man*.

It may be urged that the very word Incarnation is an awkward Latinism, that no corresponding word is used by the Greek Fathers, and that the religious truths which are involved could be better expressed by avoiding the word altogether. The reply is that we are not limited to the use of that particular word to express the idea. Martineau, for example, did not often use it. He perceived, of course, that the same thought could be expressed in different ways; thus:

"I can find no rest in any view of Revelation short of that which pervades the Fourth Gospel . . . that it is an appearance, to beings who have something of the divine Spirit within them, of a yet diviner without them, leading them to the divinest of all, which embraces them both."

Whether we speak of "the universal incarnation"; or whether—with Justin the Martyr in the second century and James Martineau in the nineteenth—we speak of the Divine Word sown as a Seed of Life within the intellect and heart of mankind; or whether—in more familiar words—we speak of the universality and inspiring power of God's Holy Spirit, we are clothing in different forms of language one and the same great thought. To bind this thought down to any single verbal expression of it or any limitation of its meaning is to sin against the light. What the world needs is that the central thought itself shall be realized in mind and spirit and made a power in life.

The "worship of Jesus" is a difficult subject to handle, because "worship" may mean various and very different things. It may mean liturgical adoration of Christ in public worship, and petitionary prayer addressed to him. Unitarians

believe that such worship in relation to Jesus is as much idolatry as it would be in relation to Socrates or Isaiah. Yet where such worship of Jesus is excluded, there are some who feel "the chilling influence of a great negation." What is the negation? It can only be that Jesus is a "mere man." But Unitarians believe that there is no such thing as a "mere man." But if the very phrase implies an anti-Christian view of human nature, it does not in the least follow that such worship of Jesus is justifiable.

Ceremonial adoration and prayer, addressed to Christ, in public or private, is not the only meaning of "worship." In common usage "worship" means not only "reverent homage or service paid to God"; it may mean "adoration or devotion comparable to this felt or shown towards a person, or a principle"; as when we speak, quite generally, of "an object of worship," or of the "worship" of rank, wealth, intellect, and so forth. It would be absurd to stigmatize as "idolatry" a feeling of reverence for Jesus as the Master in the things of the Spirit, or the communal expression of this feeling in recognized ways: provided such expressions of feeling are not made into exclusive tests for religious fellowship and so given a place among the essentials to which they have no right.

(vii) *Is there a "Christ of Experience"?*

In modern times the experience of communion with the Living Christ is earnestly impressed upon us as the essence of the Christian religion, and not only in connection with certain crises of life, described as the "conviction of sin," "the sense of forgiveness," or "conversion." The whole sphere of the inner life and the uplifting of inward aspirations is referred to Christ, the one source of strength in our struggle with inner evil, or weariness, or doubt. And those who make this claim feel a response which guarantees the reality of the object of their faith and becomes a decisive witness of its truth. There is an apparent finality about this evidence which makes any attempt to analyse it seem like a rude intrusion into a sacred place, and

Like a man in wrath the heart
Stands up, and answers "I have felt."

Nevertheless we must point out that we have here not only an immediate experience or intuition which might be infallible, but

an intuition *together with an interpretation of it* which cannot possibly be infallible; and those who do not share this special kind of experience must ask how to recognize the truth of the interpretation. The soul is in contact with a mighty spiritual Power other than itself, and yet within; and if this is the true form of Christian experience, we must press the question, How is this Power to be recognized? Why must we identify it with the historic figure of Jesus Christ rather than with the living God?

We find that those who are best qualified to speak for this variety of religious experience do not all speak with one voice. We turn the pages of *The New Life in Christ*, by the late Dr. Agar Beet, a learned and eloquent Wesleyan divine. He affirms that the Power with whom the individual is in communion is no other than the Spirit of God. The Spirit dwells in the heart of the believer; the Spirit is the source of grace; the Spirit acts on our conscience and affection; and the Spirit is to be identified with Christ. We ask, What is the ground of this identification? For an answer we are referred to certain texts in the Epistles of the New Testament: texts the precise significance of which is far from certain, and which can be set by the side of other texts suggesting that Christ and the Holy Spirit are not to be identified. Once more, we turn to *The Living Christ*, by that fervent exponent of evangelical orthodoxy, the late Dr. R. W. Dale. He affirms the absolute self-sufficiency of the individual experience. Even though there were no written gospels, the verdict of individual experience, repeated many times in the souls of many believers, is enough. On the other hand, when we turn to *The Christ of Experience*, by the late Dr. D. W. Forrest, an able and learned exponent of contemporary Presbyterian orthodoxy, we find a clear declaration that by no conscious distinction can the soul mark off its communion with Christ from communion with God. How then do we know that Christ is there? Because of the witness of Scripture. Dr. Forrest affirms that the authority of Scripture is needed to regulate and guide what might otherwise be liable to extravagance or illusion. In other words, the experience of Christ does not, after all, authenticate itself; it needs a recognized standard for its guarantee; and we are left in a position which cannot possibly be final. The spiritual experience is offered in

vindication and support of the scriptural record, and yet the spiritual experience itself requires the support of the record which it was summoned to confirm.

The voices to which we have listened belong to a generation or more ago. But the same way of belief has been pursued by religious teachers of our own day, and has created a *liberal evangelical Christianity* showing new features and making new claims. It is an evangelicalism which insists on the distinction between the essential and the non-essential. It feels itself free to accept all that is sound and trustworthy in the achievements of historical and literary Biblical criticism. It does not even claim that the Gospels themselves are in every detail historical narratives. But it finds essential Christianity in the emotional reaction to a Supreme Personality revealed in the Gospels; on that emotional reaction everything else is based. The statements in the historic creeds are read in the light of it. The Jesus of the Gospels, even of the first three Gospels, is found to have "the Value of God." This is declared to be the ultimate Court of Appeal, and the interpretation of the Atonement and of Christian duty are based solely on this experience.

While fully admitting that a great deal of what is best in modern Protestantism, in England and America, is implicitly based on this method of belief, I must in honesty affirm that it is nothing but glorified "religious impressionism." The saying may seem a hard one; but when we follow out the implications of this method, we find Christianity reduced to little more than a matter of temperament; and it is indeed strange to find able religious thinkers describing this interpretation of Christianity as pre-eminently "historical."

The greater part, or numerically the greater part, of Christendom has fashioned its faith on lines other than those of evangelical orthodoxy. The secret of strength has been found not in the pure individualism of direct communion between the soul and the Saviour, but in the Catholic conception of sacramental communion, where the stress falls upon the Church with its hierarchy, sometimes conceived as itself the mystic body of Christ. Here, the basis is not so much the unity of the individual soul with the heavenly Christ, as its organic unity with all men, or at least with all believers. The central idea of Eucharistic devotion is still the Passion; but it is worked out in

a totally different way. In the daily sacrifice of the Mass it is repeated in bloodless fashion on tens of thousands of altars, and the believer in communicating is taught that he actually feeds upon his Lord. And we know that a faith just as exalting and just as purifying can gather round these ideas as round the characteristic conceptions of evangelical Protestantism.

If the incidents of impassioned experience are to be made the basis of faith, let the student consider the work wrought, for example, by Catherine of Siena, in the fourteenth century, on her turbulent age. Most of her religious experiences—her frequent divine colloquies with Jesus Christ, her intimate converse with him and his endowment of her with miraculous power to share in his sufferings—would be set down by physicians as the hallucinations of a hysterical fanatic, and by many psychologists to-day as the creation of bodily instincts unnaturally suppressed. And all the while, in the midst of intense bodily pain, she is sustained with a holy joy as she tends the sick and plague-stricken, ministers to the lepers, heals the feuds of the nobles, conducts an immense correspondence, reconciles the enemies of the State, and at length, by sheer might of spiritual influence, in the face of a corrupted papal court, brings back Gregory VII from the "Babylonish captivity" at Avignon to Rome. No one can follow the phases of this extraordinary union of the mystical and the practical without the conviction that her energy was fed from unseen springs.

If it be said that in this case the religious mysticism and the practical achievements are altogether exceptional and abnormal, turn to Paris in the seventeenth century. Here is Madame Guyon, rich, beautiful, accomplished, but unhappily married: offering herself to Christ that she may be of one mind with him, accepting as her marriage portion the temptations and sorrows, the cross and the contempt, which fell to him, and finding the secret of strength in sorrow and suffering in the august privilege of the Eucharist.

So we might proceed; and the Christian Churches, age after age, have produced "one gospel in many dialects."

(viii) *Solution of the Conflict: Symbolism*

Judged by their outward appearance the facts seem to lend little warrant to the assertion of one gospel in many dialects.

We seem to hear a discordant chorus of many voices all claiming revelations which, based on intimate personal experience, must be inviolably true, and which, when with pains and trouble we have sorted them out, resolve themselves into a few mutually contradictory and mutually destructive beliefs.

The conflict arises from confusing together the reality of religious experience, as an event in the inner life, and the validity of the interpretation of it, formulated and expressed in language. The moment when we pass from experience to interpretation, the moment when we formulate, for example, the doctrine of "the Living Christ" or "the Christ of Experience," is the moment when, at any point, doubt and disputation, criticism and debate, may arise. Questions arise which cannot be met by simply falling back and asseverating, "I have felt."

In other words, religious experience is and must be essentially symbolic. A Symbol, as the term is here used, is a fact of experience *whose power springs from the real presence of the object symbolized, but which so long as it remains a symbol cannot completely embody the object symbolized.* A religious Symbol manifests the Real Presence of an object in some sense Divine.

A recent writer, in putting forward a crude criticism of a well-known philosophical theory regarding the nature of Time, asked: "Where is the *specimen* on which the allegation is founded?" The question has a certain suggestiveness for our present purpose. If human literature is inspired, there must be some literature representative and typical of this inspiration in those moral and spiritual things which are necessary for our salvation. If all days are ever to become holy and all places sacred, there must be some definite day and hour, some place accessible to all for such regulated and orderly meditation on divine things as may make them become a growing force in actual life. If the ideal of "natural supernaturalism" is ever to be realized among men, there must be some material things capable, though natural, of suggesting the supernatural; though material, of suggesting the spiritual.

The human need of realizing the "particular" presence of God does not require any metaphysical quality of uniqueness or finality in the realization. Indeed this follows from the nature of a religious symbol. If we may adopt, for this purpose, the definition given in the Anglican Catechism, a religious

symbol is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." It reveals the spiritual fact *directly* but *partially*, and not with absolute finality and completeness. Such finality and completeness are no more necessary to the vitality of religion than they are to the vitality of art. Art is a conscious and concentrated endeavour to embody the spiritual in the material. Hence the appropriateness of the word *poesy*, creation. The works of great artists are really alive. They have a soul, which the material form at once *conceals and reveals*. From architecture to music there is not an art which is not symbolic. The artist gives to the material thing a power born in his own soul, to appeal to the inner life and feeling of those who contemplate it. It produces in us the feeling, the faith, the enthusiasm which the poet himself experienced in creating it. And if this is true of art, it is yet more true of Morality and Religion. These central activities of the human spirit can only express themselves by means of symbols—by seeking some outward and visible form and dominating it to express their own meanings and purposes, really and directly, but never exhaustively.

Nevertheless it is just this quality of finality and completeness which the Church has insisted upon as vital.

The decisive illustration of what the claim means may be found in the declaration of the Council of Nicæa (A.D. 325):

"One Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God: begotten of his Father before all worlds: God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God: begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father: by whom [that is, by Jesus Christ] all things were made."

The Eternal and Infinite God was completely and exhaustively embodied at one particular period in history. This theory of the nature of Jesus Christ goes beyond Symbolism. It is the final statement given by the Church of the dogma familiarly expressed in the proposition that "Jesus is God." The difficulties involved are sufficiently shown in the controversies of the century following the Council of Nicæa; and in the subsequent revival of the *Kenosis* doctrine, that the Deity divested himself of certain divine attributes in becoming incarnate.

When we come to see what the Deity of Christ means practically for multitudes of devout Christians, we find that this belief is not assimilated as a theological or philosophical proposition, but as expressing the way in which the central Figure of the Gospels appeals to many hearts. They hold on to the traditional doctrine of the Deity of Christ because this grasp enables them to *visualize God* better; and they feel that in some way they must visualize God. Others are prepared to say frankly that they only know God through Christ: apart from Christ, God is to them only an unknown, an *x*.

In contrast to all this covert agnosticism, let us hear James Martineau:

"The whole world is held together by forces of natural reverence, grouping men in ten thousand clusters round centres diviner and more luminous than themselves. And if every family, every tribe, every sect may have its head and representative, excelling in the essential attributes that constitute the group, what hinders this law from spreading to a larger compass, and giving to *mankind* their highest realization, superlative in whatever is imitable and binding?"

And again:

"The Incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of man universally, and of God everlastingly. He bends into the human to dwell there: and humanity is the susceptible organ of the Divine. And the spiritual light in us, which forms our higher life, is *of one substance* with his own Righteousness—its manifestation, with unaltered essence and authority, on the theatre of our nature. Of this grand and universal truth Christ became the revealer, not by being an exceptional personage (who could be a rule for nothing), but by being a signal instance of it, so intense and impressive as to set fire to every veil that would longer hide it."

Thus may those who deny that "Jesus is God" find in Jesus the supreme symbol of God.

(ix) *What, then, of the Trinity?*

We have intentionally postponed to this late period of our discussion all reference to that famous doctrine of theology the denial of which is bound up with the etymological meaning of the name "Unitarian." To identify "Unitarian" and "anti-Trinitarian" is to empty the name of all positive meaning.

Even if we understand Unitarian theism in its narrowest and most technical sense, we must at least give it a positive meaning. Unitarian theism implies at least the *unipersonality* of Deity. It affirms that there can only be one Personality, one individualized centre of consciousness, of absolutely divine nature or rank. In other words, it is *pure monotheism*.

This conception of Unitarian theism is essentially *abstract*, as well as narrow and technical. We have already pointed out that it gives an entirely inadequate view of the historical origins of Unitarian Christianity and of the historical conditions affecting its advance. As a matter of fact, it contains nothing *distinctive* of any particular movement of religious thought. It excludes only those conceptions of Deity which affirm more than one personal centre of consciousness in the divine nature. It therefore excludes *tripersonality*, which the traditional doctrine of the Trinity attempts to affirm. It does not exclude even the most exalted conception of Christ's person, or the most limited conception, for it says nothing at all about Christ's person.

I have already urged that this technical meaning of the name "Unitarian" is inadequate. But if the name is to be tied down to this meaning, then the result is as we have stated it. I have introduced the point here in order to bring out a fact which is usually ignored. *The doctrine of Christ's person is logically independent of Trinitarianism* understood as an attempt to affirm the tripersonality of the Godhead. The introduction of the third personal centre of consciousness introduces boundless confusion into Christology. The attempt is thus characterized by a distinguished modern thinker:

"Few things are more disheartening to the philosophical student of religion than the way in which the implications of the doctrine of the Incarnation are evaded in popular theology by dividing the functions of Deity between the Father and the Son, conceived practically as two distinct personalities or centres of consciousness, the Father perpetuating the old monarchical ideal and the incarnation of the Son being limited to a single historic individual. Grosser still, however, is the materialism which has succeeded in transforming the profound doctrine of the Spirit, as the ultimate expression of the unity and communion of God and man, into the notion of another distinct Being, a third centre of consciousness mysteriously united with the other two."

I quote this passage not because I personally believe it to be conclusive (as I do), but in order to suggest the question whether a doctrine, which really needs to be defended against such a criticism from the side of philosophy, can possibly be regarded as belonging to the essentials of the Christian faith? But this is not all. In recent years the doctrine of the Trinity has sometimes been explained not as a doctrine of three Persons, three individualized centres of consciousness in one God, but as a doctrine of three fundamental orders of self-revelation or self-expression on the part of Deity in relation to the world. Its precise drift will, I think, be clearer when modern Christian thinkers who defend the conception of a Divine Trinity in Unity explain their view of the historic difficulty of Trinitarianism—the relation and distinction between God the Eternal Son and God the Holy Spirit.

None the less, a Trinitarianism of the modernized type may be actually stated as a definition of Unitarian theism. In our finite nature, personality is found to embrace the deepest differences within the most intense unity; and therefore the very idea of an Infinite Personality must imply an infinite manifoldness and variety of operation, absolutely unified. If then this manifoldness and variety of operation in relation to the world takes a threefold form, we get a conception of Deity which may be called Trinitarian but is not tripersonal. The Unitarian contention is that while such a formulation of Theism may be philosophically sound, it is not essential. Everything of religious importance in it is secured by insistence on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit: in other words, the reality and constancy of immediate divine self-revelation and immediate divine inspiration. One of the great historic failures of Christian theology, I venture to believe, is found here: that theologians, in their eagerness to exalt Christ to the throne of Deity, have been largely blind to the immeasurable religious value and profound philosophical significance of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not contained in the New Testament. It is a product of a distinctly later age. What the New Testament gives are the names which subsequently became the names of the three Persons in the Trinity. But there is no possibility of discovering in any text—though there may be by

a judicious combination of tests—the identification of the later doctrine of the Trinity.

Here, then, is a doctrine which in its traditional form is proved, by the history of Christian thought, to be full of ambiguities and difficulties, and which, when *rationalized*, is found to be fully compatible with Unitarian Theism, but which has mainly a philosophical or speculative interest. To make such a doctrine into a test by which men who are at one in the essential things shall be divided and excluded from one another is to sin against the light.

(x) *The Way of Atonement*

These critical digressions, dealing as they do with some of the prominent features of the religious thought of our time, have been unavoidable. But we now return to develop the implications of the religious principle which we affirmed to be “first among the essential things” in historical Christianity.

The sonship of every human soul to God is an eternal fact. Nothing that can come to pass in time can destroy it. But men may and do incur, and may and do inflict on themselves, prolonged and multitudinous miseries through striving to live a life which is not their true life. Being for ever sons of God, they would live as though they were mere creatures of time. The very sense of sonship is almost lost. And on our human world is laid the weariness of an age-long burden of ignorance, suffering, and sin.

The great thing needed for our deliverance is that our divine sonship shall be to us not only a truth to be acknowledged by the mind, but a reality to be experienced and lived. Here is the final issue of the question, “What think ye of Christ?” How does Jesus Christ help men to realize this life of Sonship? This is the vital meaning of the theological question, How does Jesus Christ reconcile God and Man?

It is remarkable that in the earliest centuries of Christian thought there is only the most slender support for theories of the Atonement which became widely current at a later time. The early Fathers did not regard the sufferings of Christ as a vicarious satisfaction of God’s wrath, where he underwent punishment due to us and his obedience is imputed to us. Whenever they use language which seems to convey such notions, they,

as it were instinctively, safeguard it by the idea of our union with Christ, where *we share in his obedience and his passion*, and only so far as we make them our own do we actually appropriate the redemption he won for us. And their main thought is that man is reconciled to God by the Atonement, not God to man; the change which it effects is a change in man rather than a change in God.

Many centuries later the familiar outlines of the theory of Vicarious Atonement were drawn, and carved into a rigid scheme by the Reformers. They were deeply convinced that human sin is a violation of an Eternal Law which has its basis in the very being of God and is the expression of God’s Justice, which must be satisfied. This is the conviction embodied in the Protestant creeds, and worked out, by means of a series of increasingly mechanical and narrowly legal metaphors, into a doctrine so full of immoral paradoxes that modern theology has been marked by a widespread revolt against every form of it. And yet these paradoxes were suggested and prompted by facts of actual experience.

(1) There is in our moral experience an apparent contradiction between the demands of Justice and the demands of Love. These are fundamentally different moral principles. And some of the most tragic conflicts of moral judgment among men to-day spring from the inability to reconcile them. A conclusive mark of a superficial theory of morality is the attempt to resolve either of these principles into the other—as in the “Utilitarian” reduction of Justice to “Benevolence.” But the ancient dogma carried the conflict of Justice and Love into the very being of God, and imagined Deity as a Trinity of Persons, the second of whom died to save mankind from the wrath of the first.

(2) The dogmas of “original sin” and “human inability” in like manner involve an arbitrary perversion of facts of experience. It is a familiar doctrine to-day that communities of men are not collections of separate units, combining only for the conveniences of civilized life. *Bodily* each man stands by himself—though even by physical inheritance he is vitally connected with generations upon generations who have gone before; but spiritually it is literally true that men are members one of another, that they are penetrated by a common spirit and

common life capable of an education that is divine, and capable also of a degradation that passes the power of words to describe. Sin, even if it begins in the independent acts of individual men, may result in a corruption of character which spreads like a disease, and is utterly beyond the power of the individual will to cure. The fact that men thus, *both for good and for evil*, inherit and share in a common life, is the truth distorted and perverted to falsity in the dogma of original sin. And so far as the facts of life compel us to limit the range of human freedom, so far is truth contained in the dogma of human inability.

(3) As a factor in evangelical preaching, the motive of the orthodox theory of evil is to lead through a sense of sin to humility and at last to dependence. Orthodox here becomes intelligible, as soon as we perceive that its purpose is practical rather than dogmatic. Religion consists so greatly in the sense of dependence, that it is a leading purpose in the orthodox system to produce this. This being absent, the uplifting principle is absent; the man cannot rise above himself. There may be truth, courage, conscience, purity, but they are all stoical and self-relying. This practical instinct which the orthodox dogmas regarding sin express is sound and good; but we can satisfy it without appealing to any unnatural miracle or crisis by which Mercy and Grace are made ours. Once recognize that men are always dependent on one another, that all are dependent on God, and that what is good in man is God in man: then in every good deed and faithful effort of the human spirit we may find a ministration of Divine Grace.

(4) This brings us to the heart of our question. All real redemptive work in the world must be the outcome of personal sacrifice and to that extent of suffering. Even in what appears to be complete success, this is still true. In all good work the worker must needs give *something that is part of himself* for his work. And in this respect the life of Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme example of the suffering for others which all true work involves just in proportion to its inwardness, depth, and power. The question which we set out to answer is therefore twofold. Is Jesus *indispensable to the highest religious life*? This is a theoretical question which we do not propose to discuss. We do not know what the *highest religious life* is; and no one is entitled to assert that *his own* personal type is the highest. Is

Jesus *valuable and important to the religious life*? This is a practical question which demands an answer and which we answer in the light of the doctrine of Symbolism.

While it is true that the highest ideal of good is God himself, and that he both can and ought to be the object of our highest love, it is also true that the one sure pathway of experience to lead to the knowledge and love of God is through the Divine Symbolism of human goodness. The consciousness of God cannot be so living and clear as to work strongly on feeling and thought without external influence to arouse it: not the influence of instruction alone, still less that of law or commandment: but the living manifestation of goodness in the personality itself, the visible comprehensible ideal of Godlike manhood, which lays hold of all hearts which are not completely hardened, and awakens in every breast the smouldering spark of the better self. When goodness is set forth not merely as a law that commands but as a living reality and life-giving force, we feel how much it is to be desired, and willing surrender to it is no longer a burden but a joy. It is this that appeals as by a saving hand to the man whose courage has departed from him and who despairs of himself: this, that by the unselfish force of its forgiveness, help, and healing, arouses faith in the Divine Love which conquers all and forgives all: this, that by its example of persistent faithfulness gives courage to the weak and inspires him with confidence to arise and enter on a new life. Of this grand and universal truth Jesus becomes the revealer, not by being an exceptional personage who could be a rule or example for nothing, but *by being a signal instance of it so intense and impressive as to set fire to every veil that would longer hide it.*

(xi) *The Future*

One aspect of the case, however, remains untouched. Unitarian Christianity has its institutional and denominational side. Will it command the future? Will it maintain a living and effective position in the future?

The denominational defects of Unitarianism are many and are confessed—confessed often with a frankness which puzzles those who do not know the movement from the inside. A denomination is not necessarily in a dying or decadent condition because it dares to discuss its difficulties in public. And it does

not follow that the religious thought of a denomination is to be tested by the numbers or even by the cohesion of its membership: if that were so, it would seem, by the rules of elementary logic, that the true theology must be that which is distinctive of the Church of Rome. Need it be pointed out that the religious thought of a denomination is scarcely ever the sole cause affecting the cohesion or the extent of its membership?

In the case of the movement known as Unitarian, its past history has stamped certain characteristics on its life. Our fathers were forced into exile by exclusion from the larger historic churches of Christendom; and this, together with our subsequent denominational history, has infused a certain habit of mind. It is the habit of independent judgment, of bringing opinions to the bar of a sturdy common-sense, of proving all things and holding fast that which is good. The men trained in these congregations have learnt to think reverently, but to trust their own reason and stand on their own feet. I mention these qualities not in order to dwell on their value, but to point out that these qualities do not easily lend themselves to the creation of that consciousness of common life which instinctively demands corporate union in "a Church." But the question of what Church will "command the future" is a question which all of us in our wiser moods will let alone.

The Hebrew prophet, in a grand world-picture, delineates the disappearance of the great conquerors and kings of earth, one by one, into the world of the dead; and as each one descends, the shades of departed potentates greet him with a wondering question: "Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?" There is a world of the dead, where the shades of dead creeds, and theologies, and man-made systems dwell. Into that world all our little schemes of thought will go: the latest and newest, at last, will travel there.

The consciousness of all this points to the reason why Unitarians, to a greater extent than larger and less mentally alert bodies of Christians, are open to the manifold influences of modern science, sociology, and psychology. Their task is not an easy one; but they believe it is their appointed task. It was defined many years ago by Martineau, with an insight extending far beyond the occasion. Early in the year 1838, he attended a meeting called by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association,

and moved the following resolution: "That this meeting, in professing its attachment to Unitarian Christianity as at once scriptural and rational, and conducive to the true glory of God and well-being of man, and in avowing its veneration for the early British expositors and confessors of this faith, at the same time recognizes the essential worth of that principle of free inquiry to which we are indebted for our own form of Christianity, and of that spirit of deep and vital religion which may exist under various forms of theological sentiment, and which gave to our forefathers their implicit faith in truth, their love of God, and their reliance, for the improvement of mankind, on the influences of the gospel." In this resolution, three main points are emphasized:

- (1) That Unitarian Christianity is scriptural, rational, and conducive to the true glory of God and well-being of man.
- (2) That there is something greater than Unitarian Christianity; and that is the spirit of fearless free inquiry, without which Unitarian Christianity could never have come to be.
- (3) That there is something greater even than Unitarian Christianity and free inquiry; and that is the spirit of deep and vital religion which may exist under many different forms of doctrinal belief.

Here are defined three essentials of Unitarian Christianity. Doubtless the resolution implied the use of the Bible as a standard in a way no longer possible to us; but fundamentally the principles are the same now as then. Each one of these principles, of course, is capable of perversion. The *first* may become the mere protest of an isolated body, the creed of a sect against other sects, the dogmatism of a minority. The *second* may yield a vague and formless freedom with no content of positive meaning. The *third* may produce a religion which ignores the need of coherent thought to give unity to the emotions and guidance to the will. Sundered thus from each other, even these ideals fail. United, they yield the rising vision of another Church, in whose upbuilding Unitarians believe they have their appointed part, though its life will be too vast and rich to be called by any of the names which now are familiar to our ears; a Church that will not discard the objective help of

historic religion, embodied in the supreme personality of Christ, realizing in its highest historic form the relation between God and man; a Church thus wise to gather to herself all the best truth that old times have won, but never seeking to build religion on a dogmatic theological idea, and for ever strong to watch, with forward look, for the light that is still to rise from the unspent deep things of God; a Church whose one demand of all her children is, that they shall be pure in heart, and whose worship is built on one great motive of thought and action, "Glory to God alone!"

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